

Abstract of thesis entitled
“Knowledge in Early Chinese Thought”

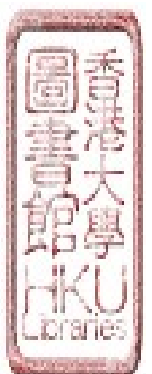
Submitted by

Donald Sturgeon

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Hong Kong
in April 2014

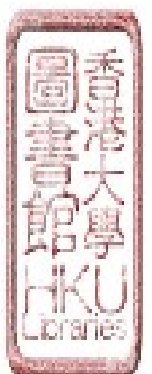
Early Chinese philosophical texts contain discussions of the nature, origins, and possibility of knowledge, in which both positive accounts and skeptical responses to them are couched in importantly different terms to those most familiar from similar discussions in Western philosophy. In place of appeals to truth, belief, and fallibility of the senses, action, discrimination, and difference of perspective play crucial roles. The aim of this dissertation is to explain why this should be so, and what consequences this had for the early Chinese understanding of knowledge.

In an attempt to answer these questions, I argue that, likely influenced by both facts about the classical Chinese language and key philosophical trends and interests of the time, discussions of knowledge by early Chinese thinkers generally referenced a broad notion of knowledge that was seen as being closely related to action. Linguistic factors also contributed to theorizing about knowledge focusing not on beliefs or other sentential structures, but rather on the drawing of action-guiding *shi-fei* distinctions, and the same *shi-fei* framework that was applied to perception was also applied to knowledge.



Language, understood most fundamentally in terms of an ability to distinguish *shi-fei* and apply names to things in the correct way, also played an important role in the pre-Qin understanding of knowledge. On a linguistic level, knowledge corresponded to reliably correct language use, and rigid *fa* (法 standards, models) were seen as underwriting this by providing the standard of correctness. Just as these *fa* could be used to measure the correctness of individual terms, thinkers interested in the correctness of doctrines and speech in general attempted to apply the same idea to larger linguistic structures such as sentences, in the hope of finding *fa* for correct language use at a higher level. In doing so, they discovered facts about natural language use that could not be accounted for using the types of *fa* they considered.

Likely in part influenced by similar observations, others called into question the existence and uniqueness of standards in general and the adequacy of language in expressing knowledge. I argue that the prevailing positive view of knowledge ultimately gave rise to an interesting and nuanced form of skepticism grounded in a form of perspectivism. This skepticism does not merely have the negative consequence that we should question some of our knowledge commitments, but can also be used to suggest that – while still doubting – we can make practical use of our skepticism to improve our knowledge by considering a wider range of perspectives.



Knowledge in Early Chinese Thought

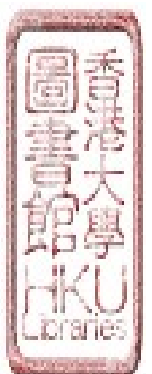
by

Donald Sturgeon

B.Sc. Warwick; B.A. BLCU; M.A. Soochow

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at
the University of Hong Kong

April 2014

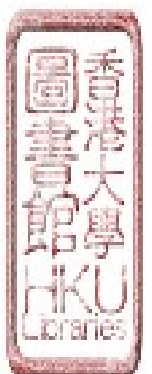


Declaration

I declare that this thesis represents my own work,
except where due acknowledgment is made, and
that it has not been previously included in a thesis,
dissertation, or report submitted to this University
or to any other institution for a degree, diploma, or
other qualification.

Signed _____

Donald Sturgeon

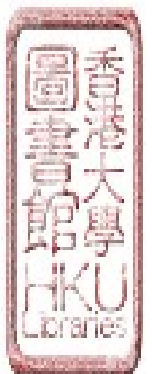


Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to my supervisor Chris Fraser both for his consistent encouragement and invaluable, detailed, and insightful criticism of many early revisions of work presented in this thesis, as well as for being the source of many of the ideas upon which I have drawn. My sincere thanks also to Chad Hansen, whose work has been a key source of inspiration for many of the ideas considered in this thesis, and whose valuable comments and suggestions I have also greatly benefitted from. The debts I owe due to both of them through both their published works and ideas expressed in conversations and e-mail exchanges extend far beyond the explicit acknowledgements made in the text.

I also owe debts of gratitude to Hsien-Chung Lee 李賢中 for his advice, encouragement, and constructive criticism, as well as for many informative discussions that deepened my interest in Mohist philosophy, and to Wan-Chuan Fang 方萬全 for many interesting exchanges that broadened my philosophical outlook.

Some of the ideas forming part this thesis were presented at a departmental seminar at the University of Hong Kong Department of Philosophy in 2011, the 2012 Australasian Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy conference, and the International Society for Comparative Studies of Chinese and Western Philosophy panel at the 2013 Eastern APA Meeting, and I would like to thank all those present for their valuable criticism and helpful comments. I am also grateful to anonymous reviewers from the



journal *Philosophy East and West* for their comments on an early revision of a paper discussing the interpretation of Zhuangist skepticism presented in the final chapter of this thesis.

I would also like to thank my family for their support throughout the course of my studies.

Finally, I am grateful to the University of Hong Kong for providing much-needed financial support.

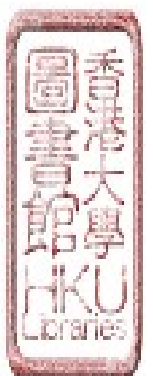
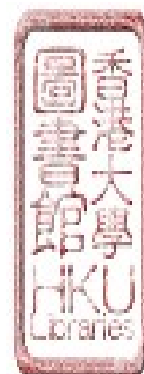


Table of Contents

Declaration	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents	iv
Abbreviations	v
1. Introduction	1
1.1. Topic, aims, and motivation.....	1
1.2. Methodology.....	4
1.3. Textual, authorial, and interpretative issues	6
2. Linguistic and philosophical background	10
2.1. “ <i>Dao</i> ”: ways and paths.....	13
2.2. “ <i>Shi</i> ” and “ <i>fei</i> ”: so and not-so; this and not-this	20
2.3. “ <i>Bian</i> ”: drawing distinctions and settling disputes.....	24
2.4. “ <i>Zhi</i> ”: knowing, knowledge.....	26
2.5. Truth and Belief.....	31
3. Knowledge, mind and world	37
3.1. Mind and body	38
3.2. Knowing through human nature.....	49
3.3. Knowing through models	61
3.4. Knowing as doing	72
3.5. Knowing as construction	83
3.6. Conclusion.....	96
4. Knowledge and language	103
4.1. The possibility of linguistically expressible knowledge	105
4.2. Language, justification and objectivity	115
4.3. Knowing through language alone	126
4.4. Inadequacy of language.....	143
4.5. Conclusion.....	150
5. Failing to know	153
5.1. Knowledge and error	153
5.2. Skepticism and the possibility of knowledge.....	155
5.3. Knowledge and <i>dao</i>	180
6. Conclusion.....	198
Appendix: Mohist groups of correct language use	203
Bibliography.....	207



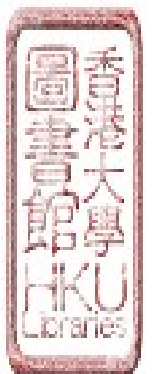
Abbreviations

Citations from early Chinese texts are given as references to the following standard reference works:¹

<i>Analects</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Daodejing</i>	<i>Daozang</i> edition	paragraph
<i>Gongsunlongzi</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Hanfeizi</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Hanshi Waizhuan</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Han Shu</i>	<i>Zhonghua Shuju</i> 1962 edition	page
<i>Huainanzi</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Lunheng</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Lüshi Chunqiu</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Mengzi</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Mozi</i>	Harvard-Yenching concordance	page/chapter/line
<i>Shiji</i>	<i>Zhonghua Shuju</i> 1959 edition	page
<i>Shizi</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Shiming</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Shijing</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Shuowen Jiezi</i>	<i>Zhonghua Shuju</i> 1963 edition	page
<i>Xunzi</i>	Harvard-Yenching concordance	page/chapter/line
<i>Zhonglun</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Zhanguoce</i>	ICS concordance	chapter/page/line
<i>Zhuangzi</i>	Harvard-Yenching concordance	page/chapter/line

Translations given are my own except where otherwise indicated; in addition to the above, I have consulted a number of commentaries and translations as indicated in the bibliography.

¹ In addition to the standard printed reference works, locations in the original text and in some also cases English translations of many of these textual references can also be determined using the Chinese Text Project website concordance tool:
<http://ctext.org/tools/concordance>



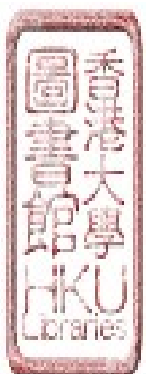
1. Introduction

1.1. Topic, aims, and motivation

The purpose of this study will be to provide an account of philosophical discourse regarding knowledge and knowing in pre-Qin Chinese thought. The aim will be to show how early Chinese thinkers conceived of knowledge, and how they viewed its relation to the self, world, language, and ethics. The study will focus on how knowledge is treated in the key philosophically reflective texts of the period. This will include primarily those texts which incorporate extended discussions of relevant philosophical issues, particularly the *Mozi*, *Xunzi*, and *Zhuangzi*, but also parts of other texts of the period which touch on the same issues and in doing so can contribute to the overall picture, such as the *Analects*, *Mengzi*, *Daodejing*, *Lüshi Chunqiu*, and *Hanfeizi*.²

Recent studies have highlighted important differences between early Chinese conceptions of truth and belief and those of other traditions (e.g. Lloyd 2004), and although both truth (in particular following Hansen 1983a and Hansen 1985) and belief (largely following Hansen 1983a, Hansen 1993 and various responses) in early Chinese thought have been the subjects of recent research, along with related topics such as skepticism in the *Zhuangzi* (Fraser 2009; Hansen 2003; Wong 2005, and many others), less work has been done on Chinese conceptions of knowledge itself (Harbsmeier 1993 is a

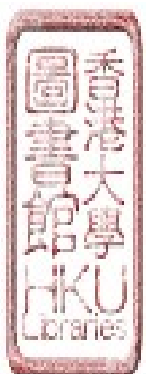
² Han dynasty texts will sometimes also be cited, particularly where they provide useful evidence of classical Chinese word use.



notable exception). What research has been done, however, strongly suggests that knowledge in early China was not conceived of as primarily consisting in justified true belief as has been a relatively mainstream view in much of the history of Western philosophy.³ If this is so, it seems important for us to ask exactly what conception of knowledge the early Chinese actually held, since this may have bearing on many related philosophical questions. For example, if Chinese thinkers do not primarily relate knowledge to truth and belief, what do they relate it to, and could this explain why they appear less interested in discussing concepts of truth and belief? When we say that the *Zhuangzi* is skeptical about certain types of knowledge, what conception of knowledge is it that is being rejected?

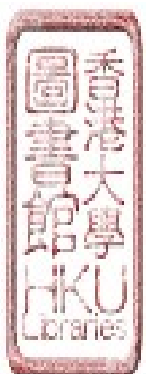
As evidenced by texts such as the *Mozi*, *Xunzi*, and *Zhuangzi*, early Chinese thinkers themselves considered many issues such as what knowledge is, how we come to possess it, and even whether we truly *can* come to possess it, to be valuable questions worthy of inquiry, and to which the answers even in pre-Qin times were far from obvious or uncontroversial. Early thinkers' stances on how best to answer such questions may have informed their thinking on other issues in interesting ways, and so a better understanding of their views on knowledge may lead to a better understanding of their philosophies as a whole. Recent investigations into truth, belief, skepticism and perception (above-mentioned titles, as well as Fraser 2007 and 2010, Harbsmeier 1998, and Geaney 2002) have laid much of the groundwork necessary for such a study.

³ I do not mean to suggest that this is the only account of knowledge that has been offered by Western philosophy, merely that it has been particularly influential.



Aside from the historical importance of understanding the details of pre-Qin thinkers views themselves, the questions that they considered, which have continued to attract the interest of philosophers to the present day, are fundamental to philosophy and to how we understand our place in the world. The early Chinese tradition, being isolated from Western and other philosophical traditions, represents a contrasting discourse that grapples with these questions from a very different historical, social, philosophical and linguistic background. Perhaps partly because of this, and also partly because the conditions which fostered pre-Qin philosophical debate largely disappeared after the end of the Warring States period, many aspects of the pre-Qin philosophical tradition are still poorly understood. Therefore efforts at better understanding the pre-Qin tradition are not only valuable in themselves from a historical perspective in order to better understand the origins of Chinese philosophy, but may also yield interesting insights into alternative ways of approaching philosophical questions which remain relevant today.

I shall argue that linguistic disanalogies between knowledge, belief, and truth, and an overall focus on normative *dao* encouraged Chinese thinkers to pursue a distinctive account of knowledge that was neither purely descriptive nor focused on sentential concepts. Instead, knowledge corresponded to reliably correct action and reliably correct language use. This correctness was less a matter of truth than of acceptability and accordance with the correct *dao*. Pragmatic concerns, such as practical success in promoting certain practices or values throughout society, were key to justifying such a *dao*.



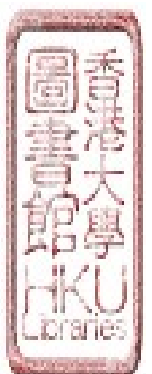
On the mainstream positive account of knowledge, correctness of the use of words and statements, understood in terms of standards, underwrote linguistic knowledge and correct language use in general, both at the level of the word and at the level of the sentence. However doubts about the claimed uniqueness and reliability of such standards presented challenges to the positive view.

Skepticism about the possibility of correct language use and thus linguistic knowledge therefore attacked the premise that correct language use can be governed by any fixed standards, and a more wide-ranging skepticism challenged the notion of standards of objective correctness in general. This led some Chinese thinkers to consider a unique form of “positive skepticism” that has both positive as well as negative consequences for understanding knowledge.

1.2. Methodology

The key methodologies to be used in the study will be the historical method, textual analysis, and philosophical investigation.

Historical method will inform the study by providing constraints on plausible historical assumptions that may affect the textual and philosophical interpretation. In accordance with this methodology, the most important sources used will be primary texts believed likely to date in large part from the pre-Qin era, with only secondary importance given to later texts such as commentaries. Due care will also be given to the historical context in which texts have been transmitted, with texts often being formed through an ongoing process of authorship and editing, rather than being created as

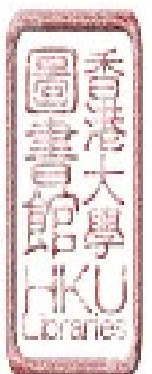


works of a single author, as well as often being ascribed to a person who may not have played an authorial role, and may indeed not correspond to any actual historical individual.

As the language and context of the texts concerned are so remote from the present day, interpretation plays a key role in understanding what is expressed in them. Various interpretative principles will be employed, including for example holism – in particular, the importance of consistency of interpretation of parts, e.g. words and phrases, across as wide as possible a scope – and the principle of humanity:⁴ the principle that rather than attempting to maximize the *rationality* or truth of a writer's claims in any interpretation (as might be done with some versions of the "principle of charity"), one should always try to maximize the *plausibility* or *intelligibility* of the claims in the interpretation, in the sense of having a maximally plausible account of why the author might have made such claims in the historical context in which he made them, given what we can assume is shared by us and the author or authors despite the historical gap between us, namely our common humanity. Such interpretation conceptually involves taking the physical texts being interpreted as evidence in constructing an interpretative theory that aims to explain the meaning of the texts under consideration, and interpretative principles such as holism and the principle of humanity will determine which of the potential theory candidates is chosen over the others.

Philosophical investigation (or analysis) will also play a role in the interpretation. The aim of philosophical investigation in this context will be

⁴ Grandy (1973).

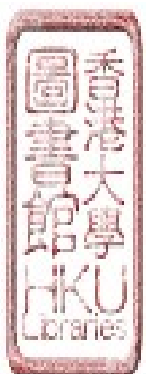


to go beyond the literal meaning of the texts as understood by the chosen interpretative theory, and to reconstruct the philosophical stance on the issues under consideration most plausibly reflected by the text. To give a concrete example, if our textual analysis tells us that a passage of text is telling a parable about how various characters are fundamentally unable to attain knowledge about certain types of things in certain cases, the philosophical investigation stage of the inquiry will aim to incorporate this into a theory about what philosophical stances the text is taking – for example, it may take the parable as evidence in favor of the text taking a skeptical stance about certain types of knowledge. This investigation will primarily be informed by (and could also be considered a part of) the interpretative theory, but may also feed back into the process of theory choice within the context of the interpretative principles. If, for example, already having good evidence for ascribing a skeptical stance to a section of text, we encounter within it a passage that could be read equally intelligibly as skeptical or anti-skeptical in meaning, the tentative conclusions of our philosophical investigations might lead us to take the skeptical reading as more intelligible, based on the principles of holism and humanity.

1.3. Textual, authorial, and interpretative issues

It would be naïve in the extreme to assume that each of the texts that will form a focus of this study should be interpreted as the product of a single author who sat down and wrote a text in the currently presented form.⁵ Most

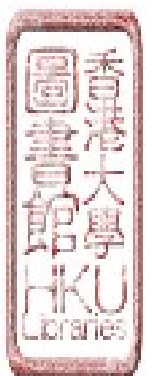
⁵ More naïve still to assume those texts that appear to be named after a purported individual were indeed written by someone of that name.



of the longer texts dated to the pre-Qin period do not read as if they were ever intended (at least in the form we see them today) as single cohesive works, instead consisting of chapters (篇 *pian*) each of which covers one or more topics, but often bears little or no clear narrative relation to the adjacent chapters. Rather than books, these works might more accurately be described as encyclopedias, or indeed libraries, particularly given that when written in their original form – most likely on bundles of bamboo strips rather than bound leaves of paper – a single “book” as we see it today would have been of a considerable physical size and weight.

Recent work, particularly relating to early excavated texts and their comparison with transmitted editions, has highlighted the crucial role played by Han dynasty editors in reassembling many texts from the often fragmentary sections of them extant at the time.⁶ The complexity of the task facing them may well have been similar to that of contemporary scholars dealing with excavated texts: unstrung bundles of bamboo strips with no clearly defined order, damaged, illegible, and missing strips, written in archaic characters used prior to the standardization of Chinese script. Worth noting also is that even in cases of completely undamaged and perfectly preserved manuscripts, Han dynasty editors would have been faced with many difficult interpretative issues, such as where an archaic character corresponded to multiple standardized characters (for instance, where an archaic character was written without a radical and corresponded to multiple characters each of which was now disambiguated by the presence of

⁶ Shaughnessy (2006) provides a detailed example with its comparative studies of extant and excavated editions of several early texts and discussion of the editing processes that influenced their development.

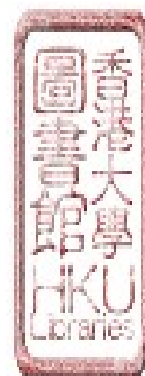


a radical in the reformed script – each with a distinct meaning), and the editor necessarily had to make an interpretative judgment call as to which one character should be the unique replacement in each context.⁷

Such work has also highlighted the fallacy of assuming that there must be one “original” version of any particular text. It is highly likely that many such texts were gradually altered over time by numerous scribes and editors, each emending or deleting words, phrases, or longer sections of text that he found unintelligible, contradictory, offensive, illegal (in the case of imperial edicts forbidding the use of certain characters) or otherwise undesirable, while in other cases adding in material that he felt improved the work, perhaps better explaining what he saw as the key import of a passage, adding a related quotation or anecdote, or introducing things he felt the text ought to or could have mentioned in support of what he believed was (or, alternatively, wished to represent as) its position. When this is taken into account, much of the long transmission history behind each text as we see it now is better captured not by a “book printing” analogy (where a sequence of scribes all methodically transcribe without modification a single “original” copy of a text in front of them), but a “Wikipedia editing” analogy:⁸ a sequence of editors each of whom attempted to improve the text through incremental modification. In truth, it may well be even more complicated than this, since some of these editors will have had in front of them more than one copy of the text in question that may already have varied quite dramatically, as well as familiarity with closely related parallel sections or

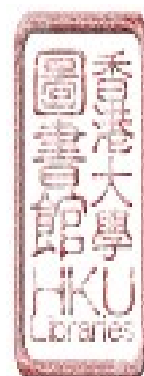
⁷ Shaughnessy (2006, 30).

⁸ I owe the Wikipedia analogy to Chris Fraser.



quotations of well-known passages in what were considered to be entirely different texts.

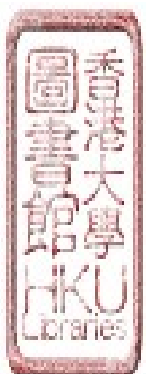
With these issues in mind, it would seem foolhardy to expect to be able to successfully impose a single consistent interpretation upon the ideas expressed in each present-day “book”. At the same time, accurately determining historical authorship for all parts of a book with any degree of confidence seems fanciful based on the currently available evidence for most texts, and would in any case be a hugely ambitious project in and of itself. With this in mind, the interpretative methodology of this study will be to largely ignore questions of authorship except where it has already been clearly established, and to attempt to provide as unified as possible an interpretation of the ideas in each text – and also across texts, where similar and compatible ideas are expressed in different texts. In cases where contradictory ideas in a single text prohibit a single unified interpretation, the aim will not be to attempt to impose a single interpretation or explain away sections as being of different authorship, but instead to speak of different “strands of thought” in the text: sections which, on the interpretation offered, express different and perhaps sometimes incompatible ideas, while being internally consistent and perhaps related to each other in some way. In this way, the interpretation will not assume facts about authorship, but will be compatible with a multiple authorship explanation (as well as other possible explanations) of observed divergence in content within a text.



2. Linguistic and philosophical background

The conceptual framework we implicitly make use of when talking about the world is inevitably tied up to some extent with the language in which we do the talking. Regardless of whether this is best expressed in terms of different “conceptual schemes” (and without first considering what significance if any should be attached to these), it is going to be crucial to this study to realize that not only was what early Chinese thinkers said about knowledge different to many modern conceptions, but also that the very words they used to talk and write about knowledge differed importantly from the words that are used to do so in contemporary English discourse (or for that matter modern Chinese discourse, or most likely that of any other language). The authors of the texts being so remote in time and place from us, it should be expected that differing background assumptions will lie behind their use of some terms, and we should not be surprised if many terms do not admit of a straightforward and unqualified translation into our own language – and it will be of key importance to avoid tacitly assuming that words Chinese thinkers used should all have one-to-one correspondences with individual words or phrases of modern English.⁹ This is not to suggest that translation is impossible or inevitably lacks accuracy or precision, but rather to stress that what is being sought in attempting to understand these terms is not so much a translation as an interpretation – and this will likely mean

⁹ Nevertheless, this is a mistake that can be easily disguised by faith in a specific interpretation or translation dictionary. See Hansen (1992, 8-9 footnotes).

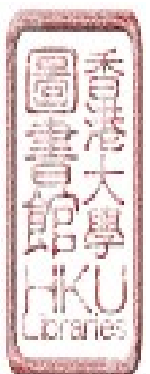


individual terms being cashed out in a discussion of their use and meaning, rather than the mere provision of an English translation or gloss. This problem is in no way unique to the case of ancient texts – consider for example the Japanese word “*natsukashii*”. This might be glossed in a Japanese-English dictionary as “dear”, “nostalgic”, or “missed”.¹⁰ However this information alone may leave us wondering what if any connection exists between these three (distinct? overlapping?) senses, and knowledge of these glosses alone would probably mislead us as to the actual usage of the word. “*Natsukashii*” can be explained much more clearly by saying that it is an adjective primarily referring to the quality of invoking a fond feeling that one experiences upon remembering a past person, place, object, or event – yet it seems that no single word in the English language directly corresponds to this.¹¹ That a word cannot be translated into a direct cognate in another language does not mean that it cannot be meaningfully interpreted or understood using that language; part of the purpose of this section will be to provide just such meaningful interpretations of certain early Chinese words that will be of particular importance in the following chapters.

With this in mind, several general points apply to the language as a whole. Firstly, classical Chinese does not typically draw any grammatical

¹⁰ *Kenkyusha's New College Japanese-English Dictionary* offers these and several other translations for the term in various contexts. *Kenkyusha's New College Japanese-English Dictionary*, p.1361.

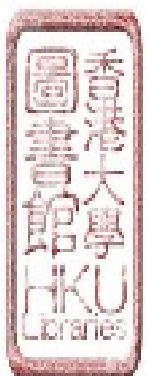
¹¹ This is especially so when the full range of usage of the term is considered, because the adjective “*natsukashii*” can be both applied to the object invoking the feeling (for example, a *natsukashii* place) as well as to the subject experiencing the feeling (I am *natsukashii*) and even to the feeling itself (a *natsukashii* feeling). Although this is a general feature of Japanese grammar not specific to this word, it is again something that an overreliance upon any of the proposed English glosses considered could easily mislead us into overlooking.



distinction between singular and plural, nor does it precede nouns with a definite or indefinite article. Though the language certainly has the means to *express* such distinctions by the use of additional words (e.g. “數人 (several people)” versus “一人 (one person)”, or “之人 (this person)” versus “今有人 (suppose there is some person)”), this was done relatively infrequently for specific rhetorical purpose or emphasis, and thus in most cases plurality and definiteness of article can only be inferred from context. Additionally, subjects are often omitted where they can be reasonably inferred.

Secondly, aside from a handful of rare exceptions, words are not inflected or modified in any way due to their grammatical role in a particular sentence, and often the same word can be used both nominally and verbally with related meanings: thus “I speak”, “he spoke”, “she speaks”, “speech”, “speaking” etc. can all be rendered identically as “言 (speak, speech, words)” in many instances. Again this does not imply that the language lacks the necessary tools that would allow a writer to distinguish unambiguously between these different cases, but rather that it does not *require* them to be specified in the vast majority of instances.

These characteristics of the language, particularly when combined with what was likely at first a pragmatic and later a stylistic preference for conciseness in the written medium, mean that often there is a significant degree of interpretative freedom in rendering sentences of classical Chinese into English. Translation often requires that questions not settled explicitly in the Chinese be decided one way or the other merely to form a grammatical English sentence corresponding to the intent of the sentence being translated; though there will be many clear and unambiguous cases, some cases will

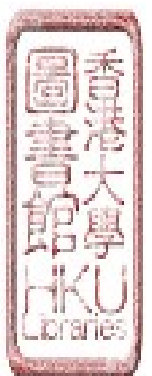


inevitably be based upon an implicit appeal to the working interpretative theory for the context of the particular sentence. Thus the reader should bear in mind in what follows that where English translations are given for classical Chinese sentences that settle issues such as plurality or case, what is being offered may be one of several justifiable interpretations that differ in these respects.

2.1. “*Dao*”: ways and paths

The central issue at stake in much pre-Qin philosophizing and discussion of the world and our place in it focused on a concept called “*dao* (道)” – a way or a path, sharing similar metaphorical usage as both “method” and “guidance” that these words have in English. Though perhaps not immediately obvious outside the context of Chinese philosophy, *dao* is closely associated with knowledge – indeed, the most commonly used modern Chinese word for “know” is composed of the two characters “know” and “*dao*”, and this pairing occurs frequently in classical texts (though generally not with the same meaning or connotations as the modern compound), where it typically refers to knowing the correct or ideal way of acting or living and successfully following it in practice.

Different groups of thinkers in the classical period said such widely varying things about *dao* that some interpret the term as having entirely different meanings in the writings of various thinkers – a view that has been dubbed the “meaning change hypothesis”. Before looking at this hypothesis itself, it will be helpful to consider some aspects of the use of the term in less problematic and disputed contexts.



Firstly, the word “*dao*” has a literal meaning of a road or a physical path. This meaning appears for example where the Han dynasty *Shuowen Jiezi* dictionary glosses “road” as “*dao*”,¹² and where the *Shijing* refers to there being “a solitary russet pear tree, growing on the left of the *dao*.”¹³ Many such uses (though not all, as in the case of “the left of the *dao*”) can equally well be understood as being the closely related “way” – any real or hypothetical continuous path between places, not necessarily associated with any physical markers – rather than a road or path physically demarcated in the world.

However such usage of “*dao*” accounts for only a very small proportion of its occurrence in early texts. Likely metaphorically expanding upon the earlier literal meaning of a road or path, the word “*dao*” could refer to a specific method or manner of effectively performing actions or achieving certain goals, as in “the *dao* of sacrifice”¹⁴ or “the *dao* of determining whether something exists or does not exist”.¹⁵ It was also often used to refer to the way of an individual or class of people, such as in “the *dao* of the *junzi* (君子 lord, superior man)” or “the *dao* of one’s father”.¹⁶ Though when used of an individual it was primarily descriptive (“the *dao* of Mozi”, meaning simply the *dao* that Mozi endorsed and/or followed), when used of a class of people this second usage might be descriptive or normative depending upon the context: in telling us to follow “the *dao* of one’s father”, the *Analects* seems to be saying that one should follow the *dao* that one’s father actually followed; in

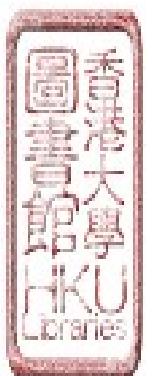
¹² *Shuowen Jiezi* 48.

¹³ *Shijing* 123/54/1.

¹⁴ *Liji* 26.5/130/14-15.

¹⁵ *Mozi* 49/31/10.

¹⁶ *Analects* 1.11/2/4.



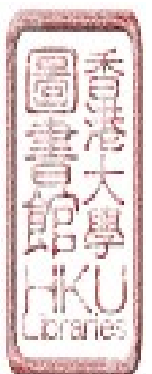
another context, however, the same words might be used with normative force to implore us to follow “the *dao* of a (good, proper, worthy of the name) father” – a fatherly *dao*. Particularly in cases of “the *dao* of X” where X is a role term with strong positive or negative connotations, it is usually the case that the *dao* being referred to is a normative *dao* – “the *dao* of the king” is the *dao* that kings *should* follow, and were an actual king in fact not to follow such a *dao*, this would raise an apparent paradox in that the king’s *dao* (王之道) is not a kingly *dao* (also 王之道). One response to such a paradox is to claim that in such a case, the so-called “king” is not, in fact, a king, for he fails to meet the normative requirements upon the role of king. The normative and descriptive aspects of such a *dao* are not always completely separable; the “*dao* of the petty man” is a *dao* that, viewed descriptively, consists of such things as petty men typically do; but by calling it as such, there is an implicit but clear suggestion that one *should not* follow such a *dao*. A closely related usage was of a *dao* having certain objectives or results – “the *dao* of great disorder”¹⁷ or “the *dao* of serving one’s parents”;¹⁸ in such cases any normative force again is dependent upon whatever phrase is used to modify “*dao*”.

“*Dao*” could also be used verbally, meaning “to speak”, such as in “his mouth does not *dao* good words”,¹⁹ or “to follow” in the sense of taking something as a guide for one’s course of action (i.e. “take as one’s *dao*”), for instance “if one *daos* the methods of a king and the conduct of a king, one will

¹⁷ *Liji* 19/99/4.

¹⁸ *Mengzi* 7.28/40/19.

¹⁹ *Xunzi* 106/31/6-7.



also become a king”.²⁰ Without a direct object and particularly in the negative, it could refer to following the *correct dao*: “In departing, how dare I not *dao*?”²¹ It could also mean “to lead” as in “If the people are *dao*-ed by laws and regulated by punishments, they will avoid [the punishment] but lack shame” (this usage was later distinguished in writing by using a different character, “導”).²²

The last and potentially most confusing usage of *dao* was the unqualified use of the term, where it is used unmodified in the abstract and pronouncements are simply made of or about “*dao*”. This is the usage that occurs in such phrases as “when one knows what comes first and what comes last, one approaches *dao*”,²³ “what your servant loves is *dao*, it goes [or: they go] beyond skill”.²⁴ It also occurs in the term “know *dao*”, for example when the *Liji* says “if a man does not study, he will not know *dao*”. This last sense on the face of it appears purely normative: *dao* is what we *should* do. Saying that I “know *dao*” seems to imply that I not only know a way, but that I know some way to which I attribute positive normative force of some kind. Having or lacking *dao* in this sense refers to having or lacking a *good dao*, not merely *any dao*, for in the descriptive sense of the word, it makes little sense to talk of any person lacking a *dao*, since such a *dao* would simply be the sum total of his actual actions.²⁵

²⁰ *Xunzi* 38/11/28-29.

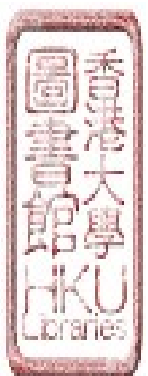
²¹ *Mozi* 80/46/43.

²² *Analects* 2.3/2/29-30.

²³ *Liji* 43/164/25.

²⁴ *Zhuangzi* 7/3/5.

²⁵ Shen Dao in particular expands upon this idea, referring to it as the “great *dao*” to avoid the ambiguity between the normative and descriptive senses: he suggests that we might take the descriptive (great) *dao* as a prescriptive

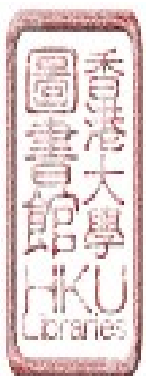


This usage is all the more difficult to interpret given the absence of explicit markers for singular and plural. The second example in the previous paragraph taken on its own might plausibly be rendered as “what your servant loves *are daos*, *they* go beyond skill” or even “what your servant loves *are daos*, *this* (i.e. the loving of them) goes beyond skill”. Similarly, the citation from the *Liji* might mean either “if a man does not study, he will not know *the dao* (of life or living in general)”, or “if a man does not study, he will not know *daos* (of various things)”.²⁶

A further difficulty is that in the unqualified abstract usage, there are cases in which it is unclear that the term “*dao*” is referring to a way, method or path in any obvious sense at all. Examples include in particular passages of the *Daodejing* that refer to *dao* giving birth to things: “*dao* gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, two gives birth to three, and three gives birth to the myriad things”. This has contributed to traditional interpretations of Daoist texts adopting what Chad Hansen has termed a “meaning change hypothesis”: the interpretive stance that, in such cases or in the writings of particular thinkers, the meaning of the word “*dao*” has fundamentally changed from the various closely related usages outlined above, and no longer refers to ways or paths, but instead to a metaphysical monistic

dao, and that doing so has the consequence that we all do, indeed, necessarily follow the *dao*, for the normative *dao* simply is identical to the descriptive, actual *dao* describing everything that happens.

²⁶ An alternative explanation that has been offered is that nouns in classical Chinese behave like mass nouns in English, and so “*dao*” is not associated with any one inherent principle of individuation (Hansen 1993, 84). On this account, the correct explanation for the observed usage of the word “*dao*” is due not to its functioning in the singular and plural, but rather to it lacking singular and plural forms by virtue of being a mass noun.

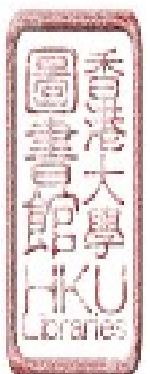


absolute.²⁷ There are a number of serious problems with this view, which it will not be possible to critique in detail here. However it is worth emphasizing that, in the absence of strong arguments in favor of an interpretation on which the meaning of the word “*dao*” has radically changed, instances such as those in the *Daodejing* that are difficult to plausibly interpret using the clearly established usage of the term – which, even in the *Daodejing*, constitute only a minority of occurrences – should be approached firstly as interpretative puzzles in need of explanation rather than *prima facie* evidence that the term has fundamentally changed in meaning.²⁸ Persuasive arguments that these uses of “*dao*” cannot be literal or metaphorical instances of the term’s established usage would be needed to show that it has changed in meaning. The mere fact that the text is difficult to interpret is of relatively little significance – in the same sentence of the text quoted above, it is not immediately obvious in what sense one gives birth to two, or two to three – but few interpreters would take this as evidence that these words must have changed in meaning here or elsewhere in the text; rather, the most plausible interpretative response is to search for a likely explanation of what the intent of the writer might have been given the established literal and possible metaphorical uses of the terms in question.

The semantics of “*dao*” are of considerable import to this study because the question of what particular *dao* should be used to lead society was absolutely central to pre-Qin philosophy. Ethical questions of how society should be ordered and ruled were characterized most broadly in

²⁷ Hansen (1992, 13-14, 206-208).

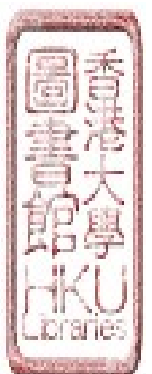
²⁸ See Robins (2011) for an approach to answering this puzzle.



terms of *dao*, and the term took on strong social connotations: a *dao* (in the unqualified sense) is typically a way of doing not just for an individual, but for society as a whole. For many pre-Qin thinkers, the project of identifying the correct *dao* and leading people to follow it was the single most important issue under discussion. This importantly shaped their views on knowledge: for many, the most important kind of knowledge is not purely descriptive knowledge of the world in general, but instead knowledge of the correct *dao*, which has an important normative component.

Though this attitude towards *dao* was apparently a mainstream view endorsed by numerous thinkers, many of whom proposed their own account of the correct *dao* that should be promoted, it was not universal. One of the most philosophically interesting debates of the pre-Qin period was that between those who endorsed the project of identifying and promoting some uniquely superior *dao* for all of society and those who critiqued or opposed in principle any such project. As a result, it will at times be useful to refer to the former as “positive *dao* advocates” – i.e. those who believed that there is or could be a single best *dao* by which society ought to be led, in contrast to those who did not. As with the classification of thinkers and texts into “schools” such as “Daoist” and “Confucian”, which were typically not categorizations made by the thinkers themselves but applied to their works much later due to thematic similarities perceived by others,²⁹ this distinction should not be taken as suggesting that such thinkers themselves actually identified with one another or saw themselves as committed to some shared

²⁹ See Smith (2003).



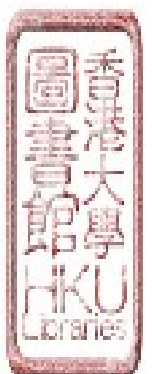
project – on the contrary, positive *dao* advocates often disagreed most vocally with other groups advocating a different positive *dao*.

2.2. “*Shi*” and “*fei*”: so and not-so; this and not-this

“*Shi* (是)” and “*fei* (非)” are ethically loaded terms that were of great importance to many aspects of pre-Qin thought. The two terms are opposites, and can often be thought of as “pro” and “anti” attitudes – though this rough gloss requires some qualification, as “*shi*” and “*fei*” cut across the boundaries of ordinary English word usage in a number of ways. Firstly, as is the norm in classical Chinese grammar, they function both as noun and verb: one can talk of *shi*-ing something or *fei*-ing it – endorsing it or opposing it – as well as the abstract nouns *shi* and *fei*.

The verbal use of *shi* and *fei* refer to a particular agent: what I *shi*, and what I *fei* – what I endorse or oppose. It is important to note that this “pro/anti attitude”, though it may be conveniently glossed as an attitude, is not necessarily purely or perhaps even primarily psychological. Whether someone *shis* or *feis* something is typically a matter of either what they say or what they do, rather than being explicitly described as a psychological attitude as such. Often it would be implicitly understood that what one says and what one does ought to be consistent: if one *feis* something, one ought to both verbally reject it and practically oppose it or refrain from doing it in one’s own conduct. This usage of *shi* and *fei* is subjective, in that what I *shi* and *fei* may well differ to what others *shi* and *fei*.

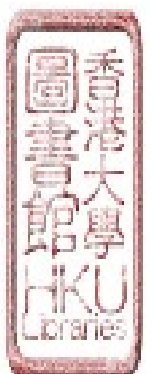
The non-verbal usage typically refers to what is, agent-independently, *shi* or *fei*. In these cases, there being no subject involved, what is at stake is



neither a psychological attitude nor the actions of an agent; rather, something is being asserted about the way things actually are. Most simply, “是也 *shi ye*” and “非也 *fei ye*” are commonly used sentences of classical Chinese, usually meaning something like “It is so/not so”, expressing the speaker’s judgment as to the way things are with respect to some matter. For example, when asked whether the person holding the reins of the carriage is indeed Confucius, Zi Lu affirms that it is by saying “*shi ye*”.³⁰ However, depending on context, this usage can also be ethically thick. For example, when Mengzi is challenged by Chen Zhen as to why his actions in one case were different to his actions in a supposedly similar case, Chen Zhen suggests that Mengzi’s actions in the two cases cannot both have been “*shi*”; Mengzi replies “*jie shi ye*” – “they were both *shi*”. It is clear from the context that he is not affirming that the cases were both as Chen Zhen described, but rather that his actions in both cases were *right*. Both the ethically thick and thin versions of this usage appear to be objective, insofar as something either is or is not *shi* or *fei* in this sense; although agents may disagree as to the correct attribution of *shi* or *fei* in a particular case, when they do so they contradict one another. Whereas in cases of subjective *shi* and *fei* described above, I can coherently say that I *shi* something and you *fei* it, I cannot say without paradox that one and the same thing is at the same time objectively both *shi* and *fei*.

It is important to note that in classical Chinese, the verbal and non-verbal uses of *shi* and *fei* are grammatically distinct, and so there is no ambiguity between for example “It is *shi*” and “I *shi* it”. The fact that word

³⁰ *Analects* 18.6/51/26-28.

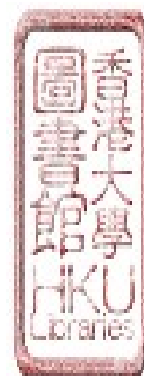


usage cuts across usage of English words we are more familiar with does not mean that the language lacks equal expressive power or a principled distinction between what is “so” or “right” and what is endorsed by the speaker. For example, a distinction is easily made between “what he endorses is wrong” (“彼之所是，非也”) and “I oppose what he endorses” (“彼之所是，吾非之”). What it does mean, however, is that the same words are used, in grammatically distinct contexts, to express the speaker’s endorsement of something as being true or right, and what is agent-independently true or right.

When the compound term “*shi-fei* (是非, *shi*-and-*fei*; *shi*-ings and *fei*-ings)” is used however, the grammar of classical Chinese gives no clue as to which of the related senses of *shi* and *fei* are involved: it could refer either to *shi-fei* in the objective sense of how things are, or to *shi-fei* in the subjective sense of an agent judging certain things to be *shi* or *fei*.³¹ Though which sense is intended may often be clear from the context, nonetheless it may be that the two related but distinct senses of the word, no longer disambiguated by grammar, may to some extent impinge upon one another and potentially shape discourse about “*shi-fei*”.

A third distinct usage of “*shi*” – and one that we might be tempted to classify as a distinct sense of the word – occurs when “*shi*” is used as an indexical meaning “this”. Interestingly, because of the syntax and semantics of classical Chinese, this usage in some ways appears continuous with the uses described above. Again this usage is often grammatically distinct to the

³¹ A clear example of the subjective use occurs in *Zhuangzi* 4/2/26-27; many examples where the objective sense is clearly intended are discussed below.



verbal and non-verbal usages described above, for example when it qualifies a noun, such as “*shi ma*” – “this horse”. But because in Chinese “*fei*” – the opposite of “*shi*” in all the uses described above – is both a common way of rejecting a proposal (“非也 *fei ye*” – “Not so”), and also of negating a nominal phrase (“非人 *fei ren*” – “Not a man”), it is natural to see it as the “opposite” of “*shi*” even in cases where “*shi*” is used as an indexical, meaning something like “not-this”. In such cases, the compound “*shi-fei*” is still intelligible, meaning “this and not-this” – an analogous distinction to the “so and not-so” and “right and not-right” that is more typically implied by the same term.

In addition to these distinct usages of the words *shi* and *fei*, it will also be helpful to note the important role of these concepts in pre-Qin thinking. In pre-Qin thought generally, *shi* and *fei* are very often associated with and used to explain perception, cognition, and knowledge. The *Mengzi* for instance explicitly claims that “all people have the heart-mind of *shi-fei*”, and states that this is the origin of wisdom;³² the *Shi Ming* dictionary glosses “seeing” as “Seeing is *shi*-ing: differentiating its *shi* and *fei*,”³³ and the *Xunzi* tells us that “*shi*-ing *shi* and *fei*-ing *fei* is what is meant by knowledge” – that is, subjectively taking as *shi* (i.e. endorsing) those things that objectively are *shi*, while subjectively taking as *fei* (i.e. opposing) those that are objectively *fei*.³⁴

Many early texts endorse goals such as “clarifying *shi-fei*”,³⁵ “clarifying *shi-fei* distinctions”,³⁶ and so on; different texts take different stances upon how to go about this, and even whether or not it is a worthwhile pursuit, but

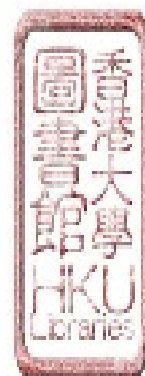
³² *Mengzi* 3.6/18/7-9.

³³ *Shiming* 4/37/17.

³⁴ *Xunzi* 4/2/12.

³⁵ *Liji* 1.1/1/12.

³⁶ *Mozi* 77/45/1.

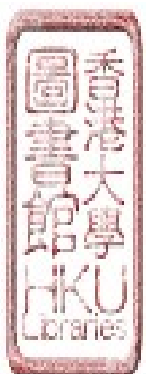


it is clear that this usage is primarily concerned with *shi-fei* in the objective sense: we want to become clear about what is so and what is not so, rather than what individuals actually take as being so or not so. It is in this sense in which there is a clear value in distinguishing *shi* from *fei* – given the scope of the words, “distinguishing *shi* and *fei*” appears on the face of it to be a broadly conceived philosophical project corresponding to separating what is *true* from what is *false*, as well as what is *right* from what is *wrong*; in other words, it is an epistemic project that cuts across descriptive and normative boundaries and will have ethical implications. Since *shi* and *fei* are closely associated with action – if I *shi* something, I should respond positively to it not just in my words but in my deeds – the way agents draw such distinctions will directly affect their conduct.

For positive *dao* advocates, *shi-fei* are closely related to following the *dao*. For those committed to there being a single unique *dao* that everyone should follow, this *dao* can be seen as determining what is objectively *shi* and *fei*, and in the ideal society, the subjective *shi-fei* attitudes of the individuals will agree with the objective *shi-fei* of the objectively correct *dao*. Their opponents – particularly the authors of the *Zhuangzi* – explicitly respond to this picture, essentially accepting much of the subjective account (for instance that cognition and perception are matters of *shi*-ing and *fei*-ing) while challenging the claim that objective *shi-fei* exist at all.

2.3. “*Bian*”: drawing distinctions and settling disputes.

Another concept central to the way early writers described matters relating to cognition and perception is *bian* (“辨/辯”), a term that refers to



the drawing of distinctions, debate over the correct drawing of such distinctions, and by extension debate and debating in general.³⁷

On the one hand, *bian* can refer to simple distinguishing, not necessarily with great care or attention, and certainly not involving any kind of debate. In this capacity, what is being distinguished is generally pairs of opposites such as *shi* and *fei* or far and near, as in “the eyes *bian* black and white and beauty and ugliness,” or “not even heaven *bians* poor and rich, noble and base, far and near, close and distant [of social relation]”.³⁸ However, the word can also take on a connotation of more reflective distinguishing or recognition, for instance in the claims that “the gentlemen of the world simply do not recognize its benefits, or *bian* its calamities”,³⁹ or “he who *bians shi* and *fei* without examination is not worthy as a companion”.⁴⁰ This usage merges almost continuously into a further usage, with connotations of argumentation or disputation, as in “[the followers of various thinkers] have come to *bian* with me”.⁴¹ Debating in this sense was seen as being continuous with distinguishing and recognizing: ultimately, as the later Mohists say quite explicitly, debating is about distinguishing what is from what is not. This latter sense is particularly common as part of the compound term “辯者 *bianzhe*” (or “辯士 *bianshi*”) meaning “debater”, which

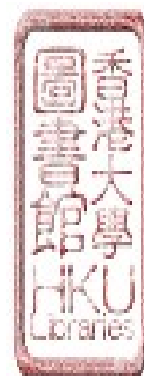
³⁷ In texts dating from the pre-Qin period, what later came to be the two distinct words “辯 *bian* (distinguish)” and “辯 *bian* (debate, argue)” are written interchangeably and not distinguished from one another in any principled fashion; in what follows, “*bian*” refers to this pre-Qin usage, which could be written equally well using either character.

³⁸ *Xunzi* 10/4/44; *Mozi* 11/9/52.

³⁹ *Mozi* 23/15/16-17.

⁴⁰ *Mozi* 2/2/10.

⁴¹ *Zhuangzi* 66/24/44-45.



often had negative connotations suggesting an engagement in hair-splitting or sophistic debates.

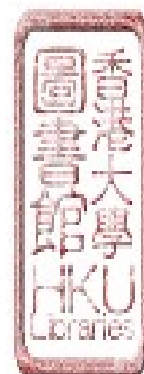
Like *shi-fei*, *bian* played a central role in accounts of cognition and perception, with agents and/or their sense organs being described as distinguishing various objects. An interesting and important feature of *bian* is that generally speaking it is not possible to distinguish something without at the same time distinguishing its opposite, and this is often made clear from the linguistic expression used. One typically does not *bian* horses, but “horses and non-horses”. In this sense *bian* is distinct from identifying or recognizing, since it excludes the possibility of both false positives and negatives. I might claim to be able to recognize horses, yet not recognize that zebras are *not* horses; but if I claim to be able to be able to *bian* horses and non-horses, I will need to not only be capable of identifying horses, but also excluding all cases of horse-like non-horses.

2.4. “Zhi”: knowing, knowledge

The Chinese word most commonly translated as “knowledge” – “知 *zhi*” – shares many similarities in usage with this English word, while having a number of important differences from it.

Firstly, as with the English “to know”, *zhi* could take many things as its direct object. Probably the most common of these was a noun or nominalized term for an concrete or abstract thing which one might be acquainted with, such as “to *zhi* [the] *li* (禮 ritual propriety)”.⁴² In these cases there was a degree of ambiguity as to precisely what was implied, since it was often taken

⁴² *Hanshi Waizhuan* 4.12/28/26.



as implicit that in order to count as knowing such a thing, one ought to be able to respond appropriately towards it, or even (as in the example of ritual propriety), to endorse it and carry it out in one's daily conduct – in other words, to *shi* it. At the same time, this was not always the case, since knowing some things (e.g. “to *zhi* dogs”⁴³) surely did not require this. There were other ambiguities with this usage too, such as whether the “knowing” in question referred to what was denoted by the term or to the actual term itself.⁴⁴

A second and less common object of “*zhi*” was a state of affairs, such as “to *zhi* [that] the gentlemen of the world understand the small yet do not understand the great”.⁴⁵ A third was an ability that one might or might not possess, as in “when the people of old did not yet *zhi* [how to] make boats and carts”.⁴⁶ A fourth was an action that one ought to perform, as in “Dogs and pigs eat the food of men, and yet you do not *zhi* [to] control this”.⁴⁷ This ethically thick usage implicitly contains a normative element: you do not know *that you should* do something, rather than how to do it, or what it is.

Though interestingly all of these have clear analogs in the usage of the English word “to know”, whereas in English many of these distinct usages are suggested by surface grammar, particularly by the addition of words, such as in “know *that*”, “know *how*”, and “know *to*”, no similar distinctions or marker

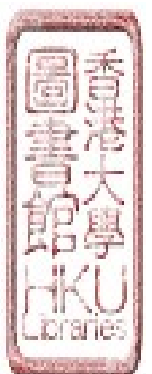
⁴³ *Mozi* 67/41/27.

⁴⁴ The later Mohists explicitly take this into account in their analysis of *zhi*. *Mozi* 66/40/12, 69/42/36-37.

⁴⁵ *Mozi* 13/10/19-20.

⁴⁶ *Mozi*: 7/6/27.

⁴⁷ *Mengzi* 1.3/2/8.

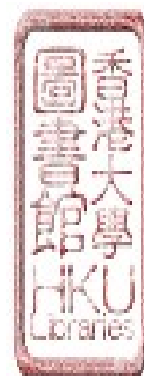


words of any kind are used in the corresponding classical Chinese – in each case the object of *zhi* directly follows it.⁴⁸

An important point to note about these various usages is that in many of them action plays an important role: acting in a certain way is often required in order to count as having knowledge, and not acting in the required way would imply that one lacked it. Failing to act in a particular way in some particular situation was considered to be conclusive evidence not only that one did not know the correct way to act in that situation, but even that one did not know the relevant concept involved or how to distinguish it. This often applied even in cases where the object of *zhi* is not itself an ability or a case of knowing-how. The *Mozi* makes the point quite explicitly: suppose there is a blind man, and that he is able to say various (correct) things of the terms “black” and “white” – he says for instance that black is dark, white is light, and so on. But ask him to separate black things from white things, and he is unable to do this. The text then concludes from this that he “does not *zhi* white and black”, explaining that this is not because he does not know the words, but because he chooses incorrectly – in other words, acts incorrectly.⁴⁹ This is reinforced by the point the text uses this example to illustrate: the same is true of “benevolence” – though people all say the correct things about benevolence when they discuss it in the abstract, in

⁴⁸ Harbsmeier (1993, 15-16) points out that there are grammatical differences in what follows *zhi* when it plays the role of “know-that” and “know-how”; however, these differences are considerably more subtle than in English where words “that”, “how” and “to” often appear as markers, and, lacking explicit marker words, these distinctions only become clear in the light of some kind of grammatical framework or compositional analysis of language, which would most likely not have been available to pre-Qin thinkers.

⁴⁹ *Mozi* 83/47/23-26.

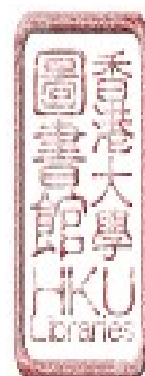


practice they fail to correctly distinguish between cases of “benevolent” and “non-benevolent”, and thus, it concludes, they do not know benevolence.

While associating the verbal “*zhi*” with the English “to know” seems relatively unproblematic due to the high degree of similarity between the two, the nominalized form of “*zhi*” that is typically translated as “knowledge” diverges significantly from its English equivalent, often taking on more of the connotations of “wisdom” than “knowledge”. This is likely related in part to the absence of any commonly used nominalized construction expressing something like “the knowledge that ...” in classical Chinese: particular ascriptions of knowledge to an agent were almost always made verbally. Instead, the nominalized form of the word referred to something more like the aggregate of an agent’s knowledge – what they know – but with a strong connotation (as in the verbal case) of including correct action within its scope, as appears for instance in cases like “My *zhi* is insufficient to preserve the state, and my courage insufficient to die at the hand of the enemy”.⁵⁰

Related to this is a subtly different nominal use of the term “*zhi*” where it refers not to knowledge or wisdom but to the capacity or faculty by means of which one acquires knowledge. The Mohist Canons in particular seem to suggest that in some cases *zhi* should be read as “knowing” or “intelligence” rather than “knowledge”. The Canons include a pair of related glosses for *zhi*: firstly as “接 *jie* (connecting)”, and secondly as “材 *cai* (capability)”. The explanation for the former glosses “*zhi*” in this sense as “by means of one’s *zhi*, having passed a thing one is able to imagine it”, and the latter as being “that by which one knows (*zhi*), and necessarily knows

⁵⁰ *Zhuangzi* 78/28/39-40.



(*zhi*)”.⁵¹ It seems that in these and some other instances, *zhi* is used nominally to mean something like “knowing” or “intelligence” in the sense of a capacity that allows one to know. This usage is also attested to in other texts; for instance, the *Lüshi Chunqiu* makes a parallel pair of claims, that “all men use their lives to live, yet do not know what makes them live” and “all men use their *zhi* to *zhi*, yet do not know what makes them *zhi*”, then opining that “knowing that by which one knows (*zhi*) is called ‘knowing *dao*’” and contrasting this with the perils of not knowing that by which one knows.⁵²

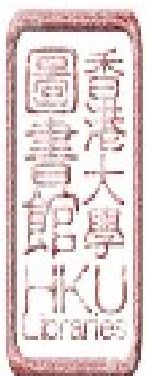
Complicating matters yet further is another observation about transmitted texts of the pre-Qin period: the words which later came to be distinguished as “知 (knowledge)” and “智 (wisdom)” were both commonly written using the same character “知 (*zhi*)”, and very likely shared the same pronunciation at the time the texts were written.⁵³ This combined with the various uses of *zhi* and their close relationship with action mean that there is even less of a sharp distinction between “knowledge” and “wisdom” in classical Chinese discourse than might otherwise have been expected. For pre-Qin thinkers, it would likely make perfect sense to say simply that a wise person was one who possessed knowledge,⁵⁴ a person who knew a great deal, because being knowledgeable would in itself entail that the person acted in a wise manner in a wide range of situations. Being wise is just

⁵¹ *Mozi* 65/40/2 and 68/42/3.

⁵² *Lüshi Chunqiu* 5.3/24/3-8; Knoblock and Riegel (2000, 140).

⁵³ E.g. Bernhard Karlgren, *Grammata Serica Recensa*, entry 863.

⁵⁴ This is precisely what the *Mengzi* claims, using “知” in what we might say were the two senses of “wisdom” and “knowledge”: “知者無不知也” (*Mengzi*: 13.46/72/31).



knowing many things, where “knowing” is understood in the expanded sense which implicitly includes guiding one’s action.

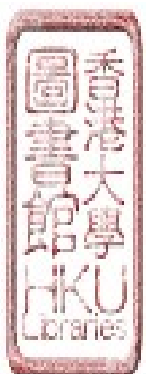
As a result, while it is tempting to try to clarify each instance of “知” as meaning either “knowledge” or “wisdom”, and there may be clear cases where only one of the two would make sense or seem appropriate in translation, in order to avoid introducing confusion by using different translations for the same Chinese character, in general I will translate “知” consistently as “knowledge”, with the proviso that this should be understood as meaning “knowledge (知)” in the sense pre-Qin thinkers took it to be rather than as a narrower Western conception of propositional or other knowledge. Particularly in cases where “*zhi*” is used non-verbally, it is often the case that either translation would make equally good sense.

2.5. Truth and Belief

The above discussion has focused on some of the key terms in which early Chinese discussions of knowledge, action, and cognition were expressed and thus likely to have been understood by Chinese thinkers. It will also be helpful to look briefly at an important way in which these discussions were *not* phrased, and the likely connection between this linguistic background and early theories of knowledge.

It has been persuasively argued that concepts closely corresponding to truth and belief do not play similarly key roles in early Chinese thought to their very central roles in much of Western philosophy.⁵⁵ Pre-Qin thinkers

⁵⁵ Hansen (1985 and 1993).



did not posit an important role for sentential structures in explaining action, belief, or cognition, such as through laws or beliefs, and it has been argued that the early Chinese did not make use of any concept corresponding to a “sentence” at all.⁵⁶ In addition to the general focus of early thought upon *dao* and the important role of action in the notions of both *dao* and *zhi*, important features of the classical Chinese language itself explain why Chinese thinkers would be unlikely to propose accounts of knowledge or belief expressed primarily in sentential terms, as well as why they might be disinclined to see knowledge and belief as being obviously related to one another.

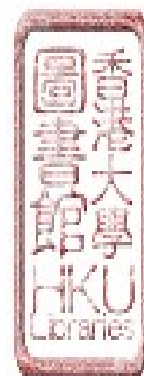
Firstly, in sharp contrast to the relative strong similarities between “*zhi*” and “to know”, belief is typically expressed very differently in classical Chinese to how it is in English.⁵⁷ Beliefs were most commonly attributed using the structure “以…為… (*yi ... wei ...*, take ... as ...)” – taking one thing as holding of some other thing, for instance “take the king as begrudging it” (i.e. believe that the king is begrudging it), or “take me as concealing things” (i.e. believe that I conceal things).⁵⁸ Although this did not rule out the possibility of expressing sentential belief, beliefs were not normally expressed by means of a verb taking anything like a sentence as its direct object.⁵⁹ Additionally, though the *yi ... wei ...* construction was the most common means of attributing a belief to someone, its connotations and semantic range were

⁵⁶ See discussion in Hansen (1985, 496-500).

⁵⁷ Hansen (1985, 500-503) highlights the philosophical importance of this fact.

⁵⁸ *Mengzi* 1.7/4/9; *Analects* 7.24/16/23-24.

⁵⁹ Harbsmeier (1993, 12) and Fang (1997) offer examples where belief of a sentence other than an attribution of something to something else is ascribed. These examples show that it was possible to express such belief in classical Chinese, though doing so was relatively uncommon.



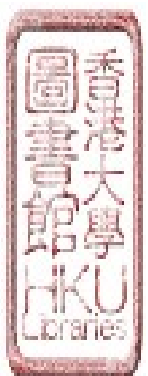
somewhat different to those of the verb “believe”. The construction often functions more similarly to “treat as” than to “believe that”, in that even when it does refer to an agent making a subjective estimation of some kind, the estimation being made is not always an estimation of the truth or factualness of a proposition. For instance, the same construction is sometimes used in ways that can only be understood in terms of an agent’s actions or other psychological attitudes rather than a corresponding belief, as in “my sister-in-law does not take me as being her brother-in-law (嫂不以我為叔)” – i.e. she does not *treat* me as such (though she does not doubt the factualness of the familial relation).⁶⁰ Similarly with the claim that “one who is held in prison takes the days as long; one who is sentenced to die in the marketplace takes the days as short” – what is ascribed is not belief in a proposition, but an apparent psychological attitude towards (or perception of) time.⁶¹ The same “*yi... wei...*” construction, arguably using different senses of one or both of the terms of which it is comprised (though with no obvious grammatical distinction) was also often used to make purely factual statements not relating to any particular agent’s beliefs: “take me as the son of heaven” (meaning make me *in fact* the son of heaven), “trees can be taken as lumber” (trees can *in fact* be used as lumber).⁶² Thus although beliefs were typically expressed using the construction “*yi... wei...*”, the construction “*yi... wei...*” did not always (or perhaps even usually) ascribe belief.

Additionally, despite the many similarities between “*zhi*” and “knowledge”, one significant difference between the two is that classical

⁶⁰ *Zhanguoce* 40/14/1.

⁶¹ *Huainanzi* 16.22/156/12.

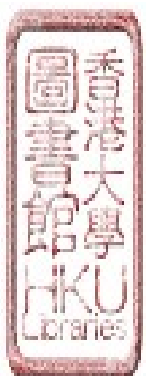
⁶² *Lüshi Chunqiu* 2.2/7/14-15; *Huainanzi* 12/106/9-10.



Chinese lacked a count noun for individual items of knowledge or belief.⁶³ “*Zhi*” could be attributed to a person so as to talk about his knowledge, but any such talk was usually restricted to talking about his knowledge in an undifferentiated way except where the context made it clear what was being talked about. It was possible (though unusual) to talk indirectly *about* certain beliefs or knowledge – for example, by means of an indexical relating to a particular statement⁶⁴ – but this talk did not involve individuating what a person believes or knows into discrete units, but rather referring to his believing some previously mentioned statement. The significance of this is not that classical Chinese had no way to talk about belief or knowledge or say certain kinds of thing about what people believed or knew, but rather that the language itself did not provide the same obvious metaphor for how belief and knowledge might be individuated or understood as do languages such as English. In ordinary English discourse it is quite natural to say things like “His belief that it would happen was unfounded” and to talk of “a/the belief that...”, and even for me to say that “I share your belief that...” – these linguistic facts alone make it very natural to suppose that belief might be the kind of thing that could come in discrete individual units, one of which might be (or have some content corresponding to) “that it would happen”. In classical Chinese, belief can be attributed to people, but doing so does not involve talking about “beliefs” or anything like them – the linguistic structure does not give the superficial appearance of some individuable abstract entity

⁶³ Harbsmeier (1993, 11)

⁶⁴ Fang (1997, 97) gives the example of a line of poetry being cited and followed by a reference to “信斯言也 – if one trusts (i.e. believes) this *yan* (claim, doctrine)”. Even in this case, it is actually speech (*yan*) that is being individuated rather than belief.



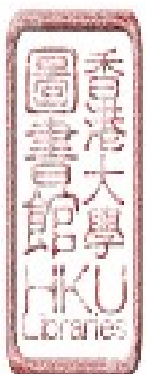
being involved in belief attribution. A similar point applies to knowledge, though rather more subtly since knowledge attributions do involve a single verb that can be nominalized – yet even when it is nominalized, it is still not countable, and references to “his *zhi*” normally refer not to a particular piece of knowledge, but to an agent’s knowledge in aggregate or the capacity through which he knows.⁶⁵

The case of truth is interestingly different. There were words that could be used to assert something like the truth, correctness or acceptability of a sentence, and these were used systematically by early writers to make such assertions (such as the use of “當 *dang* (fitting)”, “然 *ran* (so, this way)”, “可 *ke* (acceptable)”, and “是 *shi* (so, correct)”, particularly by the later Mohists).⁶⁶ At least some of these were countable, and were explicitly counted in certain importantly relevant contexts, such as in the later Mohist classifications of various claims as “one *shi* and one *fei*” or “one *ran* and one not *ran*”.⁶⁷ It was also quite common to nominalize terms such as “*ran*” and to speak of “然者 *ran zhe* – one (case or thing) that is so”. This would tend to suggest that what is so and not-so *are* or at least can be the kind of things that can be counted and expressed by sentences. But the fact remains that in classical Chinese this in no way lines up neatly with linguistic expressions relating to what is believed or known. Thus there are important linguistic disanalogies between knowledge, belief, and truth that contrast starkly with

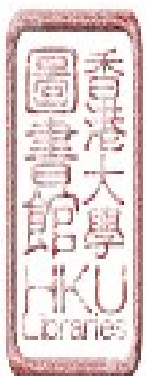
⁶⁵ There are rare exceptions, such as “only having the *zhi* [knowledge] of cicada wings (唯蜩翼之知)” *Zhuangzi* 48/19/20.

⁶⁶ See Harbsmeier (1998, 200-209).

⁶⁷ *Mozi* 78/45/30, 68/42/21.



the close sentential analogies between the three that are visible in the surface grammar of typical English discourse.

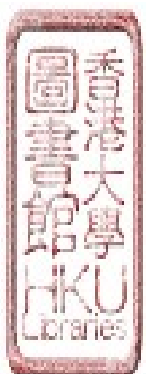


3. Knowledge, mind and world

From a linguistic point of view, “knowing” primarily relates two things: a subject – the knower – and some object (which might be a physical or abstract object, state of affairs, or ability) that is known. If an agent knows something, this implies certain things about him, but facts about the agent alone are not enough to decide the question of whether or not he knows – facts about how things actually are also involved. If I know that Confucius is a man, this says something meaningful about me as an agent, but it also says something meaningful about the way Confucius is. If I know tables, again this says something about me, but it is also related to how things actually are: if facts relating to the way tables are should change, and yet I should remain the same, I might no longer count as knowing them.⁶⁸ You would find my claim to know how to ride a bike disingenuous if it were to emerge that I could do so only as long as someone balanced it by holding the handlebars. In each case, factors external to me as an agent – and not solely deriving from the meaning of the words involved – partly determine whether or not I know.

This prompts two key questions: firstly, how is it that agents can come to possess knowledge? Secondly, what factors external to agents themselves

⁶⁸ It might be objected that this confuses the question of how things are with what words mean. However it is quite possible for important facts about tables to change independently of what the word “tables” actually means. For instance, if society should from today onwards decide that tables (being precisely those objects referred to at all times as “tables”) were to be used in a quite different manner than previously – used upended for storing things, for instance – and use them as such, while I alone remained unaware of this significant change in their use, according to the prevailing early Chinese view I might no longer count as “knowing tables”.

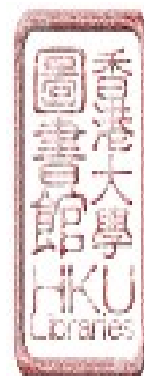


are involved – and why should it be *these* factors? This chapter will attempt to answer how Chinese thinkers responded to these questions. The first section will examine how agents and their perceptual faculties were understood and explained by early thinkers; the remaining sections will look at the competing answers to the two questions that were proposed.

3.1. Mind and body

Knowledge is described by several early texts as involving “connecting”. The terse but carefully crafted Mohist canons include precisely such a definition: “knowing is connecting (接 *jie*)”, the corresponding explanation elaborating on this as “‘*zhi* (knowing)’: by means of one’s *zhi*, having passed the thing one is able to imagine it. (Like seeing.)”.⁶⁹ Though there may be a degree of ambiguity in precisely how we should interpret the second *zhi* – as “knowing” in the sense of intellectual capacity, or “knowledge” meaning all or part of the body of what we know – one general conclusion we can draw from this is that knowing was, quite reasonably, understood at least in part as involving a connection between the knower and things, and an ability that resulted somehow from this. Related passages in the *Huainanzi*, *Lüshi Chunqiu*, and *Zhuangzi* suggest that this was not a

⁶⁹ *Mozi* 65/40/2 and 68/42/3; translation based on Graham (1978, 267). Graham translates the first “*zhi*” as “knowing” and the second as “intelligence” here, and has “describe” instead of “imagine”. “Imagine” is preferable in the present context because “describe” seems to imply *linguistic* representation, which does not follow from the translated word “貌” itself which typically relates to appearance and probably does imply representation, but not necessarily of a linguistic form. The *Huainanzi* for instance comments that “a posthumous child does not long for its father and does not imagine (貌) him in his *xin* (heart-mind)”, an example of a case where “describe” would seem inappropriate. *Huainanzi* 17.92/174/28.

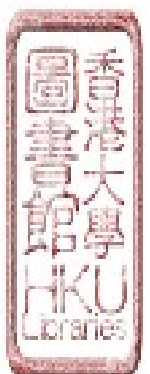


view peculiar to the later Mohists.⁷⁰ The use of the construction “by means of one’s (lit. its) *zhi* (以其知)” suggests that the implicit subject is the knower, but precisely who (or what) is it that knows and imagines? The subject might simply be the knower (for instance a human being), but it could in principle equally well be some other physical or non-physical object of some sort associated with them (e.g. the knower’s brain or mind). The terseness of the Mohist claim, even with the assistance provided by the explanation, initially leaves us with considerable room for interpretation. A passage in the *Xunzi* discussing knowledge, on the other hand, makes a similar claim of “connecting” in which the senses and the body are subject: “Ears, eyes, nose, mouth and body all have connecting (*jie*) but cannot exchange capacities”.⁷¹ In order to understand how the “connecting” aspect of knowledge is supposed to work, we will need to look more generally at ideas of cognition and perception in early Chinese thought.

The dominant understanding of perception in early China was based around the idea of the various physical organs of the body each with its own unique capacities operating to some degree autonomously and making potentially independent contributions to an agent’s experience and agency. These organs included primarily the heart-mind (心 *xin*), but also various sensory organs of the body such as the eyes and ears. While the *xin* is clearly of particular importance in understanding Chinese ideas of perception, an interesting feature of the Chinese model is that the model itself does not place *xin* on a separate level to the other senses; as Geaney (2002, 13)

⁷⁰ *Huainanzi* 1/2/15; *Lüshi Chunqiu* 16.3/92/10-17; *Zhuangzi* 64/23/71.

⁷¹ *Xunzi* 62/17/11-12.



comments, “The heartmind is integrated with the other senses. It is not distinguished from the other senses and seems to be considered a sense function”.

The term “心 *xin*” itself is often translated into English as “heart-mind” because of its dual use in referring to the heart as a physical organ of the body, such as when the *Shiji* records that the tyrant Zhou, having heard that the *xin* of a sage was said to have seven openings, “killed prince Bigan, cut his *xin* out and looked at it”,⁷² in addition to its more commonly attested use as the locus of both thought⁷³ and emotion.⁷⁴ Phrases like “having the *xin* of ...” commonly referred to having some particular intention or inclination to act in some way, somewhat akin to the English idiom “having a mind to ...”.⁷⁵

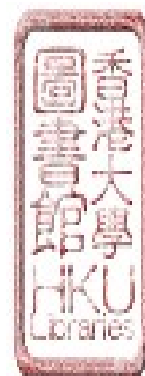
It must be noted that this apparent “duality of meaning” in the term “heart-mind” is a duality only in a very different sense to the Cartesian dualism that has been influential in Western thought and folk psychology, and must not be mistaken as implying an endorsement of a form of mind-body dualism or a commitment to anything similar; on the contrary, on the face of it the Chinese terminology appears to identify the physical organ as literally being the locus of thought and emotion, as when I say both that “my brain is in my head” and also that “I think with my brain”. Rather, the apparent “duality” is simply an artifact of our attempt to translate the Chinese term into the conceptual framework of modern English, which lacks a single appropriate term sharing to a sufficiently high degree the semantics

⁷² *Shiji* 1610.

⁷³ E.g. *Mengzi* 11.15/60/27-28.

⁷⁴ E.g. *Zhuangzi* 76/27/14-15. See Hansen (1989, 97) and (1992, 20).

⁷⁵ E.g. *Shiji* 2261 (“有吞天下之心”).



of “*xin*”; we attempt to approximate its semantic range by mentioning both “heart”, evoking both the physical organ and (in ordinary discourse at least) the locus of emotion, as well as “mind”, the purported locus of thought. Any “duality of meaning” read into the Chinese terminology itself seems more to do with our own language, background assumptions and folk theories of cognition than important characteristics of the term “*xin*” that we are trying to interpret. Early Chinese writers did not typically distinguish between two independent realms in which the *xin* acted (such as physical and mental), but rather treated the *xin* as simply being a physical organ that, much like the other physical organs with which it was closely associated, is both a part of the body and also has certain unique capabilities and capacities.

Sense organs such as the eyes and ears were typically identified as being not merely the locus of the corresponding perceptive faculties, but also the source of certain corresponding desires and responses. The eyes “like beauty”, the ears “like sounds”, the mouth “likes the five flavors”.⁷⁶ Pleasant appearances “delight the eyes”; harmonious sounds “delight the ears”.⁷⁷ The most commonly identified sense organs were often collectively referred to as the “natural officers (天官)”, “five officers (五官)”, or “five paths (五路)”:⁷⁸ these typically consisted of ears, eyes, nose and mouth, together with either the heart-mind⁷⁹ or the body (形).⁸⁰ The first four of these seem to have been most universally agreed upon, and were often referred to collectively by name in the absence of a fifth sense organ. Certainly there was a clear

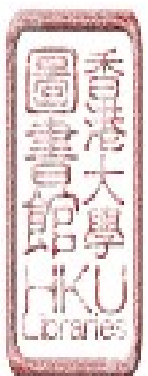
⁷⁶ *Xunzi* 40/11/78-41/11/80.

⁷⁷ *Shuoyuan* 19.8/162/6.

⁷⁸ *Mozi* 66/41/4-5.

⁷⁹ *Shuoyuan* 19.39/170/25.

⁸⁰ E.g. *Xunzi* 62/17/11.



appreciation that the status of the heart-mind, though in one sense in the same category as the other organs, might differ importantly from the others. Of considerable relevance to the present study however, each of these organs frequently functioned as the subject of the verb “to know”: speaking of musical notes, carving and ornaments, cooked meats and grand buildings, the *Mozi* for instance tells us that the body “knows their comfort”, the mouth “knows their sweetness”, the eyes “know their beauty”, and the ears “know their pleasure”.⁸¹ In the case of the most important object of knowledge from the perspective of pre-Qin philosophy generally, knowing *dao*, it is by means of the *xin* that the agent knows.⁸²

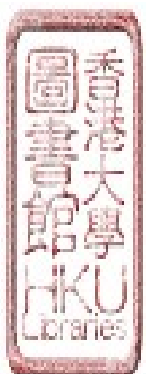
Though each organ senses and responds to different things or aspects of things, their functioning shares a common mechanism: *bian* (辯/辨 distinguishing). Distinguishing what is from what is not, or distinguishing between polar opposites such as black and white, was central to the operation of each organ. This makes it even clearer why there would be such a strong temptation to put *xin* in the same category as the other sense organs. The Han dynasty text the *Zhonglun* makes this quite explicit in its comments about the *junzi*’s distinguishing: “A person’s *xin* is to *shi-fei* as his mouth is to flavor”.⁸³ Just as the eyes distinguish black from white or the ears clear from muffled sounds, so the heart-mind distinguishes (or *should* distinguish, if it is functioning correctly) *shi* from *fei*.⁸⁴

⁸¹ *Mozi* 54/32/5-7.

⁸² *Xunzi* 80/21/34.

⁸³ *Zhong Lun* 8/11/24-25..

⁸⁴ *Huainanzi* 19/208/26-26.



Just as the other senses have desires, so too does the heart-mind. But whereas the list of objects said to be desired by the other senses is generally fairly short, the same cannot be said of the *xin*. The *xin* is often described (not infrequently with a moralizing undertone) as desiring rest or indulgence,⁸⁵ particularly when mentioned in contrast to the other organs, but also as desiring a range of abstract objects such as wealth and prosperity⁸⁶ and benefit,⁸⁷ actions one wishes to carry out,⁸⁸ and states of affairs⁸⁹ – the latter two usages generally implying an emphasis on a consciously hidden or as yet unexpressed desire known to the agent but not revealed to others.

As a consequence of their having desires, the senses are not merely passive receptors of sense data, but active seekers of the various objects they desire. According to the *Lunheng*, the mouth desires food, and the eyes desire to see – and this internal desire manifests itself in the external act of seeking (求 *qiu*).⁹⁰ Again, just as the subject of the desire is the sense organ itself, so too is the subject of the seeking. Returning to the Mohist canons, we have a definition that states that “thinking/deliberating is seeking (慮，求也)”, which is expanded on as “By means of one's *zhi* one seeks something, but does not necessarily find it. (Like peering.)”⁹¹ This seems to suggest that the case of the heart-mind is likely again analogous: it desires and therefore seeks out its various objects.

⁸⁵ *Xunzi* 39/11/46-47; *Hanshi Waizhuan* 2.7/8/26-27.

⁸⁶ *Hanfeizi* 20/36/5.

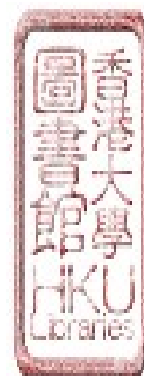
⁸⁷ *Hanfeizi* 20/38/28.

⁸⁸ *Shiji* 1486 (“心欲殺管仲”); *Han Shu* 2504 (“其心欲盡滅先王之道”).

⁸⁹ E.g. *Shiji* 124 (“心欲武王亟入”).

⁹⁰ *Lunheng* 54/239/26-27.

⁹¹ *Mozi* 65/40/1-2 and 67/42/2-68/42/3; translation following Graham (1978, 267).

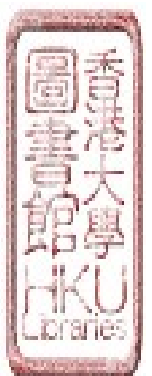


While the various organs all shared these conceptual similarities however, this did not imply that they were all of equal importance or played equally central roles. Inherent in the nomenclature of the “five officers” is an important analogy between the senses and political administration that was explicitly alluded to in the classical period. The term “five officers” was itself used at times to refer literally to five key administrative offices of government as well as those who occupied them.⁹² The *Xunzi* in particular paints a clear picture in which the officers – the senses excluding the *xin* – are ruled by their “natural ruler”, the heart-mind, which the text says is the means by which the sage knows what to do and what not do to.⁹³ Just as there is a normative power relationship between ruler and officer, so too the senses – acknowledged to have some degree of autonomy – should be guided and kept in check by the *xin*.⁹⁴ The Mohist example alluded to above – in which the text explains that it is opposed to wasteful over-indulgence because this is harmful to the common good, while acknowledging that the sense organs do indeed know the enjoyment of the various objects – makes clear how this works: though the various sense organs are the source of certain desires and will be gratified in various ways when they obtain the objects of their desire, these desires can certainly be overruled. We do not have to slavishly follow the desires of these organs; in this sense, and in view of the relatively primitive nature of the objects typically desired by these organs, their “desires” might be better characterized as “urges” or

⁹² E.g. *Liji* 43.2/165/29, *Huainanzi* 3/21/1.

⁹³ *Xunzi* 62/17/11-63/17/16.

⁹⁴ As Yu (2007, 37) points out, the metaphor works both ways, with rulers being metaphorically described as the *xin* of the state.



“appetites”.⁹⁵ It is the *xin*, in its role as ruler, which possesses the authority to overrule the senses and ensure they do not run rampant. Though my mouth desires another slice of cake, my *xin* may overrule it in this particular case since it has determined that I will go on a diet.

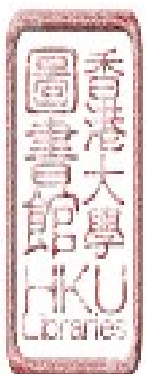
One passage in the *Xunzi* in particular takes this idea further, elevating the *xin* above the other senses in describing it as possessing a “verifying knowing” capacity that the other senses lack.⁹⁶ This appears to be intended to work in conjunction with the discriminations made by the other senses: the other senses make discriminations in the role of sensation, but the *xin* – their natural ruler – is required to perceive or classify these sensations appropriately, and both conditions must be satisfied in order for one to count as knowing.

This conception of the heart-mind as ruler did not go unchallenged however. A passage in the *Zhuangzi* – while going along with the analogy of the organs as officials – appears to question the relation between the *xin* and the other senses.⁹⁷ Perhaps each organ plays each role in turn, sometimes playing ruler, sometimes minister – or perhaps none is fit to rule over the others. Whatever the precise goal of the *Zhuangzi*’s challenge, it serves to

⁹⁵ They might also be said to correspond to “first-order desires”, in the sense that they can be overruled by desires of some higher status. However this terminology should be used with caution to avoid on the one hand implying that a belief-desire model of motivation played an important role in the Chinese conception of mind and action, and on the other glossing over the key fact that the subjects of these low-level desires are the sense organs themselves and would likely not in general be same as the subject of any overruling desire, which would typically be the *xin*.

⁹⁶ *Xunzi* 83/22/19-21.

⁹⁷ *Zhuangzi* 4/2/16-18.



underline the perceived importance of the ruler-officer relation in understanding the relation between the senses and *xin* at the time.⁹⁸

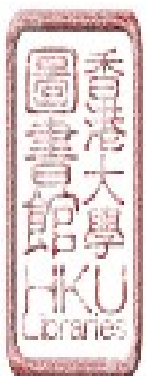
Though a majority of commentators have accepted that early Chinese thinkers did not endorse a form of dualism, the suggestion in early texts of an elevated status of the *xin* versus the other organs of the body has prompted some to raise the possibility that they may nonetheless be committed to some implicit form of dualism. Slingerland and Chudek (2011) for instance point to statistical evidence that the *xin* is contrasted with terms referring to the body as possible grounds for believing that the early Chinese subscribed to what they call “weak folk dualism”, in which “mind-stuff and body-stuff overlap and interact”.⁹⁹ In apparent support of this argument, the *xin* is at times also described as being not just the ruler of the other senses, but also the ruler of the *body* (形之君 or 身之君).¹⁰⁰ This might be taken (particularly if one were to focus on the loaded term “body” in the English translation – “body”, being, in the dominant English language paradigm, in direct opposition to “mind”) as suggesting an implicit commitment to a form of mind-body dualism.

There is a genuine issue here regarding what should be accepted as evidence for such dualism. Though there are indeed cases where *xin* is contrasted with body, it would appear that such cases may be quite different to cases in which the English term “mind” is contrasted with “body”, because “mind” is never (in ordinary English language terms) considered to be a part of the body, whereas *xin* certainly is, at the very least in a minority of clear

⁹⁸ Geaney (2002, 22-23).

⁹⁹ Slingerland and Chudek (2011, 997-1003).

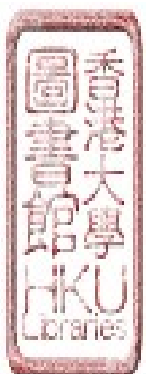
¹⁰⁰ *Xunzi* 80/21/44 and *Shizi* 1.2/3/6 respectively.



cases, and not implausibly in all cases. Here it seems important to emphasize that – particularly in light of the administrative analogy – claims about the *xin* ruling the body are most naturally read as claims about physical parts of the body: the *xin* (which is part of the body) is the ruler of the body, in much the same way that the king (who is part of the state) is the ruler of the state. This seems more closely analogous to a claim in English that “the brain (a physical part of the body) is the ruler of the body” than the more loaded “the mind (perhaps existing outside the physical realm) is the ruler of the body”. Given also that, as we have seen, the *xin* was generally agreed to have a unique standing among the other organs with which it was grouped, it seems unlikely that any amount of evidence that the *xin* was contrasted with terms associated with the body would in and of itself be sufficient to support a dualism hypothesis without the additional support of other forms of evidence.¹⁰¹ As Klein and Klein (2011, 180) argue, the association of the *xin* with cognition and its tendency to be contrasted with other organs would be consistent with many other interpretations besides those implying weak folk dualism.

In summary, the “connecting” between agent and world was performed by the sense organs themselves, including the heart-mind, each typically interacting with different kinds of objects. Though the other senses

¹⁰¹ Other forms of evidence would include any comments that could be found in Chinese texts suggesting some sort of ontological contrast between the *xin* and *shen* (身 body) implying that the *xin* is *not* literally a physical part of the *shen* – for instance, if there were comments that one’s *shen* and *xin* might somehow come apart in some way other than the physical sense in which Bigan’s did, or that one’s *xin* or something associated with it might continue to exist after one’s *shen* ceased to be, this could count as evidence in favor of a dualist position.

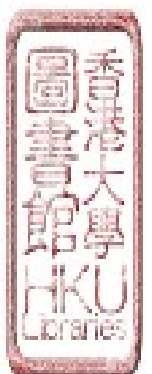


were generally viewed as subordinate to the heart-mind, this subordination was typically not one of a centralized processing unit receiving data from mere sense receptors or information conduits, but rather a relation between organs *including* the heart-mind that share many commonalities: sensing through discrimination, possessing desires relating to their corresponding objects, and being the cause of corresponding responses. It was a relation between things of the same kind, but generally not among equals: it had a natural ruler, the heart-mind, which had the power and responsibility to keep the other senses in order.

Perhaps the most important point to emphasize about the picture that emerges of the heart-mind is what is absent from it: reasoning is not proposed as a mechanism by which it functions, nor is its primary function to manipulate sentential objects such as propositions, nor to represent such objects.¹⁰² Aside from distinguishing, seeking, and knowing, the functions of the heart-mind primarily related to perception and recognition, attending to or concentrating on things, deliberating and planning, and approving or preventing action.¹⁰³ Prior to examining further evidence from within early Chinese discourse, we should initially as Hansen (1989, 97) suggests regard it as a “black box”: certainly it is a faculty responsible for a great deal of

¹⁰² It might be objected that for many Chinese thinkers the heart-mind was expected or required to internalize a *dao*, and that this constitutes a form of representation. However, such internalization was more typically described using language suggesting cultivation (such as “修 *xiu*”) rather than representation, and rarely ascribed specifically to the heart-mind but more typically to the agent or his body as a whole (commonly expressed as “修身 *xiu shen*” – cultivate the body). The *ability* to reliably follow a *dao* was often seen as an end goal of cultivation, but this in itself does not imply representation in the *xin*.

¹⁰³ Fraser (1999, 192-193).



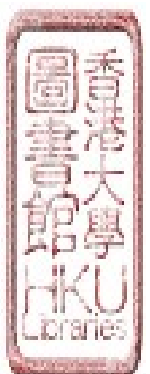
human behavior, but we can by no means assume that it was believed by Chinese thinkers to do so through the mechanisms typically ascribed to the mind in Western thought.

3.2. Knowing through human nature

The question of *a priori* knowledge – knowledge that can in some sense be acquired purely through reflection, without empirical investigation of the contingent facts of the world – has long been a subject of discussion in Western philosophy. In the Chinese tradition, a related but distinct debate arose, centered around a group of related questions: are the origins of morality internal, or are they external? Do people have the capacity to become morally good agents due to facts about human nature independent of moral society, or due to external and contingent facts about the world? Are there aspects of right and wrong – the *shi* and *fei* of the correct *dao* – that we “just know” through some innate human capacity, or must all individuals learn morality through interaction with moral society? Given the important relationship between *dao* and knowledge, if it should turn out that some objectively correct *shi-fei* distinctions are both natural and innate – possessed by us purely by virtue of our being human – this could go some way to explaining both what knowledge is and how we can have access to it.

This debate is often partly characterized in terms of views about “human nature / natural human tendencies” (*ren xing* 人性).¹⁰⁴ The stance

¹⁰⁴ Robins (2001) argues that “human nature” is an inadequate translation for the Chinese term “人性”. Here I continue to use the standard term “human nature”, on the understanding that this is primarily to be understood as a



that human beings simply by virtue of their being human are inclined to become morally good is taken as meaning that human nature is good; the opposite stance that human beings naturally do not tend towards being good as human nature being bad or ugly.¹⁰⁵

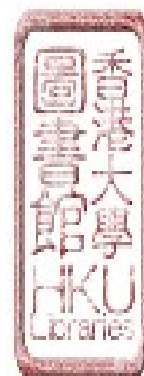
The most well-known proponent of an innate human capacity for some kind of moral knowledge is Mencius, who sees it as fundamental to human nature, which he naturally believes is good.¹⁰⁶ Mencius's innatist stance is explained in terms of what he calls the four "starting points" (*duan* 端), each of which is characterized by a state of the heart-mind that forms the basis for a key virtue in Mencius's ethics. Since these are supposed to be common to all human beings,¹⁰⁷ the claim is that the basis for morality is fundamentally internal rather than external. The four starting points are: the heart-mind of sympathy, which is the starting point of benevolence; the

convenient label with which to identify whatever is meant by the Chinese term, and not as an entirely equivalent English cognate.

¹⁰⁵ Though I follow the common translation of "人之性善" as "human nature is good", the Chinese term "人之性惡" is often translated as "human nature is evil", which can be misleading as "evil" may have connotations of a disposition towards harmful actions towards others in which malice is the primary motivation. Since this is not a feature of the Chinese debate, in which the example actions of those influenced by the negative side of human nature are typically selfish and possibly harmful to others but not actively malicious, "bad" seems a more appropriate word to use. "Ugly" is an equally plausible translation, since it is also a common meaning of the term "惡" particularly when contrasted with "美" (which *Xunzi* 73/19/76 applies to *xing*).

¹⁰⁶ *Mengzi* 11.6/58/20-26.

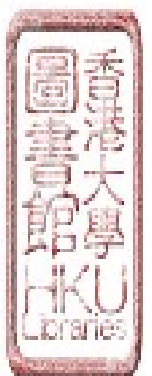
¹⁰⁷ The text appears to make this point quite explicitly, saying for each starting point that he who lacks the corresponding heart-mind "is not human" (非人也). This can be read either as the claim that all human beings do indeed possess the four starting points, or as the claim that all human beings *worthy of the name* do so – that is, it can be understood as condemnation of anyone not possessing the four sprouts as being inhuman, in the same way Mencius himself suggests that Yangists and Mohists be dismissed as "animals", or the murder of the despotic ruler Zhou as not being a case of murdering a ruler.



heart-mind of shame, the starting point of righteousness; the heart-mind of deference, the starting-point of ritual propriety; and the heart-mind of *shi-fei*, the starting point of knowledge or wisdom.¹⁰⁸ As noted earlier, “having the heart-mind of...” on a purely linguistic level implies a disposition towards action: if I have the heart-mind of benevolence, this implies that I am in some way inclined towards benevolent action. The text gives examples in an attempt to make plausible the claim that we all do indeed possess these starting points – the instinctive emotional reaction of a passer-by seeing a child about to fall into a well is not due to his desire for the goodwill of the child’s parents, nor for fear of being branded cold-hearted by others, nor because he detests the noise the child is making, but something nonetheless seemingly common to human beings. It also makes an analogy between our having the four starting points, and our having four limbs – perhaps Mencius would argue that, given an actual instance of someone apparently lacking one or more of the starting points, this would be a case of a person suffering from an unfortunate and unusual disability representing a pathological departure from the norm; the four starting points are common to all “complete” human beings just as the four limbs are, and their absence represents a serious and unnatural deficiency. The analogy of “Ox Mountain” presented in the text supports this interpretation: a mountain once had a beautiful covering of trees that were subsequently all cut down.¹⁰⁹ The sprouts that might have regenerated the covering were then eaten away by oxen and sheep, and thus the mountainside remained bare. The text suggests that the *xing* (性 natural

¹⁰⁸ *Mengzi* 3.6/18/4-12.

¹⁰⁹ *Mengzi* 11.8/59/10-17.

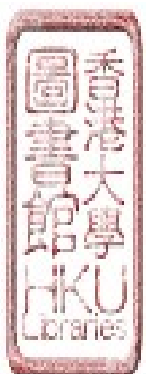


tendencies) of the mountain is for it to have trees, even though external factors working against its *xing* mean it does not in fact have them. So too, it is suggested, people whose heart-minds seemingly lack the sprouts of benevolence and righteousness do so not because of their *xing*, but because of the relentless action of external factors running contrary to it.

According to the *Mengzi*, the starting points directly give rise to an innate form of knowledge that is possessed by all. The text draws an explicit distinction between ability in general and innate ability (良能 *liang neng*) obtained without learning, and a parallel distinction between knowledge in general and innate knowledge (良知 *liang zhi*) obtained without deliberation.¹¹⁰ All children held in the arms know to love their parents, and when older all know to respect their elder brothers. This knowledge – respectively, of benevolence and righteousness – is innate to all human beings. The latter example in particular suggests that what is meant by “innate” here is not simply possessed since birth, but also what grows naturally out of the healthy development of our *xing* – presumably despite offering this example, the *Mengzi* would have to acknowledge that there may exist pathological cases of children who for some reason do not respect their elder brothers.

In a related dialog in the *Mengzi* between Mencius and King Xuan of Qi, Mencius refers to an incident where the king happened to see an ox on its way to be sacrificed, and not being able to bear its frightened appearance, asks that it be substituted with another animal. Mencius takes this as evidence that the king does indeed possess the capacity for benevolence, this

¹¹⁰ *Mengzi* 13.15/68/26-28.



apparently being the reason that “the *junzi* keeps out of the kitchen”.¹¹¹ Since animals are still to be butchered and sacrificed, however, presumably some people who are to perform these tasks must either lack the relevant starting points, or suppress or overcome them in the course of their work. Mencius explains this apparent paradox – that we all possess the four starting points, yet clearly not all are as benevolent, righteous, ritualistic and wise as he would like – by suggesting that this is largely a matter of failing to somehow engage or extend the starting points: he who seeks to develop the starting points will surely gain the virtues, while he who does not will surely fail to do so;¹¹² if one knows to extend and fulfill their potential, the result will be “like a fire burning or a spring breaking through the ground”.¹¹³ The idea is often explained by appeal to a cultivation metaphor: the starting points grow into the four virtues in the same way seeds grow into plants.¹¹⁴ If given the proper nourishment, they will thrive, but lacking it, they may wither and die. Mencius also puts it another way: those who follow their “great parts” and cultivate the starting points become “great men”, while those who follow their “petty (lit. small) parts” become “petty men”.¹¹⁵ This draws attention to a possible problem with the account: if we all have small parts and great parts, why are the great parts the ones we must cultivate? The somewhat unsatisfying Mencian answer appears simply to be that the great parts are

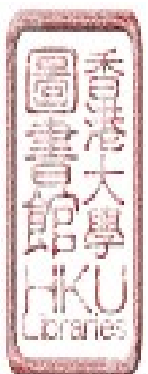
¹¹¹ *Mengzi* 1.7/3/29-1.7/4/20.

¹¹² *Mengzi* 11.6/58/20.

¹¹³ *Mengzi* 3.6/18/10-12.

¹¹⁴ The *Mengzi* itself does use the language of “cultivation” in other passages, e.g. 11.14/60/16.

¹¹⁵ *Mengzi* 11.15/60/21-11.15/61/1.



superior to the small parts, and so are – obviously – the ones we should cultivate.¹¹⁶

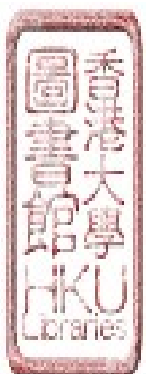
Mencius offers a second vivid example of how brute facts about human nature might lead us inexorably in the direction of morality, ritual, and knowledge.¹¹⁷ In the ancient past, we are told, there were those who did not bury their parents, but instead casually threw their bodies into a nearby ditch. Passing by the ditch another day, they saw the bodies being consumed by wild animals and insects. They broke out in a sweat, and could not bear to look at the bodies. This was not on account of others, but due to their own emotional reactions. They therefore quickly covered the bodies in earth. Thus not only morality in a narrowly construed sense, but ritual too has its roots in human nature – that is, in brute facts about human beings independent of tradition or culture.

This second example also highlights what the *Mengzi* sees as a defense of the Confucian family-centered model of human social interaction against a perceived attack by Mohism: that we believe we would indeed have such a strong reaction in this case is surely down in large part to our social relationships with the deceased; our anguish at seeing the corpses rotting and festering would surely be multiplied enormously by our personal relationships with the individuals in question as compared with the bodies of complete strangers.¹¹⁸ Thus ritual and morality have groundings in

¹¹⁶ *Mengzi* 11.14/60/16.

¹¹⁷ *Mengzi* 5.5/30/22-5.5/30/25.

¹¹⁸ This response does not seem to be based upon a charitable interpretation of Mohism, at least as understood on the basis of the received text of the *Mozi*. The Mohists did not, as Mencius tries to suggest, believe that familial relations were unimportant or that we should treat friends, family, and

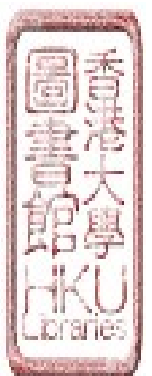


straightforward naturalistic facts about human beings and their psychological makeup.

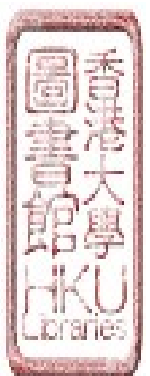
The *Mengzi*'s carefully chosen examples have a good deal of rhetorical force. But exactly how this innatist picture gets us from internal reflection on our emotions all the way to morality, wisdom, and the content of the sophisticated Confucian *li* (禮 rites, ritual)¹¹⁹ is not explained in much detail in the *Mengzi*. In so far as it is successful at all, the innatist picture seems to be interesting mainly with respect to moral knowledge of a relatively basic form, and in providing some naturalistic grounds – and motivation – for morality and ritual. Reasoning about more complex moral issues, or justifying the specifics of an elaborate system of *li* appear to unavoidably require appeal to external facts about the world and reasoning that would seem tantamount to the “*bian*” that Mencius hopes not to engage in: do the *li*, in reality, always have good consequences, for instance, and why should we accept them if they do not? It seems fanciful to suggest that prior to learning the actual concrete forms of the *li*, all human beings would somehow feel the same strength of impulse towards wearing the appropriate form of cap on a certain occasion that we might feel to seeing a child about to fall into a well or our loved ones' decomposing corpses – insofar as we might have any innate

strangers in the same way. There would seem to be little in the story the *Mengzi* tells here that a Mohist would want to reject, since Mohists also affirmed the value of burial rituals, and would surely be quite happy interpreting the *Mengzi*'s story as showing that burial rituals are, indeed, beneficial.

¹¹⁹ The term *li*, variously translated as “rites”, “ritual”, “ritual propriety”, among others, refers to wide-ranging norms which are seen as being both culturally and ethically important by Confucians. It incorporates aspects of ritual (specifying the wearing of particular garments on certain occasions), propriety (rules of social interaction), and rites (stipulations on how to correctly carry out a funeral and properly conduct mourning).

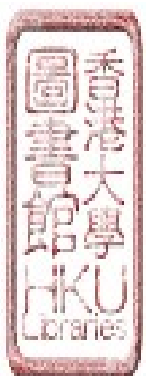


feeling at all regarding the appropriate cap, it seems highly probable that different people might feel a different cap, or perhaps none at all, to be most appropriate. The observation that the heart-mind of *shi-fei* is a prerequisite to knowledge and wisdom would have seemed relatively uncontroversial to most advocates of positive *daos*, but this in itself doesn't add much to our understanding of how knowledge and wisdom come about. At the same time, if possession of the four starting points is *not* in fact truly universal among human beings, it is difficult to see that this even provides a naturalistic basis for morality – why should we be so sure that the four starting points the *Mengzi* identifies are what should be developed, and why should we accept that the parts he identifies are indeed as he claims the “great parts” that ought to be cultivated? In the case of the Confucian *li* it seems obvious that tradition – though far from being the only factor – plays a significant role in determining its content. But as the Mohists point out, there can be good traditions and bad traditions – and the fact that a tradition can appeal to some basis compatible with human nature hardly shows that it is good. Indeed, Mencius's appeal to this moral “state of nature” type of argument risks directly providing equal justificatory grounds for practices that we might see as immoral: in this ancient time where people did not bury their parents, and so presumably did not have anything like Confucian morality or ritual in place, can we really be expected to believe that no moral outrages occurred that did not cause harm to the moral *agents* involved? It seems less easy to imagine a repeatedly successful thief voluntarily deciding entirely through his own regret at his own past actions to reform his moral character without external influence.



Nevertheless, there does seem to be something intuitively plausible about the idea behind part of the Mencian stance: it does seem true that human beings are in principle *capable* of the various virtues due to some capacity that, perhaps, is common to all humans, but might not be shared by other animals for instance. It might be reasonable to suggest that there are such faculties, common to humans, that if developed in certain ways give us the *capacity* for ritual, music, knowledge and so on. But it would seem quite implausible to suggest that these faculties alone give rise to any particular *form* of ritual propriety or morality in a broadly understood sense, and the mere fact that we have a capacity for something does not provide justification for its being morally good – human beings after all also possess a seemingly unparalleled capacity for carrying out acts of violence and oppression against one another. Yet our shared human psychology does indeed seem fundamental to our truly appreciating human rituals. Were we the kind of beings that were truly unmoved by the death of our family members or friends, quite comfortable with seeing their decomposing corpses lying in a ditch, and having no particular difficulty accepting that though yesterday they formed an important part of our social lives, from today they can no longer play any role in them, then a funeral ritual of any kind would seem largely meaningless and unnecessary.¹²⁰ Despite this, and despite – anticipating a Zhuangist response – the fact that funeral rituals can

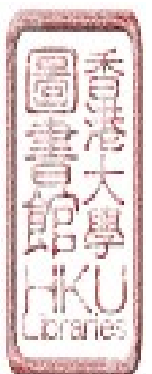
¹²⁰ Though one might imagine that public health concerns could form an alternative naturalistic basis here, it turns out that this assumption is incorrect – even in cases of disaster and mass death, in comparison to concerns of infectious contagion and other risks, “the psychological trauma of losing loved ones and witnessing death on a large scale is the greatest cause for concern”. J. Fisher, *WHO Technical Note for Emergencies No. 8*.



differ radically across different cultures, funeral rituals are nonetheless found in virtually all human societies.

The Mencian view seems most plausible then understood as a claim about human psychology: we all have the capacity for morality and ritual – perhaps of some characteristically human kind – as well as the capacity for knowledge and wisdom. Our human *xin* is constructed in such a way that we have psychological predispositions towards benevolence, righteousness, ritual, and wisdom – and these predispositions (or the distinctions that naturally grow out of them) correspond to the objectively correct *shi-fei* of the correct *dao*. Crucially, these predispositions need to somehow become “engaged” or switched on. But serious questions remain as to what justifies taking these particular innate *shi-fei* tendencies of the *xin* as being objectively correct, and on why we should expect them to develop according to any particular fixed pattern.

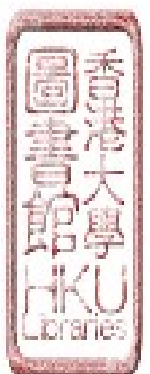
Even so, the Mencian view can be seen as going some way towards an answer to the first of the two questions posed about knowledge at the start of this chapter: how do we come to possess knowledge. For the *Mengzi*, the most fundamental means through which we can come to possess knowledge are the four capacities that the text highlights: human beings can come to possess knowledge because their heart-minds are constructed in a certain way, such that they all possess these tendencies. For example, sympathy (presumably when combined with many other factors) is what most fundamentally explains why human beings can come to be benevolent, as contrasted with, say, rational agents who lack the capacity for sympathy. Similarly, by virtue of our heart-minds possessing the ability to distinguish



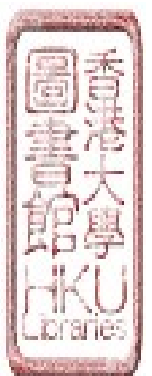
shi from *fei*, we have the capacity for knowledge and wisdom. Were our heart-minds to lack this ability, these would remain forever unavailable to us. So for the *Mengzi*, it is precisely in virtue of the construction of the human heart-mind that we can come to possess knowledge. How is it that we can *know* that it is right for a ruler to ensure that his people are sufficiently fed and clothed? Because our human *xin* is constructed the way it is, as evidenced by our reaction in the case of the child about to fall into the well. Why is it that we can know that all dogs are mammals? Because we have the ability to distinguish *shi* from *fei*, and this capacity, when naturally developed, ultimately brings us to this knowledge.

This answer – though perhaps simplistic and lacking in detail – does have some persuasive elements to it. At the very least, the capacities identified do appear to be necessary conditions for the attainment of their associated virtues. To the extent that it relies on facts about the heart-mind and its construction, part of this account might be considered relatively mainstream, as it echoes the general observations of the faculties and operation of the heart-mind laid out in the previous section, and the suggestion that these can somehow extend outwards to account for normativity more generally is an interesting one. But whether or not the “natural” development of these capacities truly must result in precisely the virtues claimed seems far from obvious – suspicions may quickly be raised as to whether there really is just one unique way in which these capacities might naturally develop.

What does this tell us about what factors external to ourselves are involved in our knowledge? This is a question that the *Mengzi* does not



engage with directly. Its answer to the first question might seem to hint at a possible response: one might think that the story of the child about to fall into the well could also suggest that *because* human beings all agree on the correct response – or at least all feel the same urge to respond in the same way – this might be what makes such a response the correct one. It may be that our human *xing* not only makes it possible for us to obtain knowledge, but moreover also determines – perhaps in part – what *counts* as knowledge. Yet the story of King Xuan and the ox seems to suggest the opposite: though it was praiseworthy for King Xuan to be moved by the ox's cries in the sense that this showed that he did indeed possess the four starting points and so did not have a deficient, inhuman heart-mind, his intuitive response to spare the creature's life – though perhaps one likely to be shared by many others in the same situation – was in fact the *wrong* response because it went counter to the established ritual. So it is not the case that even an idealized agent merely by virtue of having the natural, healthy human intuitions and tendencies would always intuit the correct thing to do, and so it also cannot be the case that it is simply shared intuition or natural tendencies that directly make these actions right. Human intuition is a necessary condition for an individual to come to possess knowledge, but according with intuitive human judgment, impulse, or action is not a necessary condition for something to count as knowledge. This suggests that an explanation may involve some sort of interplay between human *xing* and other factors that will have to somehow account for human cultural practices such as ritual that do not at first sight seem to be directly present in human *xing*. The burial example suggests that – at least for some kinds of knowledge – there may be



something right about this approach – there is a sense in which it is right for us to bury our dead not for reasons shared by all rational beings, but most fundamentally because we have human *xing* – but much more detail would be needed to explain how this could account for knowledge generally.

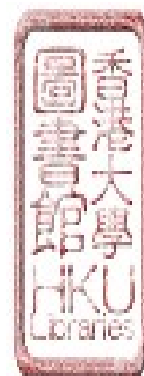
3.3. Knowing through models¹²¹

The Mohists proposed a very different explanation for the correctness aspect of knowledge that appealed not to facts about human nature, but to fixed normative standards for *shi-fei*, which they called “法 *fa* (standards, models)”. The Mohists often presented themselves as opposing the actions and established practices of both the *ru* (儒 ritualist; later “Confucian”) class and other “gentlemen” of the time, and in order to understand the motivation for their concept of *fa*, it will be helpful to briefly discuss some relevant aspects of Confucian thought.¹²²

In particular, a prominent feature of early Confucianism as presented in texts such as the *Analects* and the *Mengzi* is a tension between competing values. In the *Analects*, for instance, we see a much debated tension between *li* and *ren* (仁 benevolence), both of which seem to play key roles in guiding morally praiseworthy action. Whatever further significance *li* has in the

¹²¹ Some of the material from this chapter relating to the Mohist discussion of standards and its contrast to the Confucian *li* appears in Sturgeon (2014).

¹²² Robins (2008) argues that the Mohists themselves were primarily arguing against people they referred to simply as “the gentlemen of today” rather than the *Ru* or early Confucians specifically. Here I will not attempt to deal with the historical details of whether Mohists saw themselves as attacking Confucians, Ruists, or various “gentlemen”, or the changing use of the term “*Ru*”, but merely point out that many of the views the Mohists condemned were views that would later be classified as Confucian in nature, as well as being closely associated with ideas already present in the Confucian *Analects*.



Analects, it seems clear that one aspect of it is as something like a code of conduct: it gives specific guidelines for exemplary action.¹²³ For example, when asked about filial piety, Confucius's answer is that "parents, when alive, should be served according to the *li*; when dead, buried according to the *li* and sacrificed to according to the *li*".¹²⁴ According to the *Analects*, *li* is also essential to avoiding various types of problem and disorder,¹²⁵ as well as being at least one means of ensuring order between ruler and ruled.¹²⁶

Though there are various views on whether *li* is the most fundamental or important concept in the *Analects* – other suggested candidates include benevolence (*ren* 仁) and righteousness (*yi* 義) – it seems clear from the text that rites play a very important role. One passage of the text appears to explain the crucially important value of benevolence simply as adherence to the rites in all matters,¹²⁷ yet other passages state that Confucius himself advocates going against certain rites.¹²⁸

Since *li* is in some sense a code of conduct, much as with any scheme of codes or laws, interpretation must play a role in determining whether or not a particular rule applies in an actual concrete case.¹²⁹ One might be tempted to suggest that various other virtues or values important to the *Analects*, such as benevolence, might then be viewed as something like "interpretative principles" which govern how the *li* should be interpreted in

¹²³ I do not mean to suggest that this is the only important aspect of *li*, merely that it is one aspect particularly relevant to this discussion.

¹²⁴ *Analects* 2.5.

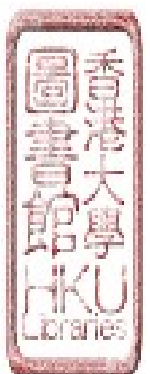
¹²⁵ *Analects* 8.2.

¹²⁶ *Analects* 14.41.

¹²⁷ *Analects* 12.1.

¹²⁸ E.g. *Analects* 9.3.

¹²⁹ See Hansen (1992, 66).



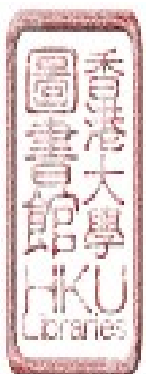
individual cases and contexts – particularly when we are told things like “in applying *li*, harmony (和 *he*) is of the utmost”.¹³⁰ But such an explanation tends to draw attention away from the fact that in some cases, *ren* can simply override *li*, and it is sometimes the case that one should not follow the *li*, because doing so would not be *ren*. So it is not the case that one should always follow the *li*, but neither is it the case that one can ignore it a large part of the time. This leaves us with a code of conduct that should normally be followed, but to which there can be exceptions on other grounds – in other words, it has a considerable degree of flexibility and may potentially be open to significantly differing interpretations in particular cases due to external factors.

Similarly in the *Mengzi* we are presented with a group of key guiding values, primarily *ren*, *yi* (righteousness), *li* and *zhi* (wisdom/knowledge). Of these, *ren*, *yi* and *li* can justify exemplary action in specific cases.¹³¹ A difficulty arises however when these values come into conflict with one another. When a man’s sister-in-law has fallen into water and needs to be rescued from drowning, though the rites say one must at no time come into contact with her, other principles override this concern in this case, the correct thing to do to be to “weigh these up (權 *quan*)”, the right thing (and presumably also the *ren* thing) to do being to rescue her even though doing so violates the *li*.¹³² On the other hand, King Hui of Liang is praised for exhibiting *ren* in his attitude towards the ox going to be sacrificed – but even though this *attitude* is praiseworthy in itself in that it indicates his potential

¹³⁰ *Analects* 1.12.

¹³¹ E.g. *Mengzi* 10.6/53/27-29; 13.33/71/1-2.

¹³² *Analects* 7.17/38/20-30.

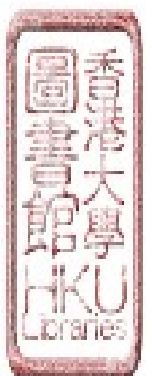


to be morally good, it ultimately will likely need to be put aside in favor of the sacrificial rituals, which *require* animals to be sacrificed – an apparent case in which *li* must trump *ren*.¹³³

One difficulty raised by these conflicts of values is primarily epistemological in nature: though there may be a matter of fact in each individual circumstance as to what is the right thing to do – it may be the case that in the drowning sister-in-law example, there is a sense in which it is indeed *right* that we should violate the *li* to save her – it is nonetheless far from clear how the moral reasoning ought to be performed so as to give a unique answer in even relatively clear cases. What is it that explains why, even in the drowning sister-in-law case, one particular value takes precedence over the others? Why is it that in this case it is the *li* that gets overruled rather than *ren*, whereas in other cases the reverse may be true? Unless a strong response can be found to this line of questioning, an obvious worry is that such a system of morality risks either making too few unambiguous normative commitments – perhaps it simply doesn't tell us that we should save the sister-in-law in this case, and we must, as the *Mengzi* might suggest, fall back on moral intuitions as justification – or alternatively entailing that what these commitments actually are is so difficult a question to answer that they must be entrusted to an elite group of decision makers (expert Ruists, perhaps) who have the necessary expertise to judge them correctly.¹³⁴

¹³³ *Mengzi* 1.7/3/20-1.7/4/20.

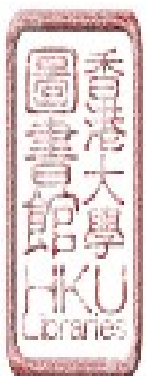
¹³⁴ Hansen (1992, 57-59) proposes the latter in his interpretation of the *Analects*.



It is against this background that the Mohists propose an alternative framework of morality and knowledge strikingly different to that suggested by the *Analects* and *Mengzi*. For the Mohists, *li* play no role in moral reasoning – not simply because the Mohists disagree with the actual content of the *li* as determined by Confucians, but because they view the whole idea of following a traditional set of norms as being an inadequate form of moral guidance. The reason for this offered in the *Mozi* is that tradition, such as is embodied by a code like the *li*, lacks justification – the mere fact that it is tradition gives us no reason to believe that what is prescribed by it is morally right. The text gives the example of a state in which by custom “the first-born son was dismembered and devoured after birth and this was said to be propitious for his younger brothers. When the father died the mother was carried away and abandoned, it being said that one should not live with the wife of a ghost.”¹³⁵ It goes on to say that this was not the way of *ren* and *yi*, but simply a case of adherence to habit and custom being taken as convenient and moral. Though *li* is not mentioned by name, the point is clearly made: adherence to a practice is not justified merely by virtue of it being tradition, even if adherents can provide superficial reasons, such as being “propitious for younger brothers” or “one should not live with the wife of a ghost” – parodies of the kind of justification early Confucians might give for ritual practices.¹³⁶ Whatever is truly *right* must be able to stand up to some form of

¹³⁵ *Mozi* 39/25/75-76.

¹³⁶ For example, the term “宜弟 *yi di* (propitious for younger brothers)”, which appears in the *Book of Poetry*, is actually quoted from and appealed to by the Confucian text the *Great Learning* in the context of ordered governance.



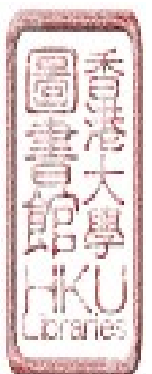
genuine scrutiny – and nothing is beyond scrutiny simply because it is tradition.

The Mohists effectively replace the role of the rites as a code of conduct with their own conception of normative ethics, explained not in terms of rituals but standards (*fa* 法). The Mohists explain what they mean by standards by means of analogy to measuring tools of artisans: the compasses of a wheelwright and the square of a carpenter. Compasses compared to an object can be used to judge whether or not it is truly circular; a carpenter's square compared to an object tells us whether or not it is truly square. But standards do not merely apply to craftsmanship; according to the *fa-yi* chapter of the *Mozi*, "nothing is accomplished without standards".¹³⁷ Not only artisans, but also generals and ministers have their standards.¹³⁸ Standards in themselves do not guarantee success in the task at hand – this is still a matter of skill – but they improve the results of the skilled and unskilled alike.

The Mohists go on to complain that those governing the world and the large states of the day do so without applying standards, thus showing themselves to be inferior to artisans. This leads them to the question of what the right standard is for ordered governance. Taking any single individual as the standard would have the same problem as simply following tradition: there is no way to know that the person being followed exemplifies morally good qualities such as *ren*. Thus the Mohists commit themselves to finding

¹³⁷ *Mozi* 3/4/1.

¹³⁸ In this sense, the Mohists probably viewed Confucians as having a standard – the *li* – but having chosen an incorrect and unjustified standard, as well as failing to follow it consistently.



moral standards that can be used in the same way as a carpenter's tools to determine unambiguously and objectively what is right and what is not.

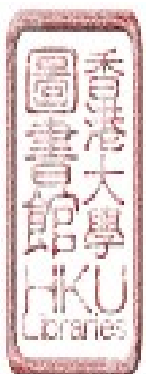
The *Mozi* sees the role of *fa* as not merely being pragmatically useful, but of epistemic importance. The carpenter's tools do not just make him more successful, but are "that by which one knows the distinction between square and round".¹³⁹ This extends to cases of practical reasoning using *fa*: the correct *fa* – once it has been determined what this is – forms a justificatory basis for knowledge. If we have accepted heaven as being the ultimate standard, for instance, this is how we know (given what the Mohists believe about heaven) that the doctrines espoused by the gentlemen of the day are mistaken.¹⁴⁰

Just as in the case of the Confucian rites, Mohist standards still require interpretation: even in the example of a compass and a wheel, there could easily be disputes over how much variation from a perfect circle is acceptable for it to still count as circular. Unlike the rites however, the Mohists believe that once we know what the right standards are, they can and should be applied universally without exceptions. To determine whether something is right, one needs merely to apply the standards to it, and, subject to interpretation, this will yield an unambiguous answer. By analogy to the carpenter's tools, standards are public and (in principle at least) easily applicable by all.¹⁴¹ A Mohist standard does not admit of exceptions, any more than it is acceptable for a carpenter to supply his customer with a non-round wheel – if the standard doesn't fit the case at hand, everyone can, and

¹³⁹ *Mozi* 47/28/44-47/28/45.

¹⁴⁰ *Mozi* 41/26/41-42/26/44.

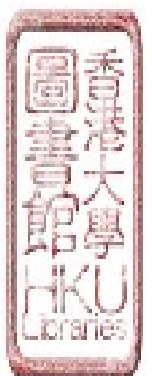
¹⁴¹ Hansen (1992, 109).



should, declare it to be wrong. If it doesn't fit, then either the case at hand is wrong, or there is something wrong with the choice of standard. Though experts in the *fa* might be better placed than ordinary people to make reliable judgments on what is in accordance with them, their judgment should be verifiable by others applying the same standard. Thus just as the unskilled wheelwright (or wheel-buyer) can determine whether a particular wheel is truly round, so can an ordinary person determine whether a particular doctrine is correct; though there may be those with greater authority, an *appeal* to authority is not required to decide whether a standard fits a case or not.

The Mohists frequently come across as being genuinely exasperated that people of the time, despite being made aware of what the Mohists saw as highly persuasive arguments, failed to accept and follow Mohist doctrine.¹⁴² Whereas a cultured appreciation of the content, background, and deeper meaning of the rites would be required for a person to be a *junzi* (君子 gentleman, superior man) or *shengren* (聖人 sage) for the Confucians, for the Mohists all that is required to be a model member of society is that one accord to a set of fairly straightforward standards. Whereas Confucians seemed to implicitly accept that not everyone would have the ability to follow their *dao* – not everyone would become a *junzi* – the Mohists saw everyone as capable in principle of following their *dao*, and believed that the reason they did not was simply that they had not been given adequate moral

¹⁴² For example, the repeated refrain of “I do not know why it is that the scholars of the world hear of inclusivity yet oppose it” after arguments for inclusive care, and “is this not perverse?” after pointing out the fallacies of their opponents.



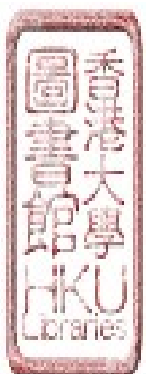
education – the Mohists themselves most often describing failure of their contemporaries to follow their proposed *dao* not in terms of refusal, disagreement, or lack of interest in doing so, but rather failure to *know* right from wrong.¹⁴³

Without the emphasis on classic texts, music, ritual, and poetry advocated by the Confucians, Mohist doctrine would have been much more intelligible to the masses than the Confucian rites, which appear, in any case, to have been aimed primarily at the educated elite. The *Analects* record that Confucius was often dissatisfied with the words and actions of many of his disciples; and though his disciples were presumably among those most sympathetic to his teachings and most eager to follow them, it seems apparent that the majority of them failed to do so sufficiently well – sometimes due to lack of motivation, but also due to lack of ability or intelligence.¹⁴⁴ Not only their actions, but their understanding of Confucius’s moral system sometimes seems to be called into question.¹⁴⁵ The Mohist maxim – repeatedly appearing in identical wording throughout the *Mozi* – that one should in one’s actions always try to “bring benefit to the world and remove harms from the world,” though of course subject to interpretation, contrasts starkly with the widely varying guidance Confucius offers to disciples when they inquire about benevolence, despite this being perhaps the most important value discussed in the *Analects*.

¹⁴³ For a detailed discussion of the Mohist theory of motivation, see Fraser (2011).

¹⁴⁴ E.g. *Analects* 11.18.

¹⁴⁵ E.g. *Analects* 12.22.

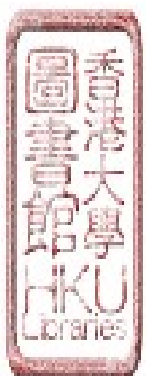


Against this background, the Mohist focus on standards brings with it an interest in uniformity and consistency. A key feature of much of the moral reasoning that appears in the *Mozi* is its rejection of exceptions: if someone deems something right in almost all cases, and then wrong in another relevantly similar case, the Mohists see him as being inconsistent in his reasoning and actions. This brings us back to the Mohist idea of a standard as something which can be used to determine unambiguously what is and what is not: standards admit of no exceptions. Even allowing that others might have different standards to the Mohists, the Mohists believe that the only correct way to make or determine the correctness of judgments is to use a standard, and therefore the same standard, whatever it is, must be applied in each relevant case. Those who fail to see this are accused not merely of being wrong, but of “knowing the small, yet not knowing the great”¹⁴⁶ and “on seeing a little black, calling it ‘black’, yet on seeing much black, calling it ‘white’”¹⁴⁷ – failing to apply their own standards, whatever they might be, in a consistent manner.

What standards bring to the Mohist moral code is equality before a common moral code that must be consistently applied to all, regardless of their role in society, without exception. The same standards apply to all, without exception even for those, such as the son of heaven, who might traditionally have been seen as exceptional cases. For a Mohist, however, the standards remain the same no matter who one is: it is *never* right for anyone to deviate from what brings the greatest benefit to the world. This devotion

¹⁴⁶ *Mozi* 40/26/1, 45/28/1-2, 89/49/24-27.

¹⁴⁷ *Mozi* 28/17/7-29/17/14.



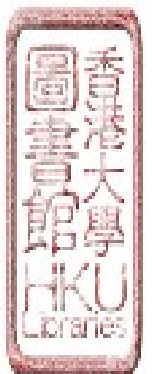
to absolute standards not only influenced the policies the Mohists advocated and the style of their argumentation, but also may have provided the theoretical support for the fanatical devotion to the Mohist social project that is testified to in many contemporary historical sources. As the Mohists themselves suggest, people will fight to the death over a matter of principle: nothing is more important than righteousness.

The Mohist idea of establishing and appealing to fixed models for justification was extremely influential, and was adopted even by those such as Xunzi, who rejected much of the content of their proposed *dao* but nevertheless adopts this and other parts of the Mohist framework, even at times talking of “taking the *li* as standard”.¹⁴⁸ It also laid the foundation for important Mohist insights into language that will be discussed in the following chapter.

Yet while the idea of appealing to standards was extremely influential, a serious problem facing the Mohist conception of knowledge lay in the question of what precisely the correct standards actually are, and what it is that justifies them. The Mohists themselves appealed to *tian* (天 heaven/nature) as an ultimate standard, seeing this as the most impartial and beneficial standard, benefiting as it does all people equally.¹⁴⁹ But while this makes sense for a Mohist – for someone whose belief system already revolves around impartial care and promoting universal benefit – others may easily disagree about this being the correct standard, highlighting the more

¹⁴⁸ Xunzi 71/19/33-72/19/35.

¹⁴⁹ This is partly due to the Mohist understanding of *tian*, but also to established usage and a shared linguistic background regarding *tian*, which already had connotations of inclusivity and universality. See Sturgeon (2014).

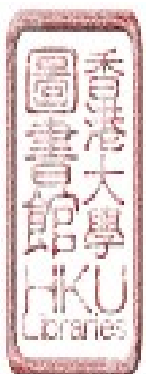


general problem of determining precisely what the standards are in individual cases. Explicit Mohist rejection of tradition for its own sake only serves to highlight this problem – just because many or all of us currently accept some standard does not show that it is right.

Nevertheless, even those who rejected the idea of standards entirely were likely to have been deeply influenced by it – particularly the authors of the *Zhuangzi*, for whom the clearly articulated project of setting out to identify the uniquely correct objective standards, justify them, and then rigidly apply them to everything would have been the epitome of everything they saw as wrong with both the Confucian and Mohist positions.

3.4. Knowing as doing

Given the general pre-Qin focus on the importance of action in understanding knowledge and cognition, it is far from surprising to find that the reliable ability to perform a task should have been upheld as paradigmatic of knowledge by certain pre-Qin thinkers. The *Zhuangzi* in particular takes this idea one step further, suggesting that contrary to the Mohist claim that the following of standards is always beneficial and in many cases a prerequisite to efficacious action, there are praiseworthy cases of knowledge that cannot be understood as model following at all and simply cannot be taught to others using objective models in the way the Mohists propose. The text presents these ideas in a number of much celebrated “skill stories”, in which we are shown an agent who has achieved an unusually high

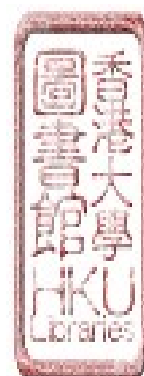


degree of skill in a particular activity such as butchering oxen, catching cicadas, or carving wood.¹⁵⁰

In interpreting the skill stories and their relation to knowledge, it will first be helpful to identify some of their shared features. Most fundamentally, the “skill stories” are so identified due to their descriptions of agents carrying out some particular activity in a manner that is skillful to a noteworthy degree – that is, their performance of the activity in question is greatly effective or efficacious. In each case, the objective of the activity itself is not critiqued in the story; rather, each story proceeds on the assumption that, for the agent in question in their particular circumstances, performing the skill in an efficient and successful manner is something praiseworthy. Similarly, the stories do not question the commonsense view of what actually constitutes successful performance of the skill – the butcher cutting up the ox quickly without damaging his knife, or the cicada catcher rapidly catching many cicadas. These aspects are particularly important to emphasize because of their contrast with skeptical ideas present elsewhere in the text – unlike some other passages of the *Zhuangzi*, the main thrust of the skill stories does not appear to be overtly skeptical in nature.

What then is the point of the stories? One suggestion that has been put forward is that the text wants to offer us a positive conception of the unique sort of knowledge that we can or should hope to attain; that is, against the background of the skeptical position put forward elsewhere in the text, the skill stories provide a description of a kind of knowledge that is unaffected by skeptical arguments. P.J. Ivanhoe for example argues that the position of the

¹⁵⁰ *Zhuangzi* 7/3/2-8/3/12, 48/19/17-21, and 50/19/54-59 respectively.

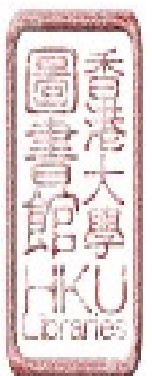


Zhuangzi is one of “an epistemological skeptic, but only of a *certain kind* of knowledge, i.e. intellectual knowledge. He is not at all skeptical about *intuitive knowledge*.” (emphasis in original).¹⁵¹ Ivanhoe goes on to explain that the difference between the two types of knowledge largely reflects the distinction between knowing how and knowing that. On this interpretation, the text allows that we can (and perhaps should) seek to gain skill knowledge, but cannot (and thus should not) hope to gain intellectual or propositional knowledge (a view which Ivanhoe refers to as “language skepticism”). We can hope to become skillful at certain practical tasks and so gain practical, intuitive knowledge of them – and so also of the one *dao* that Ivanhoe says they represent – but at the same time should remain skeptical of all claims to knowledge regarding what is so or not so.

However such an explanation seems inherently problematic, even if we were to accept that skepticism about intellectual knowledge – knowledge of distinctions and language, say – were the correct interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*’s skeptical passages.¹⁵² The big problem with this kind of interpretation with respect to the skill stories stems from the general pre-Qin conception of knowledge as primarily being an *ability* – the ability to draw distinctions in some objectively correct way is often sufficient to count as knowing them. But in the skill stories, there seems to be no doubt at all that the agents concerned *do* successfully distinguish all sorts of things in what is generally taken as the objectively correct way: cook Ding has no difficulty in distinguishing ox from non-ox, for instance; similarly, he *knows* the path

¹⁵¹ Ivanhoe (1993, 648).

¹⁵² The interpretation of Zhuangist skepticism is discussed in more detail in chapter 5.



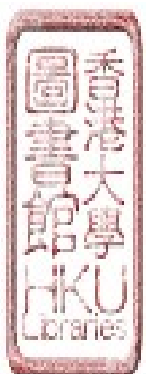
through the ox in the sense that he is reliably able to find it. The point is that action is so fundamental to the entire conception of knowledge that it simply wouldn't be sufficient for him to count as "knowing the path through the ox" were he able to articulate in words what such a path might be like, yet unable to identify it in practice by drawing his knife through it. Simply by virtue of the agent's successful action, there are already many things that he knows, and some of these will typically be cases of what we might want to label "intellectual knowledge"¹⁵³ – while by the same token, possession of "intellectual knowledge" itself will often imply that an agent has certain abilities.

On the other hand, there are suggestions in some of the skill stories that certain types of knowledge may be more or less important to skillful action. Cook Ding, for instance, says that during his carving of the ox his "perceptual knowledge (官知 *guan zhi*) stops".¹⁵⁴ The cicada catcher says that despite the enormity of heaven and earth and the myriad things, he "knows only the wings of cicadas".¹⁵⁵ What these descriptions suggest are an intense focus on the task at hand to the exclusion of all irrelevant concerns. This seems to correspond closely to the emphasis on "fasting to make tranquil the heart-mind" that appears in the wood carver story. It is made even more explicit in the story of the skilled boatman, in which we are given the example of a skilled archer who plays at his best when shooting for a

¹⁵³ This is quite separate from the question of whether being able to perform some skill implies that one is able to intellectualize or articulate adequately in words what one is doing in carrying out the skill and how one is doing it, a position that is explicitly rejected in several of the skill stories.

¹⁵⁴ *Zhuangzi* 7/3/6.

¹⁵⁵ *Zhuangzi* 48/19/20.



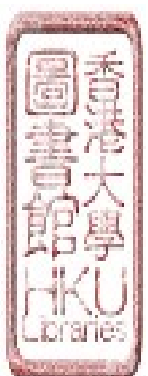
worthless prize, but when shooting for a grand trophy is put off by the distraction of things external to the task.¹⁵⁶ Thus the knowledge that needs to be put aside is not intellectual knowledge generally, but knowledge or awareness of things external to the task – in other words, irrelevant knowledge. What this will actually be in a specific case will depend entirely upon the task being carried out. It is highly unlikely to include the objects of the task itself, regardless of what they are and how we categorize them, since the skill is typically going to involve interacting with them in some successful manner. In this sense an awareness of the relevant objects is required, coupled with a lack of awareness of everything else.¹⁵⁷

So far the guidance offered by the skill stories has been largely negative. That one should concentrate on the task at hand and put aside irrelevant concerns sounds like sound advice and is plausibly a psychological prerequisite for highly skilled action of the types the text appears to be interested in. But if thinking about and being distracted by other things is what we should *not* do, what *should* we do if we aspire to such highly skilled performance of tasks, and what is it that explains why the actors in the stories are able to respond so effectively to their situations? Given a favorable set of circumstances, I can imagine that I could calm my mind and put aside irrelevant concerns, but this would hardly imply that I would be able to cut up an ox as gracefully as a dancer without blunting my knife.

The first positive guidance that the skill stories offer is perhaps the most mundane and obvious: practice and familiarity with the task are

¹⁵⁶ *Zhuangzi* 49/19/25-26.

¹⁵⁷ Graham (1983, 11) makes precisely this point.

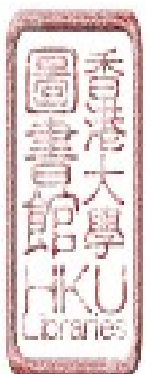


generally prerequisites to mastering the skill. Cook Ding is not a newcomer to the task of ox-cutting, having used the same knife for nineteen years and cut up thousands of oxen; the swimmer explains that he is so comfortable in water because he has grown up with it, and the cicada catcher describes his own experience of practicing and gradually perfecting his skill. The boatman, interestingly, says something slightly different: although handling a boat is something that can be learned, not all potential learners are equally placed to do so. Good swimmers learn boating quickly, and divers can handle a boat “having never before seen one”.¹⁵⁸

This idea leads naturally to a second and more interesting form of positive guidance regarding skilled action. Those already deeply familiar with the relevant objects in the context of the particular skill are at a great advantage in performing it. Why should this be so? Several of the stories emphasize going along with how things naturally are.¹⁵⁹ Natural fixed waypoints fix certain points that one should either avoid (such as the bones) or include in one’s path (the gaps between joints) – literally in the case of cutting up an ox, and metaphorically in other stories. What these points are is determined by a combination of the natural structure of the world and the task at hand; that is, given the current task, it is a fact about the world that the task will be most successfully completed by avoiding or incorporating such points. These points are brute facts of nature and cannot be changed; therefore, the only sensible thing to do is to accommodate them by working around them. These points alone do not typically determine any unique path

¹⁵⁸ *Zhuangzi* 48/19/22-23.

¹⁵⁹ As Ivanhoe says, “There is a pattern in Nature and the Daoist sage follows it”.



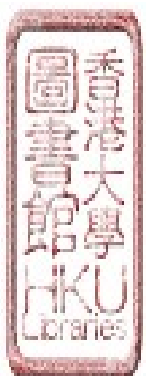
however; a great deal of freedom remains to choose the specific path to be taken, but it will be most successful if it appropriately accounts for these points. Though given a particular task, the question of which points would be most effectively included in or excluded from one's chosen path is an empirical one, the task itself plays just as important a role in determining what these points are as the structure of the world: a successful way for a hiker to traverse a forest will surely involve not attempting to go through any trees; a successful way for a logger might involve precisely the opposite.¹⁶⁰

The distinction between a *way* and a *path* is helpful in making sense of the *Zhuangzi*'s skill stories.¹⁶¹ As noted previously, both “way” and “path” fall within the established common usage of the term “*dao*”, which can render precise interpretation of the term difficult in specific contexts. A common theme of the skill stories is that *ways* are what Daoist skill masters cherish, not paths – that is, they navigate their own successful new route through the challenges that face them in their unique circumstances, rather than following any single pre-established path that has been provided to them or become known by them in advance. This much seems true even of the skillful swimmer, who when asked, explicitly denies that he has a *dao*. This initially seems surprising, particularly given that the cook Ding, cicada catcher, and wheelwright stories all make appeals to *dao*.

It is interesting to note here the particular form of question put to the swimmer, “蹈水有道乎” – “Is there a *dao* of swimming?” – as well as the answer, “亡，吾無道” – “No, I have no *dao*”. This is significant because this

¹⁶⁰ The example of a path through a forest is adapted from Hansen (1992, 312).

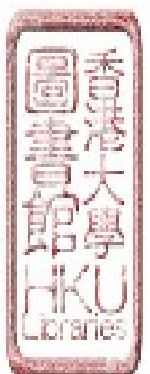
¹⁶¹ Robins (2011, 107).



form of questioning was a relatively common way of asking whether or not there is one universally applicable guiding *dao* corresponding to some particular form of endeavor: a normative description or paradigm of how one *should* undertake some activity. We should therefore not immediately assume that such a question has a uniquely “Daoist” nuance to it – in fact, this form of question appears just as often in the *Mengzi* as in the *Zhuangzi*. Typical questions of the form are “Is there a *dao* of relations with neighboring kingdoms?”, “Is there a *dao* of selecting officers?”, and “Is there a *dao* of stealing?” (this being the only other occurrence in the *Zhuangzi*, to which the answer given is affirmative). Thus it seems that the question is most naturally understood as asking whether or not there is a fixed guiding path to swimming: is there a single set of rules, guidelines, methodology or way of doing things that constitutes or describes the successful or correct *dao* of swimming? The negative answer to this question fits with the rest of the swimmer’s description of his action.

On this interpretation, it becomes quite plausible that there being no *dao* of swimming, and also having no (single, unique, fixed) *dao*, is entirely compatible with the *liking* of *daos* which Cook Ding explicitly endorses. When one acts, one necessarily chooses a fixed (descriptive) *dao* in that instance,¹⁶² namely the path that one in fact follows in that case. But this need not imply a commitment to endorsing any single *normative dao* of how to act in all similar circumstances, nor a commitment to a general normative *dao* explaining why one *should* have acted in precisely the way that one in fact did in that specific case. The *liking* of *daos* can be plausibly understood as an

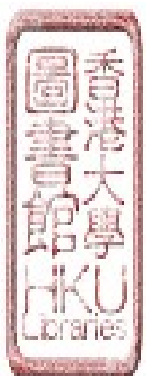
¹⁶² What Hansen (1992, 83-85) has called a “performance *dao*”.



endorsement of the freedom to choose among different successful ways of acting that do not owe their shared success to any common description of their shared features beyond including and excluding certain fixed points that, due to the nature of the task, must be included or excluded for successful action. Such points are insufficient to determine any one unique way (or even class of ways) that is *the* way of performing the task. There will typically be an enormous plurality of ways of performing a task successfully – but endorsing a fixed view of the single way that a task should be done would blind us to other important ways.

For instance, though the cicada catcher in the story is catching cicadas with a stick, it is easy to imagine from the description of him in the story that he would have little trouble catching them without one using his bare hands. A fixed *dao* of cicada-catching might be something like, “The way to catch cicadas is by watching them carefully and stabbing them with a sharp stick”; but a truly skillful cicada-catcher, even though his action may indeed typically coincide with such a fixed *dao*, is not confined to any one such *dao* and is able to choose (and successfully follow) other quite different *daos* to successfully complete the task. Part of the best *way* of catching cicadas is being open to *other* ways of catching cicadas, and adopting these when appropriate to do so. This suggests that contrary to the Mohist view, although a rigidly articulated standard might be able to capture correctness in some cases, it will fail in others – in fact it is the *lack* of a fixed standard that leads to the highest degree of practical success.

The story of the wheelwright, who suggests to a duke that there is no point in reading the words of bygone sages, makes the further point that



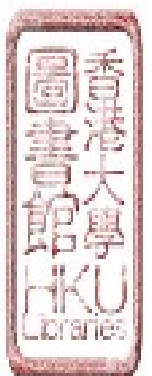
models are not always the means by which we obtain knowledge.¹⁶³ The wheelwright has acquired the skill of making wheels, but this is a skill that he is unable to transmit to others using words, nor teach to his son – despite this being a standard example of the kind of model emulation that the Mohists have in mind. He suggests to the duke that reading the words of the sages is an equally flawed strategy: we don't learn through emulating models.

The Zhuangist account of skilful action has considerable plausibility when confined to the specific types of activity that the text uses as examples: tasks that require practical skill, typically gained through concerted practice over a considerable period of time. It relates closely to the suggestion that appears across a range of texts in early Chinese that skills of various kinds can be perfected to the point at which an agent no longer requires conscious effort to perform successful action – and also the suggestion that such a lack of conscious effort may indeed be *required* for the most successful form of action.¹⁶⁴

How far can this idea plausibly be taken when considered as a paradigm of knowledge in general – does it make sense beyond scenarios that envisage the skillful execution of some already specified type of action? Some Daoist texts – particularly the *Daodejing* – view something like this kind of model as paradigmatic of exemplary action generally, in a much wider range of situations, and particularly in the realm of governance. *Wu-wei* (無為, literally “non-doing”) is presented in these texts as a way of acting which,

¹⁶³ *Zhuangzi* 36/13/68- 36/13/74.

¹⁶⁴ Examples are available even in texts as early as the *Analects* (e.g. 15.5/42/9).



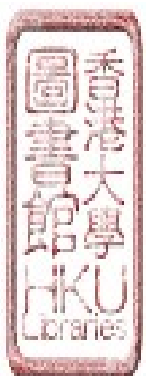
paradoxically, results in nothing being undone,¹⁶⁵ and nothing being disordered.¹⁶⁶ The suggestion is made that just as in cases like the skill stories presented in the *Zhuangzi*, we should allow ourselves to go along with things in all matters; perhaps to give ourselves up to something like the “*shen yu* (神欲 spirit desires)” mentioned by Cook Ding, which will guide us without requiring our own intentional input. The text suggests that the ideal ruler manifests a stillness, and lack of action, ambition, and desires, and that this will lead to the common people transforming themselves, being upright, wealthy, and straightforward.¹⁶⁷

There are several quite serious problems with this approach. Firstly, the very plausibility of many of the Zhuangist skill stories hinges upon their intuitive basis in uncontroversial facts about the skillful performance of complex tasks – in particular, that such abilities tend to be acquired in part at least through repeated practice of the task, which during the initial stages does not fit the final “skillful doing without conscious effort” model, but rather may typically involve the use of models, maxims or other forms of conscious guidance. If these are to be removed, and *all* action is to be *wu-wei*, it becomes difficult to see how we would ever achieve the highly developed skills that made the model attractive in the first place. Thus either some action should not be *wu-wei* (when we are still at the learning stage), or our *wu-wei* performances are unlikely to ever achieve the high level of fluency that could justify our thinking they would lead to such successful results.

¹⁶⁵ *Daodejing* 48.

¹⁶⁶ *Daodejing* 3.

¹⁶⁷ *Daodejing* 57.

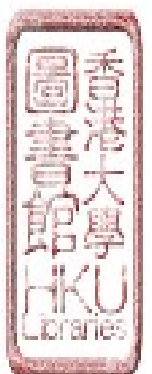


A second problem is that it is unclear that *wu-wei* really is a viable option for us at all – that is, it is far from clear that we really can rid ourselves of all intentional action, even in principle. Even if we can choose to give up our own agency, it seems that this very act is itself intentional, and thus does not fit the *wu-wei* model.¹⁶⁸ So on the one hand, giving up intentional action may not be possible, while on the other, even if we were able to do it, it would seem unlikely to lead to desirable results. *Wu-wei* appears to be a potentially achievable goal for specific realms of activity, but at least when taken on its own an inadequate account of skill knowledge in general.

3.5. Knowing as construction

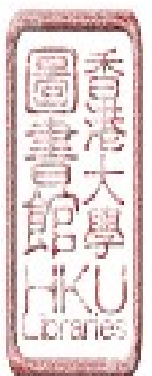
The initially attractive suggestion of the Mohists that objective standards and models are fundamental to knowledge is forcefully challenged by two related ideas presented most clearly in the *Zhuangzi*. Besides arguing as discussed above that there may be cases or types of knowledge such as skill knowledge for which models are irrelevant or inadequate either as an explanation for what constitutes knowledge or a tool for identifying or transmitting it, the text also attacks the very assumption that there are or can exist such things as objective standards that could ever be used to distinguish *shi* from *fei*. The Zhuangist argument hinges primarily on the idea that each agent has his or her own perspective, and that what is *shi* or *fei* from one perspective need not be so from another. The text gives numerous examples of agents (in many cases using different types of animal as metaphors for human individuals committed to different values, goals, or ways of life – in

¹⁶⁸ Fraser (2008, 90).



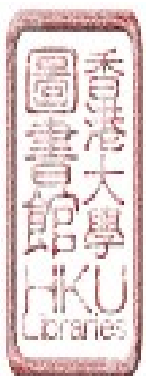
other words, different *daos*) that hold differing perspectives such that they disagree about certain issues – and then poses the question of how there can possibly be a single standard common to them all. To use one of the text’s most intuitive examples, a tree may be the right place for a monkey to live, but it is surely not the right place for a fish or a human – how then can we expect to find a single objective standard that would determine what the “right place to live” is? A conclusion that the text seems to urge us to draw from this line of reasoning is that standards are agent-dependent and no single standard is uniquely privileged or universally correct: there are no universal or absolute standards.

This challenge (which is examined in detail in chapter 5) can be seen as motivating a more sophisticated positive account of knowledge than the Mohists’ straightforward insistence upon there being a unique set of universally objective standards grounded in *tian*. The *Xunzi* offers an important contribution to the understanding of knowledge through its appreciation that while words, judgments and the *shi-fei* distinctions they relate to are indeed in an important sense conventional as the *Zhuangzi* claims, this does not mean that such distinctions are necessarily arbitrary or contingent upon perspective in quite the radical way that the *Zhuangzi* attempts to suggest. The key insight that informs this position is that whereas the *Zhuangzi* highlights the difference between each of our perspectives, when we confine our interest to the *human* realm our perspectives surely all have at least one thing in common: our shared humanity.



The writers of the *Xunzi* would presumably be able agree with the literal meaning of some of the *Zhuangzi*'s examples of differing perspective – giant birds, tiny insects, and frogs living in wells probably do each see the world differently, and are interested in different aspects of it. Their differing perspectives (on the Xunzian view at least) are in part due to their differing *qing* (natural tendencies 情),¹⁶⁹ and it seems quite natural that they should legitimately have different concerns – a fish will seldom need to concern itself with treetops or clouds any more than an eagle has reason to be interested in the mud at the bottom of a pond. By analogy in the human realm, the *Zhuangzi* implies that differing concerns and perspectives simply aren't the sorts of things that admit meaningful normative judgments from other perspectives – just as it would be pointless for a fish to try to persuade a monkey that in fact a large pond is the right place to live rather than high up in the trees, so too it is misguided for human beings with their widely varying situations, projects, commitments, and perspectives to argue amongst themselves over which *dao* is the uniquely correct one that everyone ought to follow. Which *dao* or *daos* may be correct depends entirely upon one's own situation, and it is simply a meaningless confusion to talk of the “uniquely correct *dao*”.

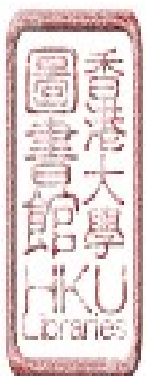
¹⁶⁹ The term *qing* along with the closely related *xing* (性) with which the *Xunzi* often pairs it are notoriously difficult to translate or precisely characterize (see Robins 2001). According to the *Xunzi*, *xing* are what is fixed by nature, *qing* are the raw material of *xing*, and desires or urges (*yu* 欲) are responses of *qing* (85/22/63). In many cases *qing* appears to refer to “facts” (e.g. Graham 1967:259-260); however it also seems to be closely related to emotions (e.g. *Xunzi* 22/107/23; Puett 2004).



The *Xunzi*, however, though seeing the analogy, does not take it as having the same consequences in the human realm.¹⁷⁰ Frogs in wells have a certain kind of perspective, just as we do – but the very fact that we can make sense of the *Zhuangzi*'s stories about the attitudes and concerns of different species of animals at all in the first place suggests that we are in fact implicitly assuming that there *is* some common kind of perspective that frogs in wells generally have – there is something that it is *like* to be a frog in a well.¹⁷¹ Were this not the case, we would find the claim that “monkeys live in trees” equally problematic – the Zhuangist position itself appears on the face of it to be committed to monkeys having some shared “monkey perspective”, from which trees in fact *are* the right place to live. But if there is something that it is like to be a monkey or a fish, then so too there is something that it is like to be human – and it is this sameness that forms the grounds for the *Xunzi*'s conventionalist stance on *dao*. Though each individual is different, our common humanity means that, just as surely as frogs have various interests relating to such things such as say flies, lily-pads and water, humans too place value upon certain distinctive kinds of thing and certain values that have import to human beings, and as a result there may be one way of living socially – one *dao* – that is more suited than any other to satisfying and fulfilling our distinctively human needs and capacities. Just as fish ought to

¹⁷⁰ Hansen (1992, 309).

¹⁷¹ The *Zhuangzi* appears to suggest that it is possible for someone to be human, for instance, without having the *qing* of a human (*Zhuangzi* 14/5/54-15/5/58), and so might well reject the *Xunzi*'s explanation of sameness of *qing* underwriting similarity of perspective. Nevertheless, its skeptical argument seems to rely on there being similarities between the perspectives of things that are of the same kind, even if this cannot be explained in terms of *qing*.

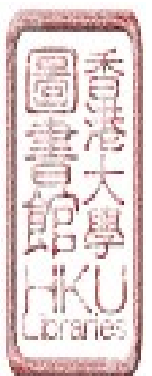


live in water, so too human beings ought to follow the *dao* that is most conducive to *human* flourishing. Human beings, for instance, possess the capacity for morality, a trait that distinguishes them from all other animals¹⁷² – surely this alone should be grounds for suspecting that the most successful human *dao* may differ from a *dao* that is successful for a monkey. The *Xunzi*, identifying itself with the Confucian or *ru* tradition, hopes to persuade us that this uniquely successful human *dao* is in fact the *dao* prescribed by the Confucian *li* (禮 ritual propriety).

The Zhuangist challenge aims to suggest that the relation between words, the distinctions they embody, and the world is, if not completely arbitrary, at the very least agent dependent. When I speak of the “right place to live”, I may mean one thing, while your utterance of the very same words may refer to something quite different. How is it then can we agree on what things are? The *Xunzi* begins its response to this challenge with a general and naturalistic stance: all beings of the same kind that have the same *qing* share the same natural faculties (of perception).¹⁷³ As a result, they tend to distinguish things in the same way – and it is on the basis of this shared way of distinguishing things and agreement about what is similar versus what is dissimilar that words can be used to name distinctions. Our eyes distinguish

¹⁷² *Xunzi* 28/9/69-29/9/70.

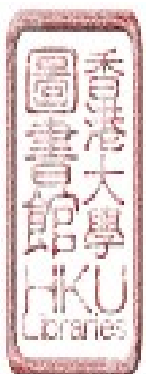
¹⁷³ *Xunzi* 83/22/15-83/22/17. Here I am following the advice of Chris Fraser in reading the “其” of “凡同類同情者，其天官之意物也同” as referring to “凡同類同情者”. Many commentators (e.g. Knoblock (1988, 3:129), Wang Zhong Lin (2009, 417), etc.) read “people” as an implicit subject to the second clause. This seems unnecessary and unhelpful as it ignores the clearly stated pronoun, and if taken as the correct reading would provide little in the way of meaningful response to the posed question “然則何緣而以同異”, as it would not explain *why* we have agreement on 同異, but merely reaffirm that we do. Following the literal grammar of the sentence seems greatly preferable here.



shape and color, our mouths the various flavors – but our peculiarly human faculties play a role in this perception. And perception is far from all that we have in common: from birth, all humans share a desire for food when hungry, for warmth when cold, and for rest when weary; they desire benefit and dislike harm: this is as true of the most vicious despot as it is of the most benevolent sage.¹⁷⁴ This hints at an explanation of why, in general, there should be a “monkey perspective” or a “human perspective”, and why we should expect them to differ – as well as why we could nonetheless be hopeful of finding, at least potentially, a *single* human perspective. All human beings share a common *qing* – fundamental facts about all human beings and human nature that can, in principle at least, be discovered empirically. Equally there is a monkey *qing*, which will be different to our human *qing* in some important respects. The *Xunzi* would surely allow that, in principle, these differing *qing* might well admit of differing optimal *daos* best suited to such a *qing*. Were humans not the kind of beings that they in fact are, the *dao* they ought to follow might have been different.

In contrast with the *Zhuangzi* however, the *Xunzi* does not seem interested in encouraging us to consider and potentially follow a wide range of radically different *daos*, but instead sees the *li* (禮 propriety) as expressing the *dao* that should be followed by all human beings. The justification for this *dao* rests partly on the *Xunzi*’s view of human nature, partly on the structure of the world, and partly on its view of which *daos* fit best with both of these in practice. Because according to *Xunzi* human nature is such that morality and the rites do not come spontaneously to each of us of their own accord, the

¹⁷⁴ *Xunzi* 10/4/42-46.



fact that such things exist at all implies that they were created not by nature but by man: specifically, according to the *Xunzi*, they were instituted by the sage kings.¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, human nature is such that we all have desires, and absent of external factors we will attempt to satisfy them without limit; this leads to disorder, which is harmful, and was what prompted the sages to institute *li* in the first place.¹⁷⁶ Finally, as a matter of fact, the *li* created by the sages is the constant, uniquely best fitting *dao* for human beings.¹⁷⁷

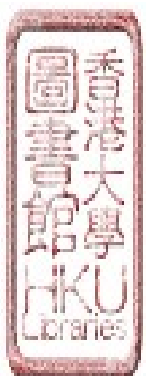
Although in giving this account the Xunzian position explicitly rejects the *Mengzi*'s view of human nature, at the same time it implicitly builds upon its innatist stance, extending it in a way that makes it far more plausible. Unlike the *Mengzi*'s optimistic view in which human nature can be appealed to as grounding for a favored *dao*, the *Xunzi* does not see human nature as being at all sufficient for this, famously taking a contrary stance and suggesting that human nature is not good as the *Mengzi* suggests, but rather bad or ugly.¹⁷⁸ It is bad or ugly in the sense that human beings, absent of any external imposition of culture or moral training, do not spontaneously act in a way that we would view as moral. Yet at the same time, facts about human nature, including the human capacity for emotions, partly determine what a good *dao* for human beings would have to look like. But for the *Xunzi* they do so only indirectly: these human factors must be taken into account together

¹⁷⁵ *Xunzi* 87/23/11-12.

¹⁷⁶ *Xunzi* 70/19/1-3.

¹⁷⁷ *Xunzi* 13/5/32-14/5/36.

¹⁷⁸ *Xunzi* 87/23/10.



with facts about heaven and earth, and these must somehow be brought to align (參 *can*).¹⁷⁹

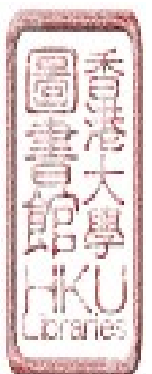
The *Xunzi* states that “all that is used to know is human *xing* (人之性); what can be known is the patterns of things (物之理)”.¹⁸⁰ Though the exact meaning of *xing* and its relation to *qing* are difficult to pin down precisely, the *Xunzi* explicitly sets up a distinction between *xing* and *wei* (偽 artifice): what people possess but which cannot be learned or acquired by application is called “*xing*”, while that which can be gained by study or mastered by application is called “*wei*”.¹⁸¹ *Xing* includes things like the ability to see or hear clearly – things that are possessed from birth and cannot be acquired through any amount of study. In using this distinction to argue against the position it attributes to Mencius, the *Xunzi* articulates a position that has been described as a form of pragmatism or constructivism. On this view, *tian* (heaven, nature) does not prescribe a unique normative *dao* that we should follow,¹⁸² but that does not mean that *tian* plays no role in determining what a good human *dao* would look like. *Tian* is constant and has fixed features – the four seasons, for instance – which a good human *dao* must mesh with in an appropriate way. A *dao* that did not account for these facts of nature would be a bad *dao*, not because *tian* is a source of moral authority, but because any such *dao* would not be optimally successful on purely pragmatic grounds. The constructive question is how we build an optimally successful

¹⁷⁹ *Xunzi* 62/17/7-8.

¹⁸⁰ *Xunzi* 82/21/78-79.

¹⁸¹ *Xunzi* 87/23/12-14.

¹⁸² In contrast to the Mohist belief that it does, critiqued by the *Zhuangzi*, which argued that *tian* could not possibly determine a single *dao*. See Hansen (1992, 281).

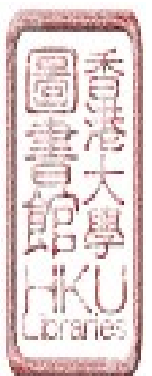


dao around these natural constraints. The general picture is in some ways very similar to that suggested by the Zhuangist skill stories: having chosen to take up a single task (promoting human flourishing, say) there are fixed points given by the world and the very nature of the task that will be best included or avoided by any *dao* for it to be optimally successful.

According to the text, “*Xing* is the beginning, the unadorned material, and *wei* the form (*wen* 文) and pattern (*li* 理), the development and completion. Without *xing*, there would be no basis to which *wei* could add; but without *wei*, *xing* [being as it is ugly] could not of itself become beautiful.”¹⁸³ The combination (matching, *he* 合) of *xing* and *wei* is supposed to cause the world to become ordered. Heaven gives birth to things, but it does not *distinguish* things; rather, things are only separated (or assigned roles, *fen* 分) upon the appearance of a sage.¹⁸⁴ Thus some sort of interplay or agreement between *xing* and *wei* is required for order – neither alone will be sufficient. The comments the text makes about distinctions in general suggest that this stance goes well beyond the relatively obvious point that a successful human *dao* must in some sense respect facts of nature (e.g. a *dao* that has people sowing and harvesting in accordance with the four seasons is likely to be more successful than one which has us attempting to grow crops in inappropriate conditions), implying further that the very way things are (and should be) distinguished and categorized is determined in part by nature, in part by the artifice of the sage.

¹⁸³ *Xunzi* 73/19/75-76. Translation based on Knoblock (1988, 3:66).

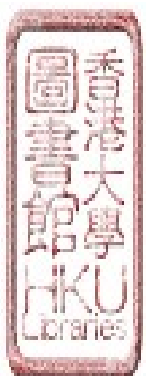
¹⁸⁴ *Xunzi* 73/19/78-79.



An important point – and an apparent point of agreement with the *Zhuangzi* – is that the natural world is not patterned in and of itself – or at the very least, not patterned to the extent required for order: “without the *junzi*, heaven and earth are not patterned, ritual and morality do not cohere, above there are no lords and leaders, below there are no fathers and sons: this is what is called complete disorder.”¹⁸⁵ At the same time, there is a suggestion that there may be *some* patterns (or similar form of ordering) in nature, since the same passage of text tells us that the various relationships of lord and minister, father and son, and so on “are of the same pattern as heaven and earth, and as eternal as ten thousand generations: this is what is called the great foundation”.¹⁸⁶ Presumably these are relatively basic patterns, closely related to the *xing* of the objects concerned (in this case human *xing*), and thus both in one sense natural – such relations do, to some extent, emerge spontaneously in human societies without intervention – and in another sense products of artifice: the *correct* relations between lord and minister or father and son being much more complex than any that could be determined simply by *xing* alone. That a ruler expects particular expressions of loyalty from his minister or a father particular expressions of filiality from his son can surely only be the product of artifice. Thus the Xunzian account appears to offer a solution to one of the big difficulties of the Mencian position. Just as with the *Mozi*, there are various models that we ought to emulate and follow – but these aren’t natural models, but models constructed by man’s interaction with nature.

¹⁸⁵ *Xunzi* 28/9/66-67.

¹⁸⁶ *Xunzi* 28/9/67.

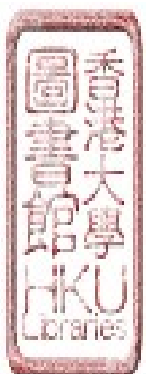


For the *Xunzi* then, in view of the ugliness of human nature, *moral* knowledge is largely going to rely upon the initial constructive work of the *junzi* and sages. But interestingly, this may not be the case for all knowledge. In particular, the text discusses what it is that separates water and fire from plants, animals, and human beings. Inorganic entities such as water and fire have *qi* but lack life; plants have life but no knowledge; animals have knowledge but no morality; while humans possess all of the above.¹⁸⁷ Animals do have knowledge – this seems to agree with the overall picture of knowledge as being reliably correct action: as long as a cow knows how to (and that it should) eat grass or a fish knows how to swim in water, there can be no doubt that animals do know certain things. But presumably animals do not have sages or *junzi*. Similarly, human beings *can* obtain knowledge without reliance upon moral education and standards – though such knowledge leads to morally bad results.¹⁸⁸ If this is true, it would seem to weigh in favor of a less radical interpretation of the scope of the sage in determining the patterns: there would seem to also be patterns that were not determined by the sage, yet can still count as knowledge.

The Xunzian position outlined so far would appear to grant in principle a significant degree of leeway to the sage or *junzi* in his patterning of the world. This constructivist model seems closely related to the Zhuangist skill passages, where fixed points of nature limited the agent's choice of path, but left him with a plethora of different options to choose from, all of which incorporated these points in the correct way. The lack of a fixed *dao* was

¹⁸⁷ *Xunzi* 28/9/69-29/9/70.

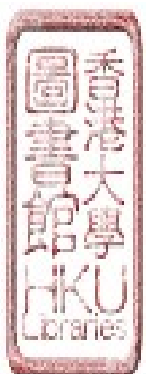
¹⁸⁸ *Xunzi* 24/8/105-106.



something to be cherished, the freedom to choose among different *dao* was paradigmatic of true skill. Yet despite having seemingly offered a sophisticated account largely compatible with this notion, the *Xunzi* appears committed to denying precisely what the swimmer told us about the lack of a single fixed *dao*: for the *Xunzi*, given the task of promoting human flourishing, we should expect to find a single optimal *dao* that fulfils these requirements. This requirement for a *single dao* requires further changes in the picture from that suggested by the *Zhuangzi*. Even if we accept that our shared humanity implies that all of society ought to follow a single *dao*, it still seems that on the constructivist account one might expect that there could at least in principle be multiple such optimal *daos*, and that they might perhaps change over time.

It is at this point that the pragmatic and philosophically sophisticated *Xunzi* appears to become somewhat overshadowed by its dogmatic and authoritarian alter ego. Those who suggest differing circumstances in past and present might cause different *daos* to succeed at rectifying disorder in each case are dismissed as “fools” with little in the way of argument beyond the claim that the masses are easily deceived and an assertion that the sage “uses himself as the measurement standard” and so is himself immune to such deception.¹⁸⁹ The patterns don’t change, so the correct *dao* doesn’t change – but this is merely a denial of the challenge and not a reasoned response to it. Although the *junzi* is supposed to align with the patterns, it seems that the way in which he is to do this has been fixed in advance by the sages: “any doctrines not agreeing with the sage kings or not following the *li*

¹⁸⁹ *Xunzi* 13/5/32-14/5/40.

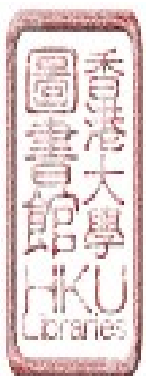


and morality are called ‘treacherous doctrines’. Though they may be distinguished/argued for (辯), the *junzi* does not listen”.¹⁹⁰ Whatever creativity was once involved in the Xunzian picture seems to have vanished with the sages.

In contrast to the Zhuangist picture of each individual forging his own way through the forest, the Xunzian picture becomes one in which the sages with their unparalleled wisdom forged the uniquely correct path, a path that once forged is set for all those who follow. This path, we are told, is the Confucian *li*; it is the most successful *dao*, instituted by the sage kings in accordance with the constructivist picture, and therefore is the uniquely privileged path that all should follow. Short of accepting that the *li* may be sub-optimal and thus require reform, and so effectively giving in to the Mohist position, it seems that the most a committed Confucian could do at this point would be to attempt to argue that the *li* as a matter of empirical fact actually do embody the uniquely optimal *dao* – a position that seems difficult to justify, largely implausible, and a stark contrast to the sophisticated constructivist picture that led us here.

Attempts to charitably combine these two strands of thought in the *Xunzi* tend to involve ascribing a strong realist position to the text: if, for instance, *Xunzi* were to claim that, though the constructivist picture is the correct one, it turns out as an entirely contingent fact about the world and human nature that the Confucian *li* is indeed the uniquely optimal *dao*, then the problem would seem to dissolve. But as Kurtis Hagen points out, this seems to rather defeat the purpose of the sophisticated constructivist stance:

¹⁹⁰ *Xunzi* 14/5/40.



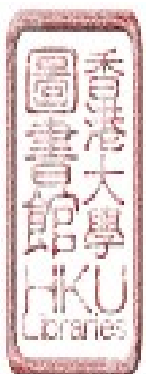
“This description does not give much room for innovation, except where innovation means innovating a system that could only ever have been innovated correctly in one way – but that would be discovery, not innovation”.¹⁹¹

3.6. Conclusion

Knowledge was in some respects relatively unproblematic for Chinese thinkers because of the absence of any form of mind-body dualism. Knowledge was at its most basic a matter of “connecting”, but this connecting was a connection between various physical parts of the world, and did not require any mysterious transition between mental and physical realms. The heart-mind, part of the body, was the seat of cognition and on the same conceptual level as the eyes, ears, and other sense organs: each had their own particular functions, abilities, and responses, but all were undoubtedly physical organs and physical parts of the body.

The autonomy of the senses would have made radical sense skepticism, though certainly not inconceivable, unlikely to be viewed as an obvious and pressing problem. Given that the sense organs were not viewed as mechanical receptors of sense data, the problem of sense skepticism in which my senses routinely deceive me as to the true nature of the world would seem an unlikely concern – my eyes are a part of me and directly contribute to my action and experience, in the same way as my *xin* is a part of me and contributes to my action and experience. If my eyes wished to deceive me, it would be much more natural to think that they would draw me

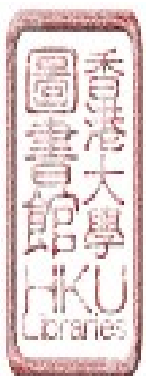
¹⁹¹ Hagen (2002, 42).



(against the better judgment of my heart-mind) towards the objects that they themselves desired, rather than systematically deceive my mind in some consistent, mechanical – reliable but unthinking – way that was of no particular benefit to them. But this kind of deception would most likely be exhibited not in radical skeptical scenarios leading me to question whether the world truly is the way I sense it, but in instances of moral weakness where my heart-mind is temporarily overcome by the base desires of the other less reflective senses.

Thus there was relative agreement on the most fundamental means through which we might obtain knowledge: natural human capacities such as those possessed by the *xin* and other sense organs were one key aspect of this, and practical training or cultivation leading to reliably successful action were another. But on the question of what ultimately determines what counts as knowledge, answers varied considerably. The *Mengzi* suggests that the answer somehow lies in the natural growth of our innate human capacities and tendencies, but this response is partial and problematic, not least because they might develop in more than one way, and further justification is needed both for why any one such way should be taken as being the uniquely “natural” way as well as for why this natural way is the correct one.

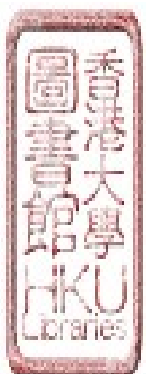
The *Mozi*’s suggestion that it is fixed, objective standards that play the crucial role in determining correctness was highly influential and in some ways persuasive, though at the same time raised the crucial question of what the standards themselves should be. More fundamentally however, Daoist texts – most notably the *Zhuangzi* – present examples of cases of knowledge



in which it is suggested that the agent cannot accurately be described as following models at all, suggesting that *any* standards – regardless of what they are – may be inadequate both as a means through which to obtain knowledge and as a tool with which to judge correctness in general in the way the Mohists desire.

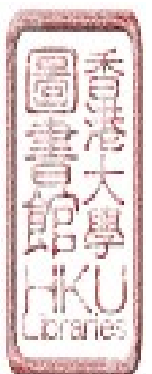
One way to view the disagreement between Mohist and Zhuangist stances might be to acknowledge that while they are by no means talking past one another, they are primarily concerned with somewhat different cases of knowledge, and very likely with different audiences. The utilitarian Mohists were concerned primarily with ways of resolving practical issues facing society: feeding the hungry, reducing waste, preventing war, and so on. Though they certainly had views on the political organization of the state, much of their concern applied to the masses, and they historically formed a social movement the majority of whose members were likely artisans and others from the lower levels of society. With these objectives in mind, they placed importance upon ensuring that everyone, regardless of his natural abilities, would be able to contribute to society in a productive way. In solving these practical challenges, there is very little point in studying how the virtuoso carpenter completes his work if this should turn out to be an ability that he cannot successfully transmit to others, or that many people are simply incapable of achieving. In such cases, standards and models are practical tools that can be used to improve the results of skilled and unskilled workers alike.

By contrast, the *Zhuangzi* delights in contemplation of perfection (whether realistically achievable or not) and could hardly be accused of being



overly concerned with the practical. It talks at great length about the “true man”, “ultimate knowledge”, magnificent beasts that exist in far off lands, and the thoughts of frogs, birds, and insects. Though the *Zhuangzi* is of enormous interest philosophically, much of its content would seem to be of little interest to the average Mohist unless some way could be found to apply its conclusions constructively to more pressing practical issues. The skill stories in the *Zhuangzi*, for instance, give philosophically interesting insights into cases where a conception of knowledge as consisting of following standards or making *shi-fei* distinctions breaks down, but these cases tend not to be the kind of cases a Mohist would be interested in. In the king’s kitchen a virtuoso butcher might be an impressive status symbol; a virtuoso swimmer might lead a personally fulfilling life; a virtuoso woodcarver might create objects of unparalleled beauty worthy of the son of heaven’s palace – but if, as the *Zhuangzi* claims, the skill of these virtuosos often lies in a knack that cannot be fully explained or transmitted to others, from the Mohist point of view they are merely fortuitous anomalies of nature, who should by all means be employed usefully by society, but who are unlikely to provide a practical means for spreading knowledge to the masses.

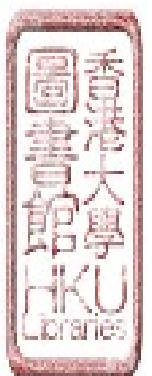
On the other hand, the Zhuangist examples would likely have been of much more interest to the ruling classes than the intuitive but somewhat mundane and rhetorically unexciting artisan examples cited by the Mohists. Rulers of the various states surrounded themselves with objects created by highly skilled craftsmen, and though they would have been unlikely in



practice to ever witness the actions of a butcher first hand,¹⁹² would likely have delighted in the beautifully painted portrait of Cook Ding deftly cutting up an ox as if dancing the mulberry dance.

The Zhuangist ideal hinted at seems to be closely related to the notion of *wu-wei*: once knowledge has been acquired – through whatever means – in the case of the most efficacious of agents it will become internalized as an automatic response. This seems most applicable to quite different cases of knowledge and action to those that the Mohists have in mind. The Mohist model seems suited to cases where uniform consistency is what counts as success rather than a fluid response to changing circumstances: a carpenter constructing a bridge as opposed to one carving an artwork from a gnarled piece of wood. Arguably the Zhuangist model is of greater interest to the ruling classes: recognizing the importance of going along with the way things are, while at the same time being ready to respond to unexpected issues as they occur, and being open to the possibility of potentially radically changing direction should the need arise are qualities likely lead to practical success in a bureaucrat, minister, or the ruler of a state. In this sense, the Mohist and Zhuangist views share a common focus on ensuring practical success of the agents in question – the typical agent in question being different in each case. If the village has a good harvest and all in it are fed, clothed, and looked after, then the villagers have been successful; if the ruler of the state is popular with the people and has a strong army to defend him, he is successful – the former might better achieve this with a Mohist strategy, the latter a

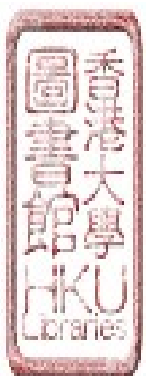
¹⁹² It is not difficult to imagine that witnessing the butchering of an ox first hand might actually make it hard to take seriously the romanticized picture the text paints in this example.



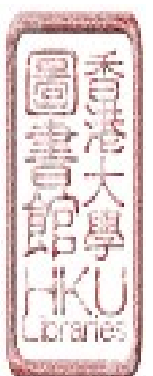
Zhuangist one. Thus this particular disagreement between Mohist and Zhuangist might best be characterized as a disagreement over how to make our actions reliably successful. The Mohists clearly state that they believe models are the key to this; the Zhuangists point to cases where this does not appear to be so.

The philosophically sophisticated strand of the *Xunzi* incorporates aspects of these ideas as well as the more plausible aspects of Mencian innatism, adopting the Mohist conception of models, but explaining more generally what it is about the correct models that makes them valuable: the way they fit together not only with the world but also with human nature. This account is nuanced and plausible, but seems to risk on the one hand conceding to the Daoists the possibility of there being different, equally justifiable *daos*, and on the other to the Mohists that the Confucian *dao* – particularly the *li* – has to be justified by something other than mere tradition or else be open to the possibility of continual reform.

An interesting consequence of the Chinese conception of knowledge is that it is quite general in terms of the scope of agents who might in principle possess knowledge. Rather than being forced to deny that animals have knowledge, for instance – in contrast to a JTB-type model, in which a key stumbling block would be explaining how animals can come to possess constructs that are primarily sentential in nature without possessing language – the Chinese model can easily account for animal knowledge being different to human knowledge (animals and humans are agents with different *xing* and *qing*), as well as explain why what they have nonetheless still counts as “knowledge” (animals can also exhibit reliably successful



action). *Human* knowledge, however, is intimately connected with language, and it is this relationship that will be examined in the next chapter.



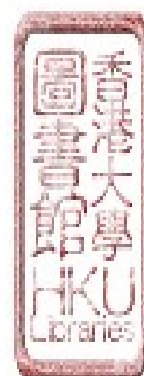
4. Knowledge and language

Just as knowledge was thought of as being closely related to action, so too was language: the primary function of language was typically seen as being guiding action, a view that is repeatedly seen throughout pre-Qin texts. The *Analects* for instance suggests that in government nothing is as important as “rectifying names” – enforcing the correct use of words – for a failure to attend to this leads directly to one’s actions not being correctly carried out (by those under one’s command), and thus to the failure of one’s projects and inability to achieve one’s objectives.¹⁹³ Mencius claims that his reluctant engagement in *bian* aims to oppose the wicked *yan* (言 doctrines, sayings) of Yangist and Mohist, not simply because they are *wrong* (as might have been a good enough reason had Mencius approved of *bian* in general), but because they lead to terrible consequences in the actions of those influenced by them.¹⁹⁴ Daoists who advocated the “non-doing” of *wu-wei* paired this with a rejection of the *yan* that would generally be seen as guiding action, while those who emphasized the point that what counts as “correct action” might be relative to various factors saw the same relativist problems mirrored in any talk of “correct language”. As a result, language became central to the Chinese discussion of knowledge, though in a quite distinct way to its also central role in much of Western epistemology.

Positive *dao* advocates saw language as having an important guiding role in ensuring that society would make the correct *shi-fei* distinctions and

¹⁹³ *Analects* 13.3/33/27-13.3/34/3.

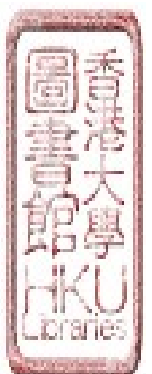
¹⁹⁴ *Mengzi* 6.9/35/7-10.



thus follow the correct *dao*. This gave rise to the general idea of “correct language use” – language that by its use or acceptance promotes or embodies the correct *dao* and the correct *shi-fei* distinctions that ought to be promoted. Since knowledge was explained primarily in terms of the ability to reliably make the correct *shi-fei* distinctions, this provided a natural way of thinking about knowledge linguistically: knowledge corresponds to the correct use of language.

Chinese thinkers saw knowledge and language as being related on a number of different levels. Firstly, an ability to use language correctly – and in particular for pre-Qin thinkers, apply words correctly to appropriately related things – is constitutive of a type of knowledge that is a pre-requisite for both the appropriate guiding of action and successful communication. Secondly, primarily linguistic practices such as the requesting and giving of justificatory reasons can be a means through which we come to agree upon what actually counts as knowledge, as distinct from mere opinion or belief. Thirdly, structures and regular relationships hidden within language may also point the way towards a formal means of inference – a means of obtaining new knowledge from things already known. If we discover that all sentences of some particular form hold, then perhaps we can know *a priori* that any new sentence fitting the pattern – whatever its contents – must also hold.

This chapter will argue that, though pre-Qin thinkers typically did not consider linguistic expressions to be the fundamental constituent or theoretical foundation of knowledge, the details of these important relations between language and knowledge were the subject of intense critical debate,



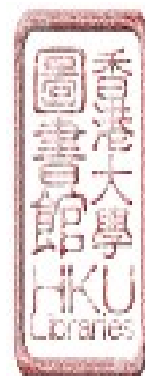
in which thinkers recognized the possibility of such relations existing and the significance should they truly hold, but were in each case challenged by those skeptical of their generality.

4.1. The possibility of linguistically expressible knowledge

As noted in chapter 3, Daoists raised the objection that there are instances of knowledge that cannot be adequately described in terms of *fa* or expressed linguistically. But can *any* knowledge be adequately expressed linguistically, and if so how? A JTB-like model of knowledge may come with linguistic elements built into it – truth and belief typically being thought of as importantly sentential in character – to the extent that on such a conception of knowledge it may make little sense to even ask this question since the account itself has already made the assumption that it can be. But where knowledge is thought of primarily as an ability to distinguish *shi* from *fei* in practice, this question is left entirely open.

Though there has been some debate over whether or not pre-Qin thinkers made explicit use of any concept corresponding to a sentence – the words “*ci*” (辭 phrase, saying) and “*yan*” (言 doctrine, speech)” being likely candidates¹⁹⁵ – there seems little doubt that, regardless of how closely either of these words correspond to the meaning of “sentence”, a more central role in the pre-Qin understanding of distinction-drawing, language, justification, and knowledge was played by *ming* (名 names, words), and it is at the level of *ming* rather than sentences that language was most fundamentally associated

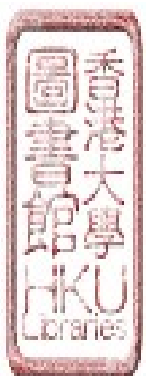
¹⁹⁵ E.g. Hansen (1985, 496-500) and Harbsmeier (1998, 173-184 and 332-336).



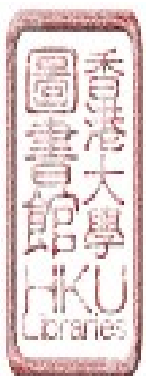
with knowledge. The Mohist Canon offers a definition of *bian* (辯/辨 distinction drawing, debating) which, consistent with the common use of the word in distinguishing between *shi* and *fei*, defined distinction-drawing as an activity in which what was to be decided was whether or not a particular *ming* fitted a particular thing.¹⁹⁶ Their example of legitimate *bian* involved two debaters taking up opposite stances, but these were not conceived of as the affirmation and denial of a particular sentence but rather of a *ming* and its negation applying to something, their example being “ox” and “non-ox”. Similarly, their characterization of knowledge itself made explicit reference to *ming* rather than *ci*. Their seven-part characterization listed three means by which one might acquire knowledge – hearing of it, explanation or argument, and having witnessed it directly – and four types of knowledge that one might come to possess: *ming*, *shi* (實 real stuff), *he* 合 (combination [of the previous two]), and *wei* (為 action, doing).¹⁹⁷ Rather than considering questions of whether descriptive sentences did or did not agree with reality in some way, the Mohist characterization of knowledge suggests that it is most fundamentally a question of being aware of and able to use the correct *ming* (such as “oxen”), being familiar with its *shi* (the oxen), knowing that these *ming* and *shi* belong together (when you ask me to fetch you an ox, I don’t go looking for a horse), and finally, *wei* (為 doing, acting). Although the later Mohists make this abstract claim explicit, similar ideas appear in many earlier texts, such as when the *Mozi* comments that though the blind know the *ming* of black and white, and can make accurate assertions about black

¹⁹⁶ *Mozi* 65/40/10.

¹⁹⁷ *Mozi* 66/40/12, 69/42/36-37.



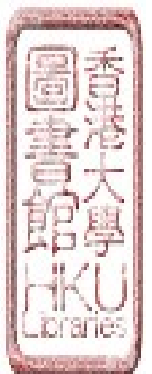
and white in the abstract, they are unable to select among black and white things and therefore do not count as knowing black and white – mirroring the distinction between knowledge of *ming* and knowledge of *shi* and/or *wei*. The divisions they draw in this characterization are of a different character to the distinction usually pointed to between knowing that, of, and how, in part because of the subtlety of grammar that the grammatical object of the different types of knowledge identified by the Mohists can all be identical in a way that they rarely could be in the case of the that-of-how distinction. In this sense the Mohist distinction can be seen as a disambiguation of certain uses of “*zhi*”: if I say that I “*zhi* benevolence”, this claim might be ambiguous, since it could mean that I know the word “benevolence”, or that I know what benevolence is (can identify it in practice), or both, or that I know to be benevolent (exhibit benevolence myself through my actions). But at the same time, since no grammatical markers differentiate between these uses of *zhi* in classical Chinese, the Mohists most likely saw these as being different *aspects* of knowledge, some or all of which might apply simultaneously with respect to a given agent and object, rather than mutually exclusive species of knowledge to which different knowledge claims and different objects of knowing might belong. This expands upon the idea in the blind man example: there is one sense in which he does know (he can say correct things about black and white), and another in which he does not (he cannot act correctly with respect towards them). Instead of some particular objects being associated with some particular kinds of knowledge (such as “that black is not white” with knowing that, “riding a bike” with knowing how, and “to eat with your mouth closed” with knowing to), the suggestion is that in general



the “how”, “of”, “that”, and “to” aspects in fact all overlap and often apply to the very same objects: for a Confucian for instance, typically “knowing the *li* (禮 rites, ritual propriety)” simultaneously implies that I know what the *li* is, have familiarity with it, know how to act in accordance with it, and do in fact act in accordance with it.

For people to have knowledge that goes beyond direct knowledge of *shi* and *wei* that might plausibly be available to someone independently of language, they will need to be able to associate the correct *ming* with the correct *shi* and the correct *wei*, or else they will be in an analogous position to the blind man who fails to know. This raises the difficult question of what the “correctness” or normativity governing how *ming* should relate to *shi* actually is, and where it is supposed to come from.

The Mohists shared the belief in the adequacy of language as a tool for expressing knowledge with their similarly linguistically-inclined opponent Xunzi. Though diverging widely in terms of the actual contents of their proposed *daos*, the two shared considerable common ground on their views about language and its relation to cognition and knowledge. Mohist and Xunzian answers to the correctness problem were described largely in terms of the concepts of *lei* (類 kind, class) and *ming* and the relation between the two. A key point of agreement between the two was that some kind of constant relationship must hold between a *ming* and its corresponding *lei*, for only this would allow language to serve as a reliable tool for communication, carrying out of instructions, and ultimately leading society to follow the correct *dao*.

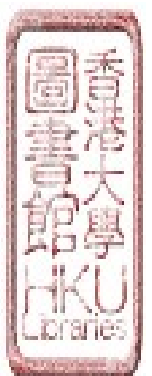


Although *lei* were closely associated with *ming*, the term was not only used of *ming*, and *lei* could be much more complex groupings of similar things, such as similar circumstances, similar actions, or similar claims. Consistent reasoning in general was understood in terms of *lei*, with the Mohists and others describing inconsistency where one reasons one way in one case, but a different way in a relevantly similar case as a failure to “know *lei*” – a failure to correctly identify the *lei* that something belongs to and respond appropriately.¹⁹⁸ This could apply at various levels, for instance at the level of a word – not correctly classifying some thing as belonging to some kind (and thus being associated with the appropriate kind term) – or at a more complex level such as appropriate description of action. Thus agreeing that two things were of the same *lei* was generally taken as implying that one ought to reason and act towards them in a similar way in each case. The Later Mohists describe part of the task of disputation as “choosing according to *lei* and giving according to *lei*”,¹⁹⁹ alluding to the choice of justification to be presented for one’s own claims and with which to counter those of one’s opponents: showing that an opponent responds differently to two cases of the same *lei* shows that he is being inconsistent.

Thus *lei* both characterized disputes and importantly underwrote the notion of objective justification: disagreement on what belongs to what *lei* would immediately lead to disagreement about what constitutes acceptable justification for a claim. Even if we both agree that “murdering one’s ruler is always wrong” (itself a claim about *lei*: that “murdering one’s ruler” belongs

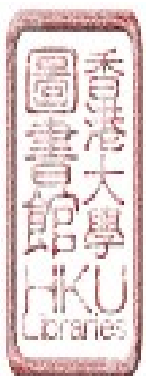
¹⁹⁸ *Mozi* 93/50/6; *Mengzi* 11.12/60/7-9.

¹⁹⁹ *Mozi* 77/45/1-3.

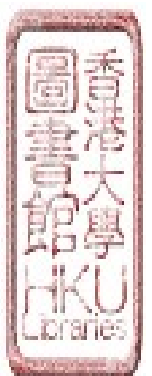


to the *lei* of “wrong”), when I claim that so-and-so murdered his ruler and thus is a wrongdoer, there remains considerable scope for our disagreement on the correctness of this statement even supposing we agree on many of the key facts. These disagreements could be (and often were) expressed in terms of membership of particular *lei*: for instance, one might – as Mencius does – argue that use of the word “ruler” to refer to someone requires that he meets a certain minimum set of normative ethical standards expected of a ruler, and thus in this case the so-called “ruler” did not truly belong to the ruler *lei* by virtue of his actions. There might be other reasons to question whether this particular action truly does belong to the *lei* of “murdering one’s ruler” – perhaps though we agree so-and-so did indeed kill the individual in question, there is dispute over whether this is correctly described as “murder” since it is claimed that he was justified in killing him (perhaps it was in self defense). Only if the instance truly does belong to the “murder” *lei* is the rule about murdering one’s ruler being wrong applicable. In general this comes down to the question of membership of *lei* that correspond to individual words – is this man truly a “ruler”, and is this action truly an instance of “murder”. Because of the way *lei* underwrite justification, if it should turn out that *lei* themselves are not fixed but arbitrary or agent-dependent, the whole edifice of justification and objectivity crumbles. Most fundamentally, if we don’t agree on which *lei* correspond to which *ming*, we could simply be talking past one another when we use the same terms since we intend different things by them.

The later Mohists and Xunzi in particular made attempts to resolve this issue. The later Mohists categorized *ming* into three types: unrestricted

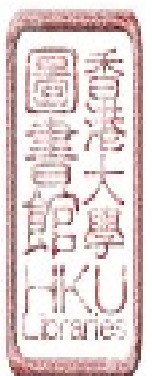


ming (e.g. “thing”) that apply to any *shi* (實 stuff, things); *lei ming* (e.g. “horse”) that apply to similar *shi* (i.e. all horses); and private *ming* (e.g. “Jack”) that apply to only some particular *shi* (Jack). Though they considered various problems with private *ming*, such as cases where the same person has more than one *ming* and cases where a *ming* is “borrowed” – i.e. what appears to be a *lei ming* is used as a personal name, such as when someone is surnamed “Crane” yet we do not take this as implying that they are a bird – the most difficult problem lay with the *lei ming* themselves and determining what it means to say that a particular *lei ming* applies to “similar *shi*”. Similar how? Though the text attempts to disambiguate the terms “same” and “different” into different types of similarity, of these their explanations for “same as a kind” and “different as a kind” fail to provide a persuasive response, defining “sameness of *lei*” as “having some respect in which it is the same” and “difference of *lei*” as “having some respect in which it is different”. Since any two distinct things share at once some respect in which they are similar (they are both things), and some respect in which they are different (they are not the same thing), these definitions would seem to make it at once possible to argue that *any* two things are of the same *lei*, and also that they are not. This seems to imply either a contradiction, or that the *lei* in each case is different (e.g. a horse and an ox are of the same *lei* in that they are both animals, yet of different *lei* in that one is of the horse *lei* whereas the other is of the ox *lei*). This imparts a seemingly quite radical degree of freedom into *lei* – any things can be of the same *lei* if there is any sense in which they are similar: perhaps rabbits and donkeys form a *lei*, because both have long ears. If this is what is meant by “*lei*”, then the term itself isn’t doing



much work in explaining *ming* beyond the original statement that a *lei ming* is used to name things that are similar. This has the effect of suggesting that the relation between *ming* and *lei* could be entirely a matter of convention or even personal choice. But if it *is* a matter of convention, and furthermore there are essentially no constraints on what constitutes a *lei*, then how do I know that when I talk of “horses” you don’t have something different (either radically or subtly different) in mind?

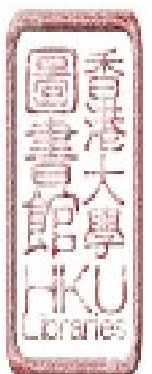
The *Xunzi* might initially seem better placed to meet this challenge, since it emphasizes the way in which our shared humanity influences human perception and cognition: in accordance with our peculiarly human *qing*, the heart-mind and other senses distinguish *shi* from *fei* in particular cases – white from black, horse from non-horse, moral from immoral – in distinctively human ways, thus leading to *lei* that reflect distinctively human concerns. This at least provides some constraint on *lei*. Perhaps facts about the nature of human perception and cognition can explain why humans tend to see “rabbits” as one group and “donkeys” as a separate group rather than grouping both together. But even according to the constructivist picture suggested by the *Xunzi*, it seems that in a descriptive sense at least different agents sharing the same *qing* might easily come to have different *fa* – different standards by which they distinguish *shi* and *fei* – for the same group of things, particularly in the case of more abstract groupings: we might easily disagree on what belongs or does not belong in any particular named *lei*. This seems trivially true simply by virtue of the existence of seemingly intractable disagreements: the Confucian believes that three year mourning is *yi* (moral) while the Mohist says that it is *fei yi* (not moral). So given an instance of



someone carrying out (or endorsing) a three year period of mourning, Mohists will consistently say that their doing so is *fei* while Confucians will consistently say it is *shi* – thus the Mohist has one standard for the *lei* associated with the word “moral”, while the Confucians have another, incompatible standard for it. But if the standards used are different, how can we even be sure that Confucian and Mohist are talking about the same thing? If language is to allow reliable communication, there must be some further response to the objection that such standards are arbitrary beyond an appeal to *qing*, since the very same human *qing* is common to Confucian and Mohist alike. If language cannot do this, then it would seemingly be an inadequate means of expressing any kind of knowledge.

The *Xunzi* does however have a response. Firstly this is to acknowledge that the relation between *ming* and *lei* is in one sense arbitrary – it is a matter of convention, since what we call “horses” might easily have been called something else entirely. *Ming* don’t inherently correspond to any particular *shi*; instead what makes them correspond is simply that people agree in practice upon their having such a correspondence.²⁰⁰ Secondly and more significantly, the conventional *lei* and *ming* that people generally agree upon now were constructed through human artifice, and not purely on the basis of similarity and difference; thus it does not need to be the case that facts about similarity and difference of things entirely determine the way *ming* are assigned. Thirdly, there are normative standards for the correct use of names that decide what the corresponding *lei* actually contain. According to the *Xunzi*, many of the *ming* themselves were laid down by the “later

²⁰⁰ *Xunzi* 83/22/25-84/22/27.



kings”, but they are justified not simply by tradition but by the fact that they have been practically successful: they were sufficient to differentiate things, enable the king to promote the *dao* and transmit his will, and thus to lead the people in unity.²⁰¹ At the same time, the *Xunzi* is quite prepared to accept that new names might be created by a new king, but any such “true king” would surely maintain the original successful *ming* even as he created new ones.²⁰² The correctness of *fa* and *lei* is not decided by facts about *fa* and *lei* themselves or by what things are ultimately similar to one another, but determined by whether or not such *fa* and *lei* achieve practical success.²⁰³ The *fa* and *lei* that are conventional in society *could* have been different, but since they have been practically successful we should not abandon them. They also take into account the structure of the world as well as our human *qing*, and it is partly in virtue of this fact that they are successful, even if this alone would not be enough to uniquely determine them.²⁰⁴

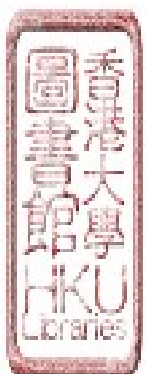
This account echoes existing views in Confucianism going back to the *Analects* and its discussion of the “rectification of names”, while also responding to the implicit Mohist challenge that just because particular *ming* and *lei* are conventional does not show that they are right. For similar reasons to those given in the *Analects*, the *Xunzi* argues that we must not allow the correct conventional standards set out by the kings to be violated, for this would lead to a failure for intentions to be transmitted effectively and

²⁰¹ *Xunzi* 83/22/6-7.

²⁰² *Xunzi* 83/22/11-13.

²⁰³ *Xunzi* 44/12/2.

²⁰⁴ On the question of whether or not the *Xunzi* should be read as claiming that these factors do determine a single, unique *dao* and set of standards, see Fraser (forthcoming).



actions carried out in their accordance, and so to the inability of rulers to lead people to follow the *dao* in the proper manner.

4.2. Language, justification and objectivity

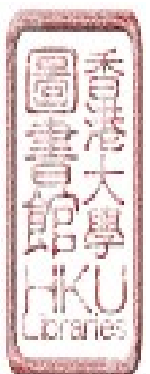
As noted in the previous chapter, a highly significant and influential contribution of the early Mohists to the philosophical debate of the time was their discussion and application of standards. A likely motivation for the Mohist position was what they saw as the duplicitous and insincere actions of the privileged classes of the day. Day in and day out, those in charge speak of promoting the worthy, yet when it comes to choosing their subordinates invariably select their incompetent friends and family over those better qualified;²⁰⁵ they speak of the importance of what is right, yet do what is wrong;²⁰⁶ they speak of their opposition to theft and murder, yet invade and plunder the neighboring states for their own enrichment.²⁰⁷

It is worth emphasizing here that the leaders so criticized by the Mohists might well have – at least nominally – shared many values with them, including values that later came to be labeled “Confucian”. The problem then lay less in a conflict between a new distinctively Mohist set of values and some other set of incompatible values than in the practical question of how – given general agreement on some broadly shared set of values – to ensure that these guiding values were correctly and reliably interpreted and applied in particular situations.

²⁰⁵ *Mozi* 13/10/10-13/10/20.

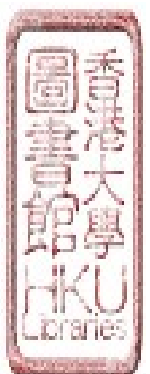
²⁰⁶ *Mozi* 28/17/1-7.

²⁰⁷ *Mozi* 28/17/7-29/17/14.



The Confucian answer to resolving practical questions of poor governance had typically concentrated on moral education and character building – the idea being that, given the appropriate training, those in charge would spontaneously interpret and apply the relevant values appropriately in each particular case they encountered. Morality, rather than the letter of the law, would motivate rulers to appoint those worthy of the position over their own relatives, and so, given sufficiently moral leaders, no external oversight would be required. There might be guiding principles, such as a written account of certain rules of propriety, but these would not have ultimate authority, as morality could overrule them in specific cases where it would be not be morally appropriate to follow such a rule – ultimately, the moral man is the arbiter of what is moral in any given case. Moreover, it would seem almost meaningless for anyone not themselves possessing the suitable moral education to question actions and decisions made as a result of such a process – if the ruler is, indeed, possessive of a degree of moral virtue far beyond my own, and it is precisely this moral character that allows him to act appropriately in such cases, then any criticism of his actions that I offer can be easily dismissed as the mutterings of a “petty man” – the opposite of the cultivated *junzi*.

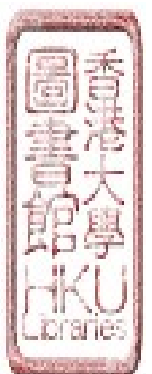
The Mohists, perhaps not surprisingly given their low ranking social status in comparison to their rivals, would not have been impressed with this seemingly incestuous relationship between morality and governance that essentially excluded the common people even in principle from questioning the hypocrisy of their superiors in a meaningful way. If only the ruling classes are sufficiently qualified to assess the morality of their own words and



actions, those excluded from the process would be essentially expected to put up with whatever justificatory story those in charge chose to offer regarding their moral reasoning, for they would be seen as lacking the tools with which to criticize it.

Given that the Mohists saw hypocrisy in the ruling classes actions, an important question for them to answer is what is actually *wrong* with hypocrisy. An obvious answer would seem to be that one treats similar cases differently, where one would be expected to have treated them similarly: when you kill a man in anger I say you are wrong, yet when my brother does so I say he was not. This lack of consistency violates an intuitive sense of fairness that objectively similar cases should be treated similarly regardless of the subjective views of the individuals involved. The Mohists were not just interested in particular cases of action, however, and that is where *yan* become particularly important. If there are standards that can adjudicate in particular cases of action, then there may also be standards that can similarly adjudicate in particular cases of *yan*. These *yan*, though themselves particular (for instance, the doctrine that “all murderers should be put to death” – one *yan*) have general applicability. The Mohist suggestion is that not only can standards allow us to reason consistently in some specific cases – for instance, if we oppose murder in most cases, we should oppose it in other relevantly similar instances too – they can also help us to reason consistently about *yan*: about the doctrines that society should be led by.

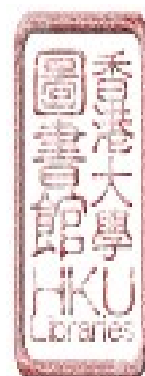
The Mohist aim, in contrast to the Confucian ideal of rites and ritual moderated by guiding values that could override the letter of the ritual in specific cases, was to create a single set of standards that would be sufficient



to guide action in all cases, without requiring exceptions resulting from appeal to other values. Rather than direct appeal to concepts such as *ren* and *de* in reasoning about practical cases (as seen in the *Analects*, *Mengzi*, etc.), the *Mozi* – while continuing to endorse many of the same common values (e.g. *ren*, *xiao*, etc.) – argues that in practical cases what we should use to reason consistently is not these values themselves, but standards that somehow embody or promote these values. Rather than simply trying to promote *ren* actions or *xiao* actions directly or through cultivation, we should try to promote those *yan* that themselves promote these types of virtuous action.

As a result of this, the Mohists in particular focused a great deal on the role language should play in the ideal society. An important part of the Mohist ideal of government is its emphasis on promoting the “good *yan*/doctrines (*shan yan* 善言)” while at the same time suppressing any *yan* that are not good. People at each level of the social hierarchy were expected to study the good *yan* of their immediate superior and suppress bad *yan*, just as they were to study the good conduct of their immediate superior and suppress bad conduct.

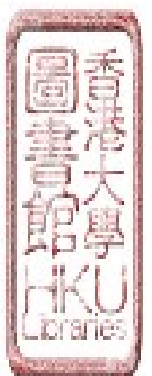
With this project in mind, a serious problem for the Mohists was that unlike the Confucians, who had a ready-made body of doctrine that they were largely committed to retaining in its existing form, the Mohists had explicitly opened up the question of what the correct *dao* is and thus what any associated “good *yan*” might actually be. Certainly Mohist doctrine that the Mohists presented arguments for would in their opinion qualify as “good *yan*” – bringing benefits to the world and removing harm, or moderation in



funeral rituals, for instance. But if there isn't any reliable way to tell the good *yan* and the bad *yan* apart in general, then the hierarchical picture of governance that the Mohists explicitly draw seems immediately open to exactly the kind of objection that they themselves aim at the Confucians: just because the ruler says these are the good *yan*, surely doesn't guarantee that these particular *yan* are actually good. The Mohist hierarchical picture seems highly dependent upon its assumption that the rulers in each case really are the "benevolent men" that they are supposed by the Mohists to be, and that the doctrines they promote to those below them really are the "good *yan*" that they claim; should these assumptions fail to hold, they would seem to be justifying the allegiance of society to an arbitrary ruler without anything even in principle with which to hold him to account.²⁰⁸

The Mohist solution to this problem was to apply the notion of *fa* to the question of doctrine. By doing this, the Mohist commitment to finding objective standards with which to reliably distinguish *shi* from *fei* would extend not only to objects and states of affairs, but to linguistic expressions of their proposed *dao*. If the correct standards for "good *yan*" can be determined, they can be applied against any actual or proposed doctrine, and thus tell us whether or not we ought to endorse it. Just as standards can allow us to distinguish what is round from not-round, or actions that are morally praiseworthy from those that are not, so too standards can be applied to language. The objectivity of the standards would in theory address the

²⁰⁸ According to the Mohists, the ruler can be held to account by *tian*, and *tian* cares for all people equally. But if the Mohist position were that the ordinary people should simply leave all matters of political import up to *tian*, this would seem to imply an endorsement of fatalism, a position that the Mohists explicitly reject.



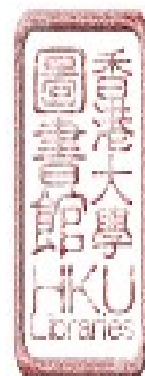
arbitrariness of political authority: which *yan* are the good *yan*, and which actions the good actions, are not decided merely by the decrees made by one's superior, but matters of fact that in principle could be verified by anyone.

The early Mohists argued that the correct *fa* against which doctrines should be measured were what they called the “three standards (三法 *san fa* or 三表 *san biao*)”, and committed themselves to “making *yan* (言 sayings, doctrines) possess the three standards”, characterizing them as a way of distinguishing between *qing* (請/情 fact, truth) and *wei* (偽 fake, falsity).²⁰⁹ The three standards they identified were a distillation of what the Mohists saw as good justification for doctrines in general. The Mohists labeled their three standards “root”, “origin”, and “use”, and described them respectively as requiring justificatory grounds in the deeds of the sage kings, facts observed by the eyes and ears of the common people, and beneficial results for people and the state when put into practice in government.²¹⁰

The Mohists did not merely assert that such justification existed in principle for the good *yan*, but also frequently made use of the three standards in practical argumentation as a justificatory basis for what they believed those good *yan* to be. For instance, in arguing against fatalism in chapters that begin by setting out the method of the three standards, the *Mozi* appeals to historical facts about the sage kings (that the actions of the sage kings led to order, whereas the actions of the wicked kings led to

²⁰⁹ *Mozi* 58/36/2-3.

²¹⁰ *Mozi* 56/35/6-57/35/10 and 60/37/1-4. A third formulation (*Mozi* 58/36/1-5) replaces the first two standards with “the intentions of heaven and the spirits and the deeds of the sage kings” and “examining the books of the former kings”.



chaos),²¹¹ that nobody has ever seen fate,²¹² and that the rejection of fatalism leads to good results whereas adoption of it leads to bad ones.²¹³ Here as elsewhere in the *Mozi*, the distinctive and repetitive phrasing of the text makes it clear that what is being offered is justification for “how (lit. by means of what) we know 何以知” that the Mohist claims are correct.²¹⁴

This Mohist stance was extremely influential in pre-Qin thinking and debate, as it brought questions of objectivity and justification for doctrine in general to the fore. Nevertheless, the three standards that the Mohists proposed would inevitably have come in for serious criticism from those not sharing their political views, and likely raised questions for the Mohists themselves which they might not have been well placed to answer. For instance, if we are to decide which *yan* are good and can constitute knowledge by means of standards, then what are the standards by which we evaluate the three standards themselves? Even supposing the Mohists produce a convincing answer for each of the standards (perhaps in terms of bringing benefit to the world and removing its harms), the same question can be asked of these more fundamental standards, suggesting the possibility of infinite regression if no standards can be agreed upon as being justified in some other way.

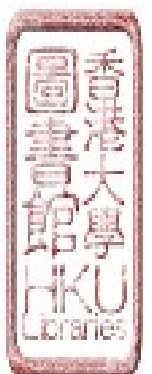
Secondly, if the standards really are standards not just for “good *yan*” but also for correctness in general as the Mohists seem to be suggesting, then there is a problem of whether the three standards may in some cases give

²¹¹ *Mozi* 60/37/4-10.

²¹² *Mozi* 58/36/5-59/36/9.

²¹³ *Mozi* 61/37/29-62/37/46.

²¹⁴ E.g. *Mozi* 58/35/36, 58/36/5-6.



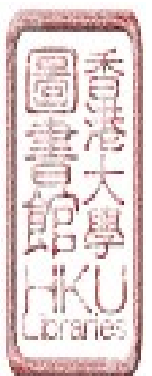
answers that run counter to what we would normally consider to be objectively correct. Though a grounding in observational experience seems quite compatible with an everyday notion of knowledge, and arguably given the pre-Qin cultural trends a grounding in deeds of sage kings (particularly given the potential flexibility in interpreting precisely who the sages were, and the correct description of their deeds) perhaps not incompatible also, the third standard with its emphasis on benefit seems to allow for the possibility of correctness on the basis of beneficial consequences of a belief that may yet be fundamentally at odds with reality. The Mohists themselves hint at this problem in the course of arguing for the existence of ghosts, suggesting that even if should turn out that ghosts do not in fact (*qing* 請/情) exist, behaving as if they do exist is nonetheless beneficial.²¹⁵

The Mohists introduce their discussion of the existence of ghosts as a response to the bad consequences of people doubting the existence of ghosts and spirits – and in particular, not only doubting their existence but also going around teaching such doubt to others by using *yan* such as “there are no ghosts and spirits”, which the Mohists will argue are bad *yan*. Since ghosts and spirits are supposed to be able to reward good conduct and punish bad conduct, if people doubt their existence they will be more inclined to commit various acts of violence and thievery against others, knowing that they can do so without fear of ghostly retribution.²¹⁶

At the same time, the language they use to describe their inquiry makes it clear that it is supposed to be epistemic in nature, particularly

²¹⁵ *Mozi* 53/31/96-106.

²¹⁶ *Mozi* 49/31/1-9.

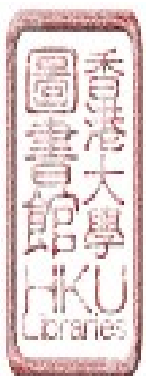


through the repeated use of “明 *ming* (understand, make clear)” in both the title of the text (“明鬼 *ming gui* – clarity about ghosts”) and claims that “the distinction between ghosts and spirits existing and not existing is something that must be clearly (*ming*) investigated”. They begin by describing a general *dao* of determining *zhi* (knowledge) of existence or non-existence (of something), which they say is to examine whether the ordinary people have or have not experienced the thing in question with their own eyes and ears: if some of them have, it exists, and if none have, it does not exist.²¹⁷

They anticipate the obvious objection that “some people have seen or heard it” constitutes only very weak grounds for believing in the existence of something.²¹⁸ They respond to this by appealing to the sage kings and the practical consequences of taking ghosts as existing – making it clear that this is an implicit application of the method of three standards, and thus that what the Mohists are arguing is that “ghosts exist” is a good *yan* whereas “ghosts do not exist” is not. They argue that it meets the two conditions of experience of the ordinary people and grounding in the deeds of the sage kings. However when it comes to arguing for the remaining standard – that the doctrine is beneficial when implemented – they say something rather surprising. Regardless of whether or not ghosts and spirits in fact (*qing* 請/情) exist, we should continue to sacrifice to them (i.e. to the ghosts and spirits of our deceased ancestors), because either they do really exist, in which case the sacrifice fulfils its purported aims of satisfying the spirits, or

²¹⁷ *Mozi* 49/31/9-13.

²¹⁸ *Mozi* 49/31/13- 50/31/21.



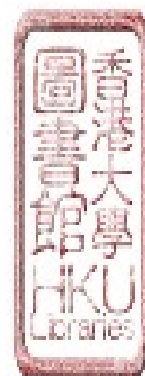
they do not really exist, in which case the sacrifice can serve other beneficial purposes such as providing a congenial get together for friends and family.²¹⁹

So there is a sense in which, even if ghosts and spirits really didn't exist, it could still be the case that we ought to act as if they did, and so presumably it would be correct for us to go around saying things like "ghosts exist", even though in fact they don't. This suggests that although the Mohists seem to take the three standards as determining objective *shi-fei*, they are prepared to concede that this might conflict with what is factually correct. Thus Mohist standards of objective correctness may commit us to accepting the existence of things that even the Mohists accept may not really exist.

One way of resolving this apparent difficulty is to allow that though the Mohists – and early Chinese thinkers in general – were concerned with what is objectively *correct*, they were not aiming to define or approximate a semantic notion of *truth*, and no such concept played a central role in their philosophical reasoning.²²⁰ A likely reason for this is that they were typically concerned primarily with normative ethical matters relating to how society should best be ordered, and that though they sought objectivity this was primarily in the sense of objective agreement with the correct *dao* rather than with correspondence to or correct representation of facts or the world. Like the contents of a good scientific theory, the contents of the correct *dao* are likely to be closely related to the way the world is, but this relation is at its heart a normative rather than a descriptive one. A strong candidate for the correct *dao* is likely to be related to the world in that when practiced it leads

²¹⁹ *Mozi* 53/31/99-106 .

²²⁰ Hansen (1985).



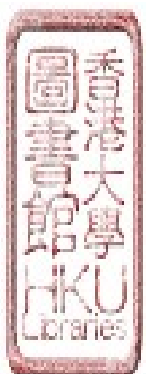
to the successful realization in the world of the values that inform it, given the way the world actually is. This contrasts with a good scientific theory of the world, which (at least for a realist) seeks to correctly describe and account for the way the world actually is. The objective correctness the Mohists seek is correctness in terms of assertability rather than truth.²²¹

In the Mohist case in particular, it seems likely that *benefit* was a value of such fundamental importance that it in a sense *defined* correctness for the Mohists: as the later Mohists explicitly state in their Canons, “righteousness/duty is benefit”.²²² So if it should turn out that promoting belief in ghosts is the most beneficial course of action for society, then *yan* that promote belief in ghosts are precisely the kind of objective *yan* that the Mohists were seeking. In this sense, the kind of objectivity the Mohists hoped to achieve was objective correctness in the sense of being maximally beneficial to society rather than in terms of providing a maximally good scientific description of the world, and this in principle could quite plausibly be compatible with commitment to promoting beliefs that are may not actually be true or are even suspected of being false.

Thus although the Mohists are quite clear that the good *yan* must be objective in the sense that they must be backed up with adequate, independently verifiable justification, at the same time they do not seem to suggest a requirement that the *yan* must also be assessed in a further dimension such as truth or factualness, and may even be willing to accept

²²¹ See Hansen (139-140 and 392 footnote 79). Hansen also makes the point that assertability does not *have* to be different from truth: “In fact, truth can be thought of as a special case of assertability. It is the standard of assertability for scientific or rational inquiry.”

²²² *Mozi* 65/40/3.



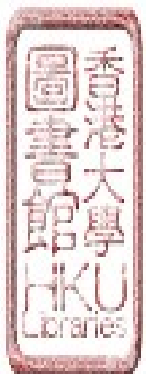
that the good *yan* diverge from the way things truly are for pragmatic or prudential reasons. Given the repeated emphasis on *ming* and *zhi* in the section of text that argues for the existence of ghosts, it would seem that this pragmatic emphasis may also extend to knowledge: if pushed, the Mohists might have to accept that it might be possible for us to know that ghosts exist, even if at the same time they don't *really* exist. The objectivity the Mohists sought was satisfied by justification backed up by a shared notion of pragmatic acceptability rather than one of truth.

4.3. Knowing through language alone²²³

The early Mohist interest in *yan* and objectivity is continued in a strikingly different style in the work of the later Mohists.²²⁴ Their surviving

²²³ The Mohist canons make intriguing references to “foreknowledge (先知)”, which some including Graham (1975, 178) and Harbsmeier (1998, 340-341) equate with *a priori* knowledge. Though Graham identifies it as being a Mohist technical term, the evidence for such an interpretation is relatively weak, the term only appearing in explanations the precise meaning of which is somewhat obscure, and not being the subject of a definition or appearing in any Canon. Crucially however, even assuming that such an interpretation is the correct one, these scant occurrences of the term – though certainly intriguing – tell us relatively little about Mohist views on it beyond the observation that they were interested in and had some awareness of the concept. This chapter will focus on more extensive writings of the later Mohists that on the interpretation offered relate to the possibility of knowledge obtained without reliance upon experience; if Graham's interpretation is right, then such knowledge might be considered to be a kind of “foreknowledge”.

²²⁴ The surviving works ascribed to the later Mohists, also referred to as the “Mohist dialectical chapters”, consist of a pair of Canons each with a corresponding commentary, and two texts titled “lesser pick” and “greater pick”. All of these texts differ in both content and style from virtually all other transmitted texts of the period. While sharing concerns of language and knowledge that we have seen were also held by their contemporaries, the Canons incorporate causation, geometry, metaphysics, and ethics within their scope. An even more striking feature however is that despite their relatively late authorship, the Canons do not follow the *Mozi* or *Xunzi* in

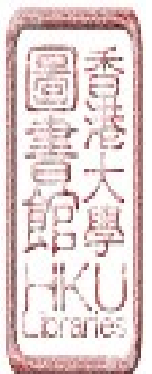


texts generally exhibit a terse but careful and methodical use of language: in stark contrast to the lengthy arguments in favor of particular concrete doctrines with appeal to specific cases of the early Mohists, the later Mohist works primarily consist of concise abstract definitions and reasoned arguments about abstract issues and the semantics of classical Chinese words and phrases. Largely absent from their works are the early Mohist emphasis on the sage kings and heaven, and anything directly resembling the method of three standards; yet there is also much continuity regarding the abstract concepts upon which the later Mohist works focus, with terms such as *fa* and *bian* receiving generalized definitions that are subsequently used in abstract reasoning about *fa* and *bian* in general.

At the same time, the early Mohist project of pursuing – and objectively characterizing – the “good *yan*” appears to be a continuing focus of the later Mohists, who suggest specific methods of argumentation that they believe will assist in the practical process of *bian*. Of these methods, one in particular receives extended treatment in the text, taking up over half of the *Lesser pick* (小取 *xiao qu*) chapter, and offers the clearest attempt in early China at a systematic structural analysis of language. This section of text lists five named groups of example sentences, each set sharing formal structural properties [Appendix].

Various interpretations of this part of the lesser pick are possible. One common suggestion is that the examples given are examples of a proposed

taking the form of an argumentative essay, but rather are presented as a series of terse definitions – perhaps making these texts among the earliest philosophical dictionaries or proto-encyclopedias.



type of formal logical reasoning.²²⁵ Most commentators agree that each of the examples constitutes an instance of the “*mou* (侔 similar, same)” method of reasoning or inference mentioned in the first section of the text, which is defined by the text as “*Mou*: similar *ci* (辭 phrases, sentences) all proceed together”,²²⁶ and many claim that the Mohists intend this to be a method of formal logical inference. *Mou* itself is presented as one of four methods, each of which seem to be methods of argumentation or reasoning of some kind. Before presenting the examples, the text singles out all four methods and also *mou* in particular as requiring caution in their use – *mou* is “only correct within certain bounds” and the methods in general all diverge in various unexpected ways, should not be used constantly, and in particular “*yan* have many methods, various *lei*, and different causes, so one cannot look at them from a single perspective”.²²⁷

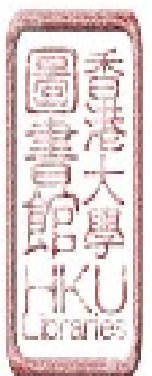
In trying to interpret the examples, the first observation to make about the sentences the Mohists list here is that they endorse all of them – most of them are uncontroversial and clearly true.²²⁸ However the inclusion

²²⁵ E.g. Fung (2012).

²²⁶ *Mozi* 77/45/5. Import should not be attached to the gloss “similar” offered for *bi* (比) here, as the semantic range of “*bi*” is quite wide and it might equally well be read here as “compare” or “parallel”.

²²⁷ *Mozi* 77/45/7-10.

²²⁸ This point is not entirely trivial. In most cases it seems clear from the *Xiaoqu* alone that the Mohists would likely endorse these claims, and many of them clearly ought to be uncontroversial, but some are rather obscure and may require external evidence for us to interpret correctly. For instance, the claim that “the fruit of the *ji* (jujube) is not *ji*” is best read as “the fruit of the *ji* is not *called ji*”. The early *Xiao Erya* dictionary contained in the *Kongcongzi* states that “the fruit of the *ji* is called ‘*zao*’” – thus suggesting that the reason this example makes sense is that while some plants share the same name as their fruit, some such as the *ji* and *zao* do not. An analogous example in English to the pair the Mohists cite might be “The fruit of a peach is a peach; the fruit of an oak is not an oak”. Similarly, though it might at first appear

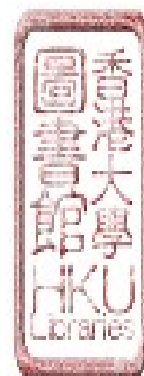


of controversial claims endorsed by the Mohists such as “killing thieves is not killing men” among them suggests that at least part of the point of the analysis is likely to be that the controversial Mohist stances are in fact just as valid as the uncontroversial claims that surround them.

Key to interpreting the examples of the lesser pick is deciding what precisely the *ci* that are supposedly being compared actually are. The answer favored by many commentators is that the *ci* are sentences such as “white horses are horses” and “riding white horses is riding horses”. This interpretation has considerable initial plausibility, since all of the *Xiaoqu* examples can plausibly be split into *ci* of this kind, and furthermore when one does this in each case it seems that there is indeed some kind of formal similarity between these pairs of *ci* – the second *ci* reuses the same words from the first *ci*, adding or substituting other words into it in some way that varies depending upon the example group – there are certainly “similar *ci*” involved.

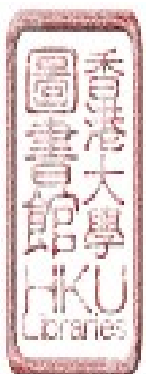
On this type of interpretation, there is a question of which groups are being considered as examples of good arguments. Some claim that the first group alone contains the good, correct, regular instances of *mou*: *mou* is arguing from “x is y” to “Ax is Ay”, and group 1 lists instances where it works,

uncharitable to attribute endorsement of the claim that “killing thieves is not killing men” to the Mohists, as we ourselves may consider it to be false, other early writings make clear that certain debaters endorsed precisely this claim (*Xunzi* 84/22/29-30), and as discussed below, the Mohists do appear to be arguing in favor of it here. The likely reason for endorsing this claim is that “killing thieves” (legitimately punishing thieves) has quite distinct connotations to “killing men” (committing murder) – the latter appearing in the penal principle of “he who kills a man is put to death; he who injures a man is punished” widely quoted in early texts and attributed specifically to the Mohists in the *Lüshi Chunqiu*.

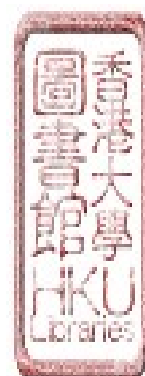


while groups 2 through 5 list instances in which it fails. On this interpretation, a paradigm *mou* argument is to infer from “white horses are horses” that “riding white horses is riding horses”. This initially seems promising, since the cases of group 1 do look like cases of valid inference, and this analysis neatly mirrors early developments in the history of Western logic. Yet beyond group 1 it becomes rather less convincing, since all of the examples are of statements that the Mohists endorse, including what under this interpretation are the conclusions of bad arguments. Looking at group 2, one might propose that the Mohists are denying the truth of the conclusion to indicate that the corresponding arguments fail (i.e. arguing that one *cannot* conclude from “a chariot is wood” that “riding a chariot is riding wood”), yet beyond group 2 this cannot be the case since many of the conclusions are not expressed as negations.

An alternative response is to argue that the Mohists considered each of the groups to consist of valid or correct arguments. This has the considerable benefit of explaining why the groups are all presented equally and at such length, rather than concentrating on the “correct” group 1, which actually takes up only a small fraction of the passage. However this version also quickly becomes highly implausible beyond the first group, as it either forces the Mohists to be arguing for incompatible argument strategies (“x is y therefore Ax is Ay” and “x is y therefore Ax is *not* Ay”) without their explaining how one is supposed to decide which of them to use in a particular case, or in order to avoid this attributes the use of historically implausible logical frameworks to the Mohists.



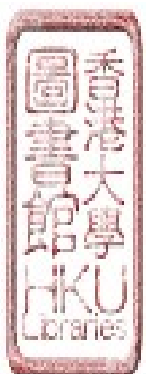
The serious problem with both variants of this interpretation is that they do a poor job of explaining the “all proceed together 俱行 *ju xing*” part of the *mou* definition. For the first group, the suggestion that things like “white horses are horses” and “riding white horses is riding horses” proceed together seems quite plausible in itself when viewed in isolation. But beyond the first group it seems less clear what the point is supposed to be: why should things like “a chariot is wood” proceed together with “riding a chariot is *not* riding wood” as opposed to “riding a chariot *is* riding wood”, as the examples of group 1 might lead us to expect? Even supposing that there is some sense in which these do proceed together, a more serious worry is that some of the Mohist examples of *ci* seem to be in direct conflict with the first group: if *mou* is telling us that we compare *ci* and they go together, and the *ci* are the sentences given by this interpretation, then why should I not compare the two *ci* “caring for a slave is caring for a person” and “caring for a thief is caring for a person” (an example from group 1 and the negation of a group 2 example), and decide that these two also proceed together? In other words, if *mou* is the relation between *ci* of this kind, it would seem to be of very little utility, since *mou* itself does not tell us what to compare any particular candidate *ci* with. For instance, group 2 includes the two somewhat controversial Mohist *ci* “killing thieves is not killing people” and “not loving thieves is not not-loving people”, implicitly pairing both of these with the *ci* “thieves are people”. But if each of these is an instance of *mou*, why can I not equally apply *mou* to compare the negation of the two former *ci* with the very same “thieves are people”, directly paralleling the examples given in group 1 to give the contradictory results “killing thieves is killing people” and “loving



thieves is loving people”? It’s not obvious that *mou* on this interpretation would give us any reason to favor any of the controversial Mohist *ci* included. Either the “proceeding together” isn’t related to formal structure, in which case it’s not clear what function *mou* is performing or what purpose the groups of examples serve, or it is related to formal structure, but the “proceeding together” can fail so radically that we can’t tell from the structure what is supposed to proceed together with what.

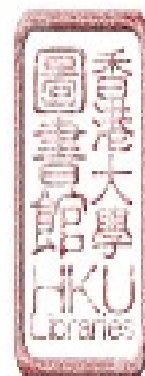
Robins (2010, 271) raises and dismisses an alternative interpretation, that the *ci* are phrases such as "白馬" and "馬". This interpretation would seem not to solve the main problems with the more common interpretation, and as Robins argues, whatever particular linguistic units it is that are being compared during the application of *mou* are supposed to be *ci* – therefore they are unlikely to be *ming* such as “horse” and “white horse”, particularly given that “horse” is given elsewhere by the later Mohists as a paradigm example of a *ming*. Robins argues that as a result there are only two candidates for pairs of *ci*: the standard interpretation where *ci* are sentences, and an alternative interpretation on which the *ci* of a pair (interpreting each pair as an argument) are instead “the verbal predicates that occur nominalised in its conclusion”.²²⁹ On this interpretation, example *ci* would be “rides horses” and “rides white horses”. According to Robins, what one does when applying *mou* is “comparing the extensions of the names they include (here the direct objects), and using that comparison to help fix the kinds associated with the *ci*”. So the idea is that because the extension of the name “white horses” is included in the extension of the name “horses”, we can be

²²⁹ Robins (2010, 272).



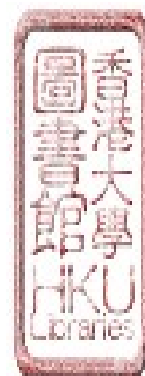
sure that anything to which “rides white horses” applies must also be such that “rides horses” applies to it.

This interpretation appears to suggest that the “proceeding together” of *mou* is not directly related to formal linguistic structure, since what is at issue is not the names themselves but their extensions – which raises the question of why, if this is so, does every one of the Mohist examples pointedly use precisely the same names in parallel structures in each pair of examples. But leaving this aside, it is still difficult to see how *mou* really helps us decide upon the correct conclusion on this interpretation. Comparing again just the first and second groups, both begin with the same form of premise, e.g. “*huo* is a man” or “a thief is a man”, both of which tell us similar things about the relations of the extensions of their names (the extension of “man” includes *huo*; the extension of “man” includes thieves), yet somehow these seemingly parallel premises are supposed to provide *different* guidance regarding the conclusions (if any) to be drawn. It’s difficult to point to textual evidence suggesting that the Mohists have any explanation for why this should be the case; but without explaining why the similar cases are treated differently, this interpretation again ends up with *mou* giving precious little guidance. It suggests that we try to determine whether or not the extension of “riding white horses” is contained within the extension of “riding horses”, given that the extension of “horses” contains the extension of “white horses” – but crucially, with the caveat that the latter on its own will not settle the former, and so it’s not clear what if any help *mou* would be to us in evaluating whether or not cases of riding white horses are or are not cases of riding horses.



In what follows I will attempt to argue that there is least one more possible type of interpretation that addresses some of these concerns. First of all, it may be helpful to emphasize the likelihood that the text does not consider the process of “proceeding together” to be one of formal *inference*, since as Robins points out, at least part of the point of the text as a whole seems to be that whatever *mou* is, it is to some degree fallible. Looking at the set of examples as a whole – particularly beyond the first group – it seems clear that what are being presented are not so much instances of valid inference as sets of structurally parallel correct language use – it is surely no coincidence that *all* of the examples appear to be statements endorsed by the Mohists: no incorrect *yan* are included in any of the groups. Neither are any *yan* put forward and then explicitly negated in any of the various ways the Mohists routinely use elsewhere such as “...，非也” or “...，不可”. On this reading, the text appears to be interested in the formal properties of the good *yan* – and by extension perhaps, the possibility of generating further good *yan* from existing good *yan* alone, or justifying candidate *yan* by means of their structural similarity to other (known good) *yan*. In other words, what the text is offering is an analysis of the possibility of a strictly formal *fa* for good *yan*.

Secondly, the importance of formal parallel structure in classical Chinese writing and its close relation to analogical reasoning should not be underestimated here. Texts from the period very frequently contained sequences in which an identical arrangement of words was repeated several times varying only some key terms while leaving the remainder unaltered to form a set of formally parallel statements endorsed by the writer. Though it



was not always used to present an argument as such, this rhetorical style could take on the character of an argument, particularly when it began with intuitively plausible cases and built up to less obvious ones. To give an example from the *Zhuangzi*:

荃者所以在魚，得魚而忘荃；

蹄者所以在兔，得兔而忘蹄；

言者所以在意，得意而忘言。

The use of fishing-stakes is in the fish;

get the fish and one can forget the stake.

The use of traps is in the rabbit;

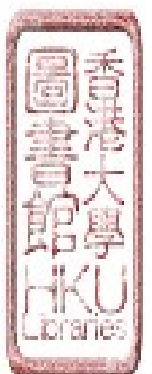
get the rabbit and one can forget the trap.

The use of words is in the point;

get the point and one can forget the words.²³⁰

Though in such cases the plausibility of the analogical argument (if what is being offered is an argument) being made certainly rests in part upon the meanings of the words and the truth of the implicit claim that the terms replaced in each line share some common relation – fishing-stakes are to getting fish as traps are to getting rabbits and as words are to getting the point – it is strengthened immensely in terms of rhetorical force due to the similarity in linguistic structure. In some cases, such as when Gongsunlong argues that one cannot consistently deny that there is a distinction between “white horses” and “horses” when one accepts that there is a distinction between “Chu-people” and “people”, it is made explicit that such parallels do form an argument, in the sense that one must either accept or deny all of the

²³⁰ *Zhuangzi* 75/26/48-14.



similar statements, for it would be inconsistent to endorse one and not the others:²³¹

夫是仲尼異楚人於所謂人，

而非龍異白馬於所謂馬，悖。

To *shi* Confucius differentiating Chu-people from people,

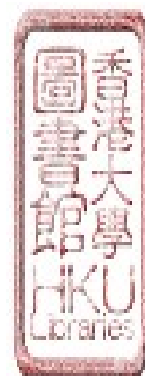
Yet *fei* Long differentiating white-horses from horses, is absurd.²³²

With this in mind, the fact that the Mohists begin by offering numerous examples of the relations between uncontroversial *yan* such as claims about horses and white horses that would be easily accepted by the typical speaker of the language, together with our desire to read the text as a treatise on formal logic risks obscuring the real point of their analysis and its relation to argumentation. It is the later examples – the ones that “go wrong” according to those who argue that *mou* is an inference from claims about white horses and horses to those about riding them – in which the text makes the import of its analysis quite explicit by actually arguing for something.²³³ Having presented the entirely uncontroversial statements that begin group 2

²³¹ Note in this example how the plausibility of the argument is at least partially grounded in similarity of linguistic structure. Gongsunlong’s argument would be less persuasive were it not for the fact that in classical Chinese “Chu-people” (i.e. people of the state of Chu) shares identical surface grammar to “white horses”. Although this is a case of analogical reasoning, the implicit claim that Chu people are to people as white horses are to horses derives part of its intuitive plausibility from the parallel structure: we might be less inclined to think that people *of* Chu are to people as white horses are to horses, for instance.

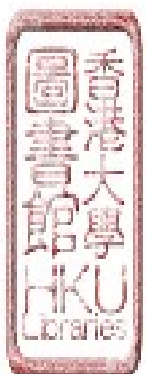
²³² *Gongsunlongzi* 1.1/1/17-18. This example can be more simply stated as the pair “楚人非人” and “白馬非馬” – which very closely parallel the form of the *xiao qu* examples – though only the latter of these two actually appears in the text.

²³³ Robins (2010, 269) notes this explicit argument, but rejects the possibility of it being an instance of *mou* because he does not see it as grounded in linguistic parallelism.



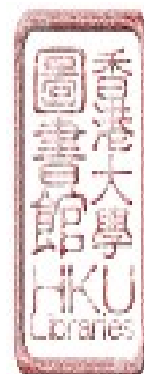
such as “a chariot is wood; riding a chariot is not riding wood”, the text tells us: “Everyone in the world takes these as *shi* (是 so, correct). If these are so, then though thieves are men, caring for thieves is not caring for men; not caring for thieves is not not-caring for men; killing thieves is not killing men – there is nothing difficult in it! This and those are of the same *lei*; the world have those and don’t oppose themselves, [yet] we Mohists have this and they oppose us. There can be no other reason than that they are stopped up within and closed without; their heart-minds are all filled in!”²³⁴ This clearly does appear to be intended as an argument, and one that the text itself characterizes as being an argument based on similarity – belonging to the same *lei*. Note that it cannot plausibly be read as claiming that “thieves are men” and “killing thieves is not killing men” are of the same kind, since whether or not these two statements *are* of the same kind in the relevant sense is precisely what is at issue, and so simply stating that they are will not settle anything or persuade anyone of the conclusion – the text can only be read as presenting an argument here if we read it as using the uncontroversial pairs as evidence for the controversial ones. The wording of the text seems to strongly support this interpretation; as Robins notes there is no “故 (*gu*, therefore)” or other connective between any of the claims such as “white horses are horses” and “riding white horses is riding horses” to suggest that we ought to read them as arguments or inferences, whereas by contrast on this interpretation the text quite reasonably uses the phrasing “if this is so, then... (若若是，則...)” to introduce its conclusions.

²³⁴ *Mozi* 78/45/16-18.



If this is right, then it seems that the *ci* in question – or at least the scope of what is “proceeding together” – may actually be larger units than those considered so far. The *similarity* that the text alludes to in its use of *lei* is surely not simply that between “thieves are men” and “caring for thieves is not caring for men”; rather it is between units composed of pairs of claims: the two-part claim “a chariot is wood; riding a chariot is not riding wood” is similar to the two-part claim “thieves are men; caring for thieves is not caring for men” – else why precede the Mohist claim with a list uncontroversial ones and then point out that “our claim is of the same kind”?²³⁵ The Mohists want us to take the uncontroversial examples listed before the controversial claims about thieves as *prima facie* evidence that the controversial Mohist claims are also correct – or at the very least, cannot be claimed to be wrong purely by virtue of their structure and its dissimilarity to the almost trivial and otherwise not especially interesting cases of group 1. On this interpretation *mou* is an argument based upon structural similarity, but it is not intended to guarantee the correctness of its conclusion. Rather, as Robins suggests, it is

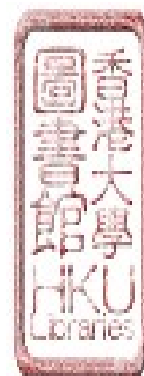
²³⁵ These pairs of claims could plausibly be considered either pairs of *ci* or a single *ci*. It is not implausible that the Mohists would have considered two such *ci* strung together to constitute a single larger *ci* in the same way that two simple *ming* could be composed to form a single larger *ming*. The examples the Mohists present feature two layers of similarity: the similarity between “a white horse is a horse” and “riding a white horse is riding a horse”, and the similarity between this pair strung together and the other parallel pairs. It seems likely that the “pairs” in fact correspond to one side in a debate simultaneously holding two claims – in other words, the reason the claims are being considered as pairs is not that they are expected to constitute arguments, but rather that what is being evaluated is whether or not it is possible to consistently hold pairs of statements such as “thieves are men” and “killing thieves is not killing men” that at first sight might appear to be contradictory. Of course, once consistency can be determined, it would typically be used to argue that the position of one’s own side is consistent or that that of one’s opponent is inconsistent.



most effective when used *against* someone who tries to make just such a structural argument, for if their only justification for rejecting a Mohist claim is similarity of structure between its negation and other structurally similar correct claims, pointing out that there are also uncontroversially correct claims that *agree* with the Mohist claim will be a knock-down refutation of their attack.

This interpretation has the considerable advantages that it can plausibly account for the appearance of all of the groups, explaining why the Mohists bothered to group things the way they did rather than simply grouping things into groups such as “good inference” and “bad inference”, why they didn’t attempt to diagnose why the “bad inferences” failed, and why they should include statements endorsed by themselves and opposed by their critics as the conclusions of supposedly “bad inferences”. If a *ci* is parallel to one of the groups – all of which are valid and of equal import, for they are all sets of good *yan* – then it cannot be dismissed on the basis of its being parallel to anything that is *not* a good *yan*,²³⁶ nor on the basis that it is

²³⁶ For instance, suppose I am a Mohist and I endorse a new controversial claim – which you deny – that “食貓，非貓也；好食貓，好貓也。(Eating cats is not cats; liking eating cats is liking cats.)” You cannot refute me by saying that that is just like making the clearly incorrect but structurally parallel claim (which neither of us accept) that “殺人，非人也；好殺人，好人也。(Killing people is not people; liking killing people is liking people.)” If you tried to do so, you would commit yourself to accepting that if A is parallel to B and B is false then A is also false; but then since you accept this principle, I can give you an uncontroversial example of correct language use from group 3 that your principle requires you to deny, but which you will not be willing to deny since it is clearly correct. I may well choose to recite the whole list of group 3 examples for rhetorical effect. Unless you want to deny all of them, you will have to abandon your original argument.

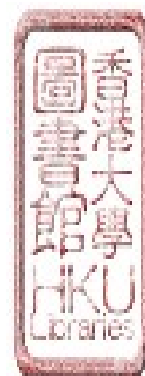


not parallel to something seemingly similar that *is* a good *yan*.²³⁷ So although the analysis does lead to some negative conclusions about the regular behavior of language, each group still serves a constructive purpose and is not merely a record for posterity of a failed Mohist attempt to construct a system of formal logic.²³⁸

Given the emphasis on *lei* – and the fact that the text presents the examples in groups which on this interpretation are precisely exemplary members of these *lei* – the use of *mou* is not so much an argument from one *ci*

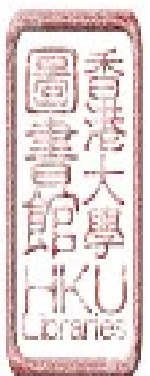
²³⁷ I claim that “堅石，石也；得堅石，得石也。(A hard stone is a stone; getting a hard stone is getting a stone).” You cannot refute me by claiming that I must be contradicting myself since the claim “堅石，石也；得堅石，非得石也。(A hard stone is a stone; getting a hard stone is *not* getting a stone).” is parallel to instances of group 2 such as “盜人，人也；多盜，非多人也。(A thief is a man; Many thieves is not many men.)” You cannot do this because there are examples in group 1 that are parallel to my claim and are correct, so the existence of correct examples parallel to your negated version of my claim is not going to be a persuasive argument for similar reasons to the previous case.

²³⁸ Fraser (2013, footnote 29) suggests and rejects an alternative interpretation of *mou* that has some similarities to the interpretation offered here. Fraser’s interpretation takes pairs of claims (such as “white horses are horses; riding white horses is riding horses”) as the basis for an argument from one claim to another (e.g. from “black horses are horses” to “riding black horses is riding horses”). This is distinct from the interpretation I offer here, since my interpretation does not claim that there is any argument involved from premises such as “black horses are horses”; rather it is the pairs such as “white horses are horses; riding white horses is riding horses” and “black horses are horses; riding black horses is riding horses” that are being compared with one another. The key reason Fraser offers for rejecting his proposal is that on this interpretation *mou* does little argumentative work, because the parallel structure of the claims involved means that any opponent who already accepted the claim that “riding white horses is riding horses” would be unlikely to deny that “riding black horses is riding horses”. Similar problems to those discussed above also apply to this and other interpretations that treat individual claims such as “black horses are horses” as premises in an argument; in particular they face the following dilemma: they either need to say that structurally identical premises can be used in arguments that draw mutually incompatible conclusions, or they need to say that most of the time *mou* actually fails, and the cases in which it succeeds are the trivial ones in which it does very little work.



directly to another, so much as the justification of one *ci* on the basis that other *ci* that are known to be correct share its structural form. *Mou* is based on formal comparison and can be considered an argument in that it provides some kind of evidence for its conclusion, but as the Mohists emphasize it nonetheless does not guarantee that its conclusion is necessarily correct. Yet despite this seemingly negative conclusion, it should by no means be considered a failure, for it provides the Mohists with an extremely powerful tool for refuting their opponents in debate, which explains why it was listed along with the other argumentation methods of the *Xiaoqu*. If used to make a positive argument rather than simply refute an opponent's criticism of a Mohist *yan*, it would need to be backed up with other methods to avoid the opponent simply turning the Mohist's method back against him and pointing out that the *rejection* of the Mohist's *yan* itself belonged to another of the groups – hence the warning about using multiple methods.

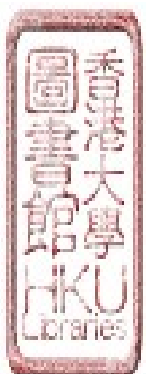
On this interpretation, though *mou* would have been a useful argumentation method to the Mohists, it also amounts to a refutation of the notion that natural language behaves in accordance with the types of simple formal rules that the Mohists examined – a conclusion that seems both entirely available to the Mohists on the evidence presented in the text, as well as being unquestionably true: natural languages, whether ancient Chinese or modern English, simply do not in general agree with simple formal abstractions of them such as the types of phrase-matching the Mohists considered. Given the Mohist's concern with practical issues of distinguishing *shi* from *fei* rather than a focus on formal properties of abstract theoretical languages, it is not at all surprising that they should reach this conclusion.



Though of immense philosophical interest, the semantics assigned by typical systems of formal logic to the logical connectives “if”, “not”, “or” and so on do not in general correspond to the semantics of these terms in natural languages, in some cases for precisely the kinds of reasons that the Mohist’s choice of examples hint at, and formal logical systems, if their terms and sentences are interpreted with natural language semantics, do indeed fail to guarantee the truth of their conclusions given that of their premises: as the Mohists point out, these methods alone do not give us a reliable way of generating new good *yan* from old.²³⁹

The Mohist response to this negative conclusion is to emphasize that we should be more holistic in our assessment of what constitutes evidence for good *yan*: formal linguistic properties alone are insufficient, so we should look at the content of the *yan* themselves – aspects of whatever it is that the *yan* are about – to determine whether or not they are good. At the same time, the later Mohists retain a central place for language in the quest for knowledge, as for them *bian* is an activity defined in explicitly linguistic terms (specifically, a matter of someone calling something “X” disputing with someone else calling it “not X”), as well as the means by which we distinguish what is *shi* from what is *fei* and similar from dissimilar.

²³⁹ In English, examples include counterfactual sentences, contextual differences and ambiguities between inclusive and exclusive or, idiomatic usage, intensional contexts, and many other “irregular” phenomena of the language. More complex formal systems that take some of these elements into account and so provide closer approximations to natural language semantics are an active field of research in linguistics and the philosophy of language – but these in general rely upon vastly more complex analytical methods than those plausibly available to the Mohists, and in any case still fail to completely agree with observed natural language semantics.



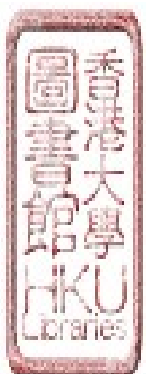
Nonetheless, the irregularities of language carefully documented by the later Mohists would seem to provide valuable ammunition to those who did not agree with the more positive overall Mohist view of the role of language. Though on the one hand the Mohist attempts at formal analysis might appear to point the way towards methods of avoiding logical errors in disputation by identifying the irregularities of language and abstracting from the regular cases formal logical principles that might allow the identification and avoidance of such errors, the fact that the Mohists themselves did not appear to think this was practical would play straight into the hands of those who believed that language in general and *bian* in particular were nothing more than intellectual games with little real purpose or value.

4.4. Inadequacy of language

Though the Mohists and Xunzi enthusiastically endorsed distinction-drawing and saw it as central to understanding and obtaining knowledge, in early China in general distinction-drawing became closely associated with clever, cunning, and in some cases intentionally disingenuous, misleading, and sophistic uses of language. In texts as early as the *Analects* there are references to how “clever words and an ingratiating appearance are seldom associated with benevolence”,²⁴⁰ and Mengzi is careful to deny that he enjoys debating, claiming instead that he is reluctantly forced into participating in it to by the need to repel the perverse sayings of the Mohists and Yangists.²⁴¹ For many thinkers – even those who in fact appear to engage in *bian*

²⁴⁰ *Analects* 1.3/1/9 and 17.17/49/21.

²⁴¹ *Mengzi* 6.9/34/13-6.9/35/10.

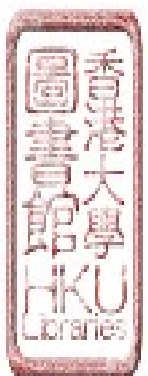


themselves – in an ideally functioning society there would presumably be no need for it; language was to be valued to a degree for its many practical uses, but certainly not in and of itself, and the knowledge necessary for people to follow the *dao* would ideally be obtained through non-linguistic means. Language was of some value when it cohered appropriately with the correct *dao*, because of its utility in leading people to follow such a *dao*; but words would be unnecessary were society to have already come to follow the appropriate *dao*. As the *Zhuangzi* suggests, just as the point of a rabbit trap is getting the rabbit, so the point of words is getting the intention or significance behind them; once we have this, we have no need for the actual words themselves.

Thinkers who later came to be classified as belonging to the “school of names” such as Gongsunlong, who is associated with the claim that “white horses are not horses” and a text that argues in favor of this conclusion, and Hui Shi, who appears as a character in the *Zhuangzi*, became associated with a form of distinction-drawing and debating that epitomized what their critics saw as the pitfalls of taking language too seriously. They would argue that “fire is not hot”, “the eye does not see”, “the set-square is not square”, “the compass cannot be round”, as well as, famously, that “white horse is not horse”.²⁴² Some today interpret their claims as carefully reasoned philosophical stances, while others see them as examples of elaborate sophistry intended for performance in court for the amusement of the ruler.²⁴³ Among their contemporaries, it seems that many shared the view

²⁴² *Zhuangzi* 93/33/75-76 and Gongsunlongzi.

²⁴³ E.g. Fung (2007) and Harbsmeier (1989).

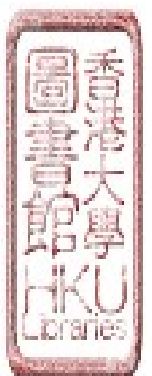


recorded in the *Zhuangzi* that “though they could defeat others with their words, they could not persuade them in their hearts”²⁴⁴ – thus providing seemingly clear cases where language and distinction-drawing, at least in the perception of those outside such debating circles, not only failed to aid in the quest for knowledge, but on the contrary seemed to be leading away from it, and might be of little if any relevance to practical matters of *shi* and *fei*.

Sadly little remains of the details of many of the arguments of these debaters, and the original intent of what does remain is in many cases far from clear. Many of their theses are known today only because they were alluded to by those who did not espouse them or actively opposed them, often only citing them for the purpose of denouncing or ridiculing them, and thus are now only known without the contextual information that might have helped us to better understand them. From what is said about these debaters it appears likely that an important feature of some of their arguments would be an appeal to the constancy of language, and probably the constancy of *ming* in particular – the *Xunzi* for instance accusing them in advancing their improbable claims of using *ming* to cause disorder to *ming* and *shi*.²⁴⁵ At the same time, however, this criticism hints at what was likely a point of agreement between these debaters, *Xunzi*, and the Mohists: there do exist standards for *ming*, the only issue is what precisely these standards actually are and how to correctly apply them. The rival debaters either used the wrong standards or misapplied the correct ones, thus claiming incorrect conclusions, but their assumption of the existence of standards was not in

²⁴⁴ *Zhuangzi* 94/33/79-80.

²⁴⁵ *Xunzi* 84/22/29-33.

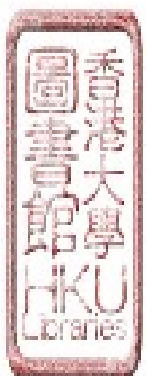


itself mistaken. Certainly the existence of such unlikely theses that were argued for in this way was recognized as a threat, as evidenced by the careful responses to many of them given by the later Mohists in particular. Generally such responses involved analyzing and arguing for the “correct” standards, and explaining how the correct standards led to the correct conclusion.²⁴⁶

However a different class of improbable-sounding sayings posed a more fundamental threat to the view that *ming* behaved in a regular manner, particularly when placed in the hands of those opposed to the positive view of the role of language in ordering society. These claims, rather than being apparently false claims that were backed up by sophisticated arguments, were apparently self-contradictory or paradoxical claims that were nonetheless argued to be correct. Texts such as the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* in particular offer numerous examples of unconventional, unexpected, or seemingly irregular language use that would appear to challenge the notion that *any* fixed standards tie *ming* and *shi* together in regular ways. Like some of the theses argued for by the school of names, these statements run counter to everyday experience and common sense. But unlike many other unlikely sounding claims, many of these statements appear, if taken at face value, to be paradoxical or self-contradictory on a purely linguistic level. Such statements included claims such as “great benevolence is not benevolent”, “the greatest happiness is without happiness”,²⁴⁷ as well as praise for

²⁴⁶ The *Xunzi* dismisses a list of them (in which it includes the Mohist claim that “killing thieves is not killing men”) as misuse of *ming* and *shi* that lead to disordering of *ming* and *shi* (84/22/29-33); the later Mohists address a number of the same paradoxical statements attested elsewhere in their Canons.

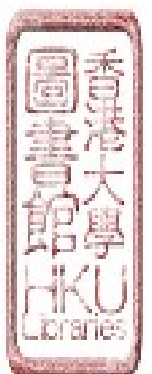
²⁴⁷ *Zhuangzi* 46/18/11.



seemingly self-contradictory ideas such as “speechless disputation”, “the *dao* that does not *dao*”, “the shapeless shape” and “the knowledge of not knowing”.²⁴⁸ If they are to be taken seriously, these pose a significant problem for those committed to *ming* having constant standards, for if it should be allowed that some of these paradoxical claims and phrases are in fact correct and contentful, this would appear to undermine the notion that any fixed standards could possibly lie behind the *ming* they are composed of. If it should turn out that “the greatest happiness” is not of the same *lei* as “happiness” for instance, this would undermine the idea that there could exist any single *lei* associated with the *ming* “happiness”.

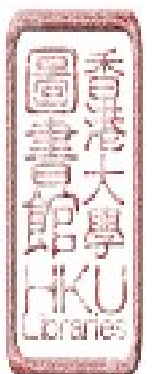
As Reu (2006, 289) notes, these paradoxes typically play upon multiple interpretations of various *ming*: if a single *ming* can be given two distinct interpretations, then a seemingly paradoxical statement that at first sight might appear contradictory can instead be read not as a contradiction but as a statement of fact. For instance, the context given in the *Zhuangzi* for the claim that “the greatest happiness is without happiness” is a contrast between happiness as generally understood by ordinary people, and what the writer himself considers to be happiness – namely “non-doing (無為 *wu-wei*)”; the two are incompatible since one requires doing, the other non-doing. Similar examples also occur in other texts such as the *Lüshi Chunqiu*, which contrasts the petty man’s conscious pursuit of profit – which, in the end, is unprofitable – with the *junzi*’s pursuit of nothing but his conduct and what is right – which conversely results in profit – thus setting up the paradox of “the profit of non-profit (不利之利)”.

²⁴⁸ *Zhuangzi* 5/2/61 and 60/22/61, *Daodejing* 14.



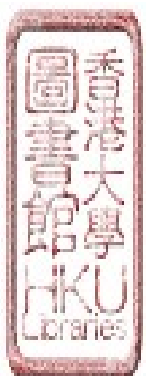
The problem this raises for the positive view of language and its assumption of the constancy of *ming* is made most explicitly in the *Zhuangzi*. The text repeatedly sets out to simultaneously set up competing interpretations that would seem to imply contradictory stances as to whether something was *shi* or *fei* with respect to some particular *ming*. It then asks the reader to decide whether the case in question is or is not an instance of the *ming*. For instance: “Speech is not blowing in wind. A person speaks and has speech, but what he speaks is something indeterminate – ultimately was there speech? Or was there not speech? He thinks that his speech is different from the chirpings of fledglings, but is there a distinction between them? Or is there not a distinction between them?”²⁴⁹ The text appears to want us to accept that at the same time there may be one sense in which we should give a positive answer and yet another in which we give a negative answer to the very same question – thus there may not be a fact of the matter about which answer is ultimately the correct one: *both* may be correct, subject to two subtly different interpretations of a key term. The initial setup, “a speaker has speech” seems trivially true, but it implicitly commits us to the opposite interpretation of “speech” to the one the passage suggests when it says that “speech is not blowing in the wind”. On one interpretation, “speech” is the sound produced by a person speaking – thus there is speech. On the other, “speech” is sound produced by a person that has meaningful content – thus there is no speech. The text intentionally sets up both interpretations, but pointedly does not tell us which we should endorse.

²⁴⁹ *Zhuangzi* 4/2/23-25.



Such a view would seem to suggest that in the case of disagreements over a claim, it may turn out – contrary to the explicitly stated Mohist view of *bian* – that in fact it is not the case that one side is right and the other simply wrong: both may be right. Rather than simply focusing on what is wrong with a claim such as “killing thieves is not killing men”, or trying to decide once and for all whether, ultimately, killing thieves is or is not killing men, these texts suggest that the whole project of attempting to decide this question may itself be flawed – there may be one sense in which killing thieves *is* killing men, and another sense in which it is not.

Though the Mohist-Xunzian view could be quite compatible with *ming* having multiple distinct uses with differing semantics – many of the definitions given in the first half of the Mohist canon set out to distinguish such different uses of particular *ming* – the problem posed by the paradoxes is that they suggest that the flexibility of language extends well beyond the neat sets of distinct usages of terms that the Mohists lay out. In particular, by setting up a *new* interpretation – perhaps one that has never before been used – a paradox may offer something that cannot be accounted for by any predefined set of interpretations. Though the Mohists offered accounts of different uses of individual *ming* that might need to be distinguished, such as when they distinguish between the *ming* “使 *shi* (make do, cause)” as in some cases being an order to someone to do something, while in others referring to causation, unlike some of the debater’s arguments, which might have hinged upon *ming* with multiple distinct established usages, the semantic paradoxes generally made use of more subtle distinctions that would not be so easily dismissed as distinct uses or senses of a word – they played upon distinct

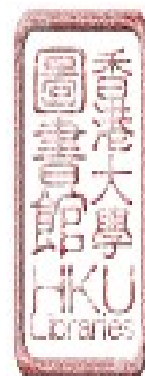


interpretations of the same use or sense of a particular word, or incompatible sets of assumptions about the word in question.

Moreover, it is far from obvious that the Mohists, even though they distinguished between various uses of certain *ming* in their definitions, actually attempted to make use of this fact to disambiguate individual *ming* as they occurred in particular sentences or use this fact to explain differing sentence semantics. The *Xiaoqu* analysis of *mou* conspicuously failed to do this, though it would have been a natural place to apply such a method – for instance to argue that the semantics of “killing” in “killing thieves” (legitimately putting them to death) differed from the “killing” of “killing men” (committing murder), or that the attribution of “wood” to “carriages” as a predicate (meaning “wooden”) might have different semantics to the same word when used as the direct object of “ride” (meaning “wood” or “tree”). The subtlety of the related but distinct interpretations applied to a single *ming* within a paradox would have been difficult for the Mohists to account for without using more sophisticated methods than those evidenced in their surviving works.

4.5. Conclusion

Given that knowledge was generally conceived of as systematically correct action, *linguistic* knowledge consisted in word use corresponding to such action, and thus to “correct” word use – correct in the sense that it cohered with and promoted the correct *dao*. Words were argued to be able to serve in the key function of transmitting intentions and thus guiding action due to the existence of objective standards for their correct use. Precisely

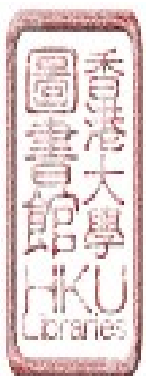


what these standards were was up for debate, mirroring the dispute over the content of the correct *dao* that society should be led to follow.

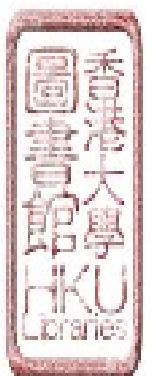
This positive view of language relied upon the existence of fixed, objective standards for word use. If there were no such standards, language in general would be unable to fulfill its key function of guiding the actions of others such that they would follow the *dao*, and call into question the whole practice of distinction drawing and the suggestion that knowledge could be adequately characterized linguistically.

Yet at the same time, even those who were committed to this model of language found that language does not always function as regularly as one might at first think. Although regular-seeming patterns could be identified in cases of correct language use, it turned out that there were often exceptions, and thus that a commitment to the constancy of linguistic forms could lead to sophistic arguments supporting seemingly impossible conclusions. Groups such as the later Mohists took this as implying that, though the standards for *ming* are constant, the precise way *ming* combine together to form meaningful phrases does not always follow the same pattern, and so linguistic parallelism alone – although a powerful rhetorical technique – is not strong enough evidence with which to justify a claim: justification always requires recourse to the facts of the matter in question.

Daoists drew a different conclusion, seeing all language as conventional, and all convention as being to some degree malleable. They delighted in raising linguistic paradoxes that challenged the supposed constancy not just of the particular interpretations of words favored by their opponents, but the very notion that words in fact have *any* constant



interpretation. Rather than emulating their opponents in arguing that one particular interpretation was correct and that all competing interpretations were therefore incorrect, one strategy evidenced in the *Zhuangzi* in particular was to suggest that multiple competing and seemingly incompatible interpretations each may be justified – thus suggesting that neither can be considered “correct” if this is to be taken as implying the exclusion of all other possibilities. This suggestion directly undermined the conception of *bian* as debate over whether something is or is not correctly described by a particular *ming*. This critique of the role language plays in knowledge and justification ties in closely with a more radical Daoist critique of the possibility of knowledge generally when conceived of as reliable, correct distinguishing of *shi-fei*, as shall be discussed in the next chapter.



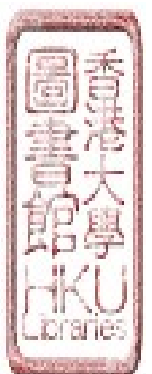
5. Failing to know²⁵⁰

The previous chapter showed how skeptical worries were raised about the adequacy of language as a means of expressing or transmitting knowledge or justification. This chapter will examine a related but more wide-ranging challenge to the positive conception of knowledge as a whole. It will also outline a novel interpretation of parts of the *Zhuangzi* – a text that many commentators agree argues for some form of skepticism about knowledge – that attempts to explain the relation between two importantly different strands of thought in the text. Finally, it will attempt to show that the skepticism the text suggests, though substantive in nature, need not have entirely negative consequences, and in particular as a result need not commit one to radical relativism or skepticism regarding all factual and ethical questions.

5.1. Knowledge and error

The existence of illusions and dreams have played an important role in motivating skepticism about knowledge in the Western philosophical tradition, from the Meditations of Descartes through to the present day. If our knowledge of the world derives from our perception of it, and yet our perception is merely a fallible reflection of how the external world actually *is*, then there emerges the possibility that our perception may be inaccurate not

²⁵⁰ A paper based largely upon the contents of this chapter has been accepted for publication as Sturgeon (2015).



merely occasionally, such as when we dream or see a seemingly bent spoon in a glass of water, but perhaps all the time.

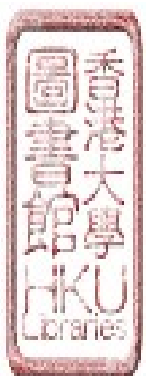
Early Chinese thinkers were also concerned with misperception and dreams. A famous passage in the *Zhuangzi* tells us that Zhuangzi dreamed that he was a butterfly, then awoke to find himself to be Zhuangzi; he then did not know whether he was Zhuangzi dreaming he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuangzi.²⁵¹ But somewhat surprisingly the aim of the passage does not seem to be a direct motivation of skepticism about knowledge, even though the *Zhuangzi* as a whole seems to be committed to a form of epistemic skepticism. Instead, the passage ends by explicitly telling us that the point is that “things change”.

In a similar manner, the *Xunzi* considers the misleading effects of perspective on our perception, reasoning and action. We can be blinkered by our likes or dislikes or by considering only start or end, near or far, wide or narrow, or past or present. Any of these perspectives has the ability to blinker us into perceiving and acting towards things in an inaccurate or inappropriate manner. But here too the conclusion that the text draws is not that we are thereby unable to perceive the world correctly, or are at risk of always being mistaken, but rather that we can find ways of avoiding the blinkering so that we do not end up being biased by it.

Chris Fraser has argued that a key reason that Chinese thinkers did not see arguments from illusion and dreams as motivating skepticism lies in their lack of a representational theory of mind.²⁵² Since the early Chinese

²⁵¹ *Zhuangzi* 7/2/94-7/2/96.

²⁵² Fraser (2011, 128-129).



understood knowledge primarily in terms of reliable action, and perception of the world was not thought of as mediated through any representational structure, failure to know was not understood as a failure to correctly represent how things are in the world on the basis of how they appear, but instead as a failure of ability or competency. Lack of competency does not motivate skepticism in the same way incorrectness of representation does, because incompetent performances are still performances, and thus still connect with the world.

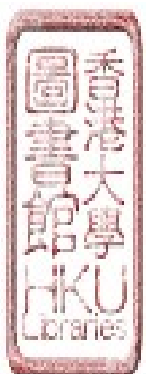
Instead, Chinese skeptical worries centered around key elements and assumptions of the mainstream, Chinese account of knowledge: assumptions such as the existence of objectively correct standards for words and action, and the possibility of universal, objective *shi-fei* in general. The remainder of this chapter will examine how the *Zhuangzi* in particular attempts to challenge these assumptions, and what the possible consequences of this are for *dao*.

5.2. Skepticism and the possibility of knowledge

Although the text of the *Zhuangzi* seems to present many *prima facie* skeptical arguments, there has been much debate as to the nature of its skeptical stance, and even whether or not its stance is substantively skeptical at all.²⁵³ Chad Hansen and Chris Fraser have argued that the *Zhuangzi* does take a substantively skeptical position, but that this position is more nuanced than simply holding skepticism about the possibility of all knowledge.²⁵⁴

²⁵³ E.g. Wong 2005, Ivanhoe 1993.

²⁵⁴ Hansen 2003, Fraser 2009.

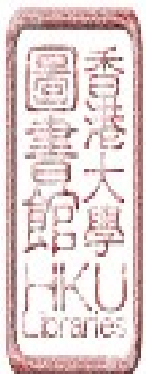


Here I will attempt to build upon Chris Fraser's proposal that the *Zhuangzi* is skeptical about our ability to know a privileged class of ultimately correct ways of drawing distinctions (果是 *guo shi* and 果非 *guo fei*), but does not question our ability to know how to distinguish things in an ordinary, provisional and commonsense sense. I will attempt to engage with both sides of the debate, by firstly accepting that the *Zhuangzi* takes a substantive skeptical stance, but also arguing that in doing so the text also provides a positive account of how to improve our epistemic position – an account which might be suggestive of one motivating factor of the Zhuangist ethical stance.²⁵⁵ My argument will focus on Zhuangist attitudes to different types of knowledge, specifically what the text refers to as “lesser knowledge (小知 *xiao zhi*)” and “greater knowledge (大知 *da zhi*)”, and the relationship between the two. I will attempt to show that, far from promoting “epistemological nihilism”,²⁵⁶ the Zhuangist stance is actually that of a “positive skeptic” who can offer wide-ranging practical advice on how to improve our own epistemic situation, while at the same time warning us of the ultimate limits of what we can come to know.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁵ This interpretation therefore represents an attempt to “strike out in another direction” as suggested in Wong (2005, 97-98).

²⁵⁶ Soles and Soles (1998, 161).

²⁵⁷ Since preparing much of this chapter, a paper taking a broadly similar line of interpretation on “greater knowledge” and “lesser knowledge” has been published elsewhere (Tim Connolly, 2011, “Perspectivism as a Way of Knowing in the *Zhuangzi*”, *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, 10, 487-505). Although I do not respond to it directly here, I believe that Connolly's interpretation is largely compatible with the one I offer.

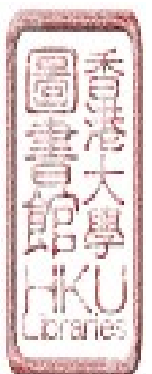


5.2.1. Skepticism in the *Zhuangzi*

A key way in which skepticism is motivated in the *Zhuangzi* is through passages that present cases in which certain *shi-fei* distinctions are drawn in one particular way by one agent, and in other incompatible ways by others, while the text raises the suggestion that there is no fact of the matter as to which one of them is ultimately correct. A paradigm example of this is the story in which the text poses the question of what it is that all agents (literally, all things) *shi* (是 endorse, take as so). A character in the story replies that fish live in water, monkeys live in trees, and people live in houses, and then poses the crucial question: which of these knows the right place to live?²⁵⁸ The suggestion the text appears to make is that there *is* no universally right place to live, and so the “right place” is not something we could hope to know, because what the “right place” is depends crucially upon the agent.

This idea is, as the text makes clear, very much a metaphor for the Confucian-Mohist debates over *shi-fei*, and by extension, all debates over the ultimately correct normative standards for *dao*. Arguing over *shi-fei* is just like arguing over “this” and “that”: from my perspective, something may be “this”, while from your perspective it is not “this” but “that” – so too, when Mohist and Confucian argue over whether the three-year mourning period is ultimately *shi* or *fei*, there may simply be no fact of the matter – it could be *shi* for one of them, and *fei* for the other, and thus neither ultimately *shi* nor ultimately *fei*.

²⁵⁸ *Zhuangzi* 6/2/64-73.



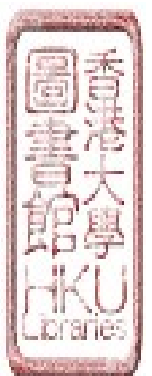
At the same time, a radically skeptical interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* faces serious obstacles. It is certainly true that many stories in the *Zhuangzi* present characters we are presumably expected to empathize with questioning whether it is possible to know something. However, these arguments generally proceed from assumptions that it seems all characters in the story presuppose – in other words, take as being known and therefore knowable. Why, in reading the monkey, fish, and human story, should we *not* be skeptical that monkeys live in trees, for instance? Is the *Zhuangzi* guilty of committing the fallacy which the Mohists accuse it of, “declaring all doctrine perverse” – itself a perverse doctrine?²⁵⁹

The work of Hansen and Fraser has shown that this is not the case. The *Zhuangzi* is not skeptical about ordinary contingent knowledge claims as they apply from particular circumstances and perspectives.²⁶⁰ No doubt is expressed about whether “monkeys live in trees”, or what “monkeys” are; rather, the skeptical doubts apply to knowledge of absolutely or ultimately correct action-guiding distinctions. This limiting of skeptical doubt to a narrower scope than that of all knowledge claims is essential to the *Zhuangzi* avoiding the obvious criticism of a claim to know that nothing is knowable – namely, “then how do you know that?”²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ *Mozi* 67/41/21, 74/43/82-83.

²⁶⁰ Hansen (2003, 145); Fraser (2009, 446).

²⁶¹ A number of commentators on the *Zhuangzi* take this line of criticism as showing that skepticism is self-refuting or incoherent (see Hansen 2003, 155 note 4). However, there is nothing obviously incoherent or self-refuting about being skeptical of some types of knowledge, yet not skeptical about others (Fraser 2009, 441-442).



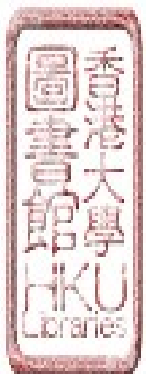
5.2.2. Perspectives in the *Zhuangzi*

The *Zhuangzi* is sometimes described as taking up a perspectivist position;²⁶² in order to avoid possible confusion, I will first attempt to clarify what I mean by “perspectives”, and in what sense I think they are important to the *Zhuangzi*.²⁶³

Broadly speaking, by perspective I mean some set of background assumptions, cognitive and affective attitudes, physical and psychological states which have a bearing upon how one thinks, feels, and acts. In particular, in the *Zhuangzi* we often find stories relating to one of two related types of perspective in this broad sense. Firstly, there is perspective in the sense of “being in someone else’s (or one’s own) shoes” – thinking about a situation as it would be if one were in fact someone else, i.e. were in his or her physical and psychological state. For example, the perspective of a monkey would be the view of the world that I would likely have if I were in fact a monkey. In this case understanding a perspective usually takes the form of a counterfactual – if I were in someone else’s position, what would I think about some particular matter at hand. Secondly, there is also the sense of thinking about some situation while primarily paying attention to some particular aspect of it. For example the “perspective of utility” would be the

²⁶² E.g. Ivanhoe (1993, 645); Hansen (2002, 150).

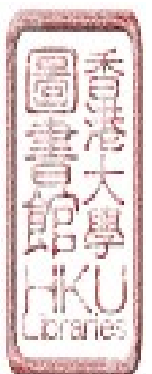
²⁶³ My core focus here will be on suggestions made about knowledge in the *Qiwulun* and how these cohere with other ideas in the *Zhuangzi* – this may include ideas and passages that can be identified as later additions to the text by subsequent authors or editors. I use the term “Zhuangist” to refer to ideas that I shall argue constitute a recurring theme throughout much of the *Zhuangzi*; I do not intend to claim that these ideas – or the textual passages that I cite – constitute the work of a single author.



view of the world (or more specifically some particular matter under consideration) that I would have if I placed emphasis primarily upon the matter of “utility”. Again this can be seen as a counterfactual – how I would see things if I were to consider primarily some particular aspect of a situation, which I may or may not in fact consider important.

Perspectives in both these senses are a recurring theme in the *Zhuangzi*. Often those who view matters from a narrow, close-minded perspective appear to be mocked or ridiculed as failing to see something important – the small bird that laughs at the giant Peng bird’s long journeys without seeing that from the Peng’s perspective the flight of little birds must seem laughably inconsequential, and the preconceived notions of people such as Zi-chan who, seeing that a person is deformed or crippled, focus only on the negative aspects of his situation and so assume he must be lacking virtuosity (德 *de*).²⁶⁴ Typically such cases are those in which one is seen as appreciating only one’s own perspective and ignoring the possibility of distinct but somehow closely related perspectives, the consideration of which might be of value to oneself either in better understanding the world or in interacting with it more successfully. In this respect, the *Zhuangzi* seems to be making a criticism similar to that of the *Xunzi*, in saying that people are easily misled or “blinkered” by one aspect of things. Nonetheless, from

²⁶⁴ The *De Chong Fu* chapter gives several examples challenging such assumptions: Wang Tai, whose feet had been cut off yet had more followers than Confucius (12/5/1-6); Shen Tu Jia, whose feet had also been cut off, yet appears to convince Zi-chan that it would be wrong to take his outward appearance as evidence of a lack of virtuousity (13/5/13-24); “toeless” Shu Shan, who is initially overlooked by Confucius on the basis of his appearance, then praised by him, then goes on to diagnose Confucius’ failings in a discussion with Lao Dan (13/5/24-31); and the ugly yet charismatic Ai Tai Tuo who attracts the devotion of all those around him (13/5/31-14/5/43).



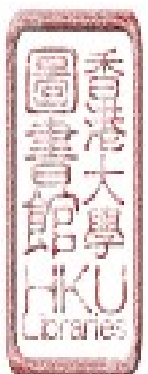
the tone of the *Zhuangzi*, and particularly the numerous stories in which an unexpected or unusual perspective is pointed out as an alternative way of looking at things, it seems clear that the *Zhuangzi* does not see engagement with the world from particular perspectives as being inherently epistemically or ethically misguided. Unlike the *Xunzi*, which seems to consider perspectives as primarily being a cause of blinkering,²⁶⁵ the *Zhuangzi*, though it acknowledges perspectives *can* cause such blinkering, also accepts that in reality, ordinary beings *inevitably* see the world from some perspective.²⁶⁶ Most obviously, we see the world from our own perspective; but also, as the *Zhuangzi* seems to be encouraging us to do, we can consider how the world might be from other perspectives.

5.2.3. Improving our epistemic situation

In what follows I adapt the terminology of “epistemic situation” or “epistemic position” from DeRose’s discussion of contextualism, for a broadly similar purpose – that is, in order to talk about necessary conditions for knowledge, without committing to any particular account of what these conditions actually might be. In DeRose’s terminology, “To be in a strong epistemic position with respect to some proposition one believes is for one’s belief in that proposition to have to a high extent the property or properties

²⁶⁵ The *Xunzi* diagnoses the failures of a list of thinkers including Mozi, Huizi, and Zhuangzi, each in terms of their being blinkered by some particular perspective (21/103/8-9). He contrasts this with Confucius, who was “benevolent and wise, and not blinkered” (21/103/15).

²⁶⁶ Though the “pivot of the Dao” (道樞 *dao shu*) discussed in the *Qiwulun* chapter seems to challenge this assumption by suggesting that one can endlessly choose among available perspectives, ultimately as soon as we act, we commit ourselves to some particular perspective. To refuse to take up any perspective on anything would seemingly not be possible in any recognizably human way of life.

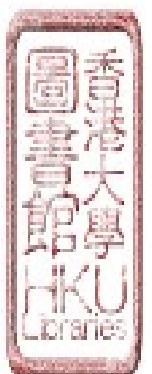


the having enough of which is what's needed for a true belief to constitute a piece of knowledge."²⁶⁷ My use of the term attempts to extend this to all knowledge in the pre-Qin sense: being in a strong epistemic position with respect to some potentially knowable thing is to have to a high extent the property or properties the having enough of which is what's needed for one to know it. By "potentially knowable thing", I mean merely anything that can function as the direct object of "知 *zhi*" – for example a kind term, a state of affairs, or an ability – in contrast to DeRose's use in which an epistemic position is always considered with respect to a proposition.

Intuitively, then, epistemic position refers to how *well* a person knows some thing; it refers to the *quality* of knowledge a person possesses at a particular time – how well he knows – as distinct from the notion of *quantity*, or the number of things he knows (insofar as this might be quantifiable). With the pre-Qin conception of knowledge in mind, there are various dimensions in which one's epistemic position at time A might be better than that at time B; these include knowing something with greater justification, knowing something in greater detail or clarity, and having greater practical success with respect to something.

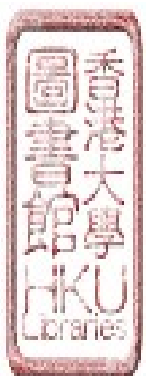
Strength of justification is perhaps the most obvious way in which a person's epistemic situation might change. For example, having heard repeatedly from mutual acquaintances that my co-worker Jones owns a Ford, I might come to have a significant amount of those properties needed for me to know that he does indeed own one; but my epistemic situation with respect to my tentative belief that "Jones owns a Ford" would surely be

²⁶⁷ DeRose (2009, 7).



strengthened further if I were to see him driving a new Ford about town, or were he to show me a receipt from the car dealership. Presumably, radical skepticism and Gettier cases aside, there would come a point at which I would be in a strong enough epistemic position for me to *know* that Jones owns a Ford.

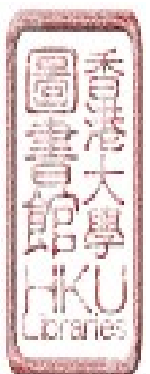
A second dimension in which one epistemic position can be superior to another relates to the detail or depth of our knowledge. This factor is especially relevant to pre-Qin ideas of knowledge because “to know X” where X is a noun was such a common use of “know”. On the pre-Qin conception of knowledge, if I know tables, then I must be able to distinguish tables from non-tables in a reliable fashion; but even given that I have this ability, there remains a great deal of uncertainty regarding *how well* I know tables. To avoid accusations of “not knowing X”, I need not only to be able to distinguish things which are X from things which are not, but also to have some understanding of how to interact correctly with X; not merely to be in possession of a functional description of X (“tables are hard raised flat surfaces for writing and putting things on”), but to actually interact with them correctly: to know that tables are used for writing on (and therefore, on the pre-Qin conception of knowledge, to use them as such when appropriate); to know that tables are used for putting things on; to know that tables are generally used with the hard flat surface facing upwards, and so on. Although there is presumably some minimum standard above which one would not normally be accused of not knowing X, there still may be room for knowing X better – in the sense of knowing more about X. Possession of other knowledge, not necessarily propositional knowledge, may also contribute to



“better” knowledge in this sense: an accomplished carpenter undoubtedly knows tables better than the casual table-user.

This idea of depth of knowledge may also be extensible to propositional knowledge in interesting ways. Consider the claim to knowledge that the Earth is flat, versus the claim to knowledge that the Earth is round. Although a straightforward purely propositional account of knowledge might argue that the former simply is not knowledge but a once widely-held untrue belief, while the latter may indeed be genuine knowledge, there also seems to be a respect in which the latter is a refinement of the former rather than a straightforward denial of it. The claim that the Earth is round is implicitly understood as building on our commonsense understanding that the Earth as we see it in our everyday experience is flat; rather than denying that this is in any sense the case, it leads us to accept that from another perspective, namely that of a greater distance, the Earth is round. From an even further off perspective, it might be that the Earth is simply a point in space. All three of these claims are approximations, which are valid only from a certain range of perspectives – strictly speaking, the Earth is no more absolutely round than it is absolutely flat. Knowledge of any one of these three claims seems, in some important respect, to be less good than an understanding of all of them combined – and less good again than this together with an understanding of the limitations shared by all three.

In skill knowledge too, it seems clear that we can make sense of knowing more or less well in a further dimension to that of greater justification or depth, namely, that of how well we are able to perform the skill in practice. A competent bicycle rider knows cycling better than a child



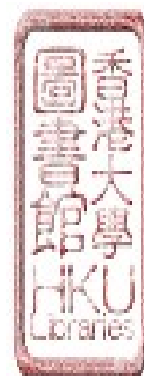
riding for the first time, and though a professional cyclist knows it better than either of them, professional-level skill is not required for us to accept that someone knows how to ride a bike.

Thus it appears that for all of these various types of “knowing” involved in the pre-Qin concept of “*zhi*”, we can make sense of the idea of knowing more or less well, and it seems that our epistemic position needs to reach some minimum standard for us to avoid accusations of not knowing.²⁶⁸

5.2.4. Greater knowledge and lesser knowledge

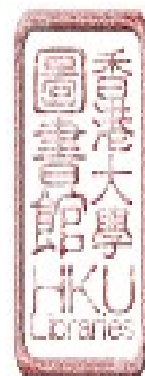
If the substantive skeptical interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* is correct, then it seems that there is a tension of some sort between the two types of knowledge – the kind we can hope to attain, and the kind we should be skeptical about. If we accept that the *Zhuangzi* is committed to the position that there are some things we can know – perhaps what things are appropriate for me to take as “contingently so” in a particular circumstance, such as that monkeys live in trees – and some things we cannot – for example, what the uniquely right place to live is – then we should not be surprised if we find evidence of tension between these two types of knowledge, both of which seem to be referred to in the *Zhuangzi* as “知”. Although this tension does seem to be part of the Zhuangist position, an obvious question is how are these two types of knowledge related, and why is one kind purportedly unattainable?

²⁶⁸ The case of “knowing to” – as in “knowing to [i.e. that you should] do such a thing” – can be considered a combination of the first and last cases: knowing that you should do something, and also knowing how to do it.



In several places in the *Zhuangzi*, an explicit distinction and contrast is made between “greater knowledge (大知 *da zhi*)” and “lesser knowledge (小知 *xiao zhi*)”. Firstly, at the beginning of the *Xiaoyaoyou* chapter, a contrast is made between the morning mushroom and short-lived cicada, and the “Da-chun”, whose autumn and spring each lasted 8000 years, and long-lived Peng Zu. One claim that is made is, to give an overly literal translation, “small knowledge does not reach large knowledge; small years do not reach large years”, which I interpret as claiming that “lesser knowledge” does not reach “greater knowledge”, and “shorter lives” do not reach “longer lives”.²⁶⁹ From the context of the rest of the passage, it seems clear that part of the claim is that creatures with short life-spans cannot know of things which lie beyond their existence – a summer cicada simply cannot know autumn or winter – and so, in this sense, those with a longer life-span can come to possess knowledge inaccessible to those with shorter lives. Interestingly, there does not seem to be a claim that it is necessarily *better* to come to know more things – but it is clear that a longer life in general gives one the opportunity of knowing more things than a shorter one.

²⁶⁹ The Chinese text reads: “小知不及大知，小年不及大年” (1/1/10). There is a considerable degree of ambiguity and scope for differing interpretations of this sentence. From the parallelism between “小知不及大知” and “小年不及大年” as well as the examples of short-lived beings that follow, it seems clear that the “小” and “大” in both sentences should be taken as modifying “知” and “年”, rather than acting as subject (i.e. simply meaning “the small” and “the large”). This interpretation is further supported by the other instances of “小知” and “大知” outlined below, which do not exhibit this type of grammatical ambiguity. Additionally, the Chinese text does not distinguish between the comparative “smaller” and the absolute “small”; preference for the comparative here is also supported by the interpretation outlined below.



Secondly, the *Qiwulun* makes another comparison between “greater knowledge” and “lesser knowledge”;²⁷⁰ and although the precise meaning of this claim is much less clear, most interpreters take it as saying that “greater knowledge” is wide and encompassing, while “lesser knowledge” is small, narrow, or petty.²⁷¹ This interpretation is supported by the *Xiaoyaoyou* passage, since knowledge gained over a greater range of experiences ought generally to be broader in some sense than knowledge gained over a smaller range.

Thirdly, in the *Waiwu* chapter, the *Zhuangzi* points out how even the superbly wise spirit-tortoise, which through its knowledge was able show itself to the ruler of Song in a dream²⁷² and divine 72 times without error, was nonetheless unable to avoid the fisherman’s net or its gruesome fate once caught.²⁷³ This is supposed to show that “知有所困” – knowledge has its perils. We are then told to “discard the lesser knowledge, and the greater knowledge will become clear”.²⁷⁴ Taken together with the first two passages, this seems to suggest that greater knowledge is something preferable to lesser knowledge, and at the same time there is a sense in which the possession of lesser knowledge can prevent greater knowledge from being clear to us.

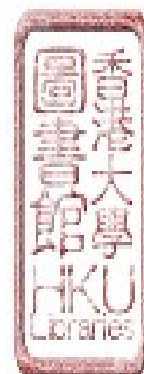
²⁷⁰ “大知閑閑，小知閒閒”. 3/2/9.

²⁷¹ E.g. Chen (1983, 41); Watson (1968, 37). The early *Guangyun* dictionary gives a gloss of “great (大 *da*)” for “閑”, and “near (近 *jin*)” for “閒”, providing some support for this interpretation (*Songben Guangyun*, reprinted in <http://ctext.org>).

²⁷² Again here we see how the pre-Qin conception of knowledge is intimately tied to action: it is claimed that it is its *knowledge* that gives it the ability to perform this feat.

²⁷³ *Zhuangzi* 74/26/24-29.

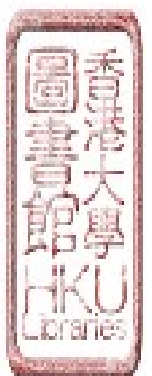
²⁷⁴ *Zhuangzi* 74/26/30.



Fourthly, although it does not make an explicit contrast with lesser knowledge, the *Qiu Shui* chapter links greater knowledge to observation of and appeal to a number of contrasts: far and near, large and small, many and few, past and present. In the course of a dialogue between He Bo and Bei Hai Ruo that emphasizes the ways our thinking is limited by our experience – the frog in a well does not understand the sea, nor the summer insect ice – the focus quickly turns to questions of relativism and absolutes. When He Bo asks whether one might take heaven and earth as being exemplary of “great”, and the point of a hair as exemplary of “small”, he is answered in the negative, and then given an explanation in terms of how greater knowledge involves looking at many different perspectives.²⁷⁵ This appears to explicitly link greater knowledge to appreciation of a form of perspectivism²⁷⁶ – in particular, to the agent’s willingness to explore different perspectives on the matter under consideration, and also to the *range* of available perspectives, including those which might at first appear contradictory or counter-intuitive. The passage also points out that what a person knows is surely outweighed by what he does not know, and the time he is alive is outweighed by the time he is not. Again this seems to be emphasizing the importance not only of different perspectives, but of the vast number of them which exist in principle. Thinking back to the *Xiaoyaoyou* passage, presumably even for the Da-chun with its spring and autumn of 8000 years, it would still be true that the time before it was born was greater than the time it was alive. So while it is important to examine things from different perspectives, it seems unlikely

²⁷⁵ *Zhuangzi* 42/17/14-20.

²⁷⁶ Perspectivism in the sense of accepting that the way things are may be contingent upon one’s perspective.

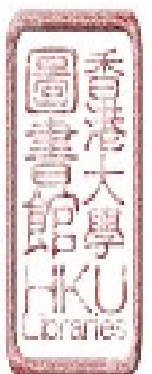


that anyone, however long-lived, would be able to examine things from *all* perspectives.

To summarize the direct textual evidence, the *Zhuangzi* seems to be promoting greater knowledge as something preferable to lesser knowledge, while also claiming that lesser knowledge should be somehow rejected in order to attain greater knowledge. In what follows I will attempt to argue that the Zhuangist position is that greater knowledge is broader than lesser knowledge, because it encompasses a range of different perspectives, and this is also one way that we can come to obtain greater knowledge – by considering the possible alternative perspectives. Considering how things might appear or actually be from the points of view of others, and thinking about things while paying particular attention to various alternative aspects or dimensions of the matter at hand, can lead to increased insight, and improved, “better” knowledge.

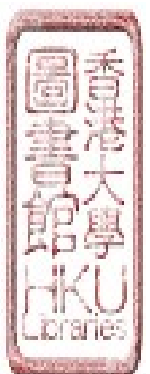
5.2.5. Interpreting “greater knowledge”

“Greater knowledge” for the *Zhuangzi* cannot mean ultimate knowledge in the sense of knowledge of what is ultimately so or not-so (果是 or 果非), because this would contradict the Zhuangist skeptical position. But it nonetheless seems to be something that is endorsed by the *Zhuangzi* as being superior to, or preferable to, the lesser knowledge with which it is contrasted. Additionally, there seems to be no suggestion in the text that it is something that is only available to a sage or spirit, and in fact we are told that we ourselves can attain it if we only abandon our lesser knowledge.



On my interpretation, this is a theme that is echoed repeatedly in the *Zhuangzi*'s stories. Greater knowledge is the kind of knowledge that holds from a greater range of perspectives; lesser knowledge is the kind that holds from a narrower range, perhaps even just the narrow-minded perspective we happen to take at a given time. For example, suppose a hedgehog has knowledge that "seeing a big juicy slug makes one feel hungry". Such knowledge would generally be a case of *lesser* knowledge, due to its clear contingency upon perspective: there are other creatures from whose perspective the sight of a big juicy slug does not invoke hunger.²⁷⁷ On this account, there is a sense in which greater knowledge can be *generalized* lesser knowledge, because if something holds from all the perspectives I am able to consider, then it certainly holds from any one narrow perspective I happen to be taking right now. For example, the knowledge that "seeing tasty-looking things makes one feel hungry" might be a greater form of knowledge than the previous example, as it would hold from more perspectives than simply that of the hedgehog. Greater knowledge can also be simply lesser knowledge together with an awareness of those perspectives from which the thing does actually hold, or the limitations of the knowledge involved – in other words, lesser knowledge "relativized" to the

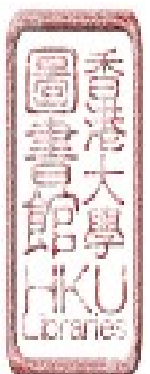
²⁷⁷ It is important to note however that "greater" and "lesser" are relative terms, and that what in one context is "lesser" may in another context be "greater". For example, if we suppose that hunger is only reliably invoked in hedgehogs by slugs when the slugs involved are big and juicy, then it would be the case that "seeing a slug makes one feel hungry" was lesser knowledge in comparison to the greater knowledge that "seeing a *big juicy* slug makes one feel hungry" – the former perhaps being contingent upon one's perspective in various ways, for instance because smaller and less juicy slugs also invoke hunger in smaller hedgehogs, whereas in larger hedgehogs they do not.



particular perspectives from which it does hold. So, “seeing a big juicy slug makes *hedgehogs* feel hungry” would again be of a greater species of knowledge than the first example, because it takes into account the contingency upon the perspective involved. On this account, when the *Zhuangzi* criticizes someone for not seeing an important alternative perspective upon his situation, this is to say that the person being criticized has committed in some sense a cognitive error. He or she has taken “lesser knowledge” and mistakenly believed it (perhaps implicitly) to be “greater knowledge” – to hold in a wider range of situations or from a wider range of perspectives than it actually does; the *Zhuangzi* points out a perspective from which it does not hold, revealing their mistake.

The focus of such Zhuangist criticism does not seem to be that, in the judgment of the Zhuangist, the agent is simply wrong and so should be opposed or condemned by others, but that the person by his or her own standards has failed to see something importantly relevant to his own thinking or action, and once shown it will himself accept its importance.²⁷⁸ In many of the stories in the *Zhuangzi* which relate to differing perspectives, the conclusion of the story is not merely that the actor did not see all the relevant perspectives and so was wrong or narrow-minded from someone else’s perspective, but rather that because he failed to consider all the relevant perspectives, he did something which he ought *himself* to accept as being stupid or wrong once these other perspectives are pointed out to him. So there is a clear sense in which being aware of different perspectives is

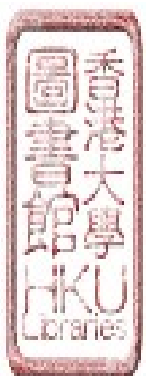
²⁷⁸ As David Wong puts it, questioning our existing knowledge commitments “moves us to look for what we might have missed” (Wong 2005, 104).



supposed to be of advantage to ourselves, and not just to others who may have different perspectives to our own. If we had seen these other perspectives, we would have been better off – we might not have done something that we would later come to see as foolish.

Consider the story of Huizi and the giant gourds.²⁷⁹ Huizi is given seeds that grow into giant gourds so large that they cannot be used as containers or drinking vessels, conventional uses for gourds. Huizi therefore decides to discard them, “because of their uselessness”. Zhuangzi criticizes this as Huizi being “stupid in his use of the large”, and goes on to tell a story about a man of Song who made a salve that prevented hands from becoming chapped; his family used it for generations in the course of bleaching silk, which earned them a meager wage. The salve is sold to a stranger, who then becomes a general of the King of Wu, and uses the salve in a winter naval war with the state of Yue, leading to a great victory, and the stranger being generously rewarded. The function of the salve was the same in both cases, but the outcomes were very different because of how it was used. The text seems to be criticizing Huizi for close-mindedness: for being so attached to the conventional perspective on the use of gourds that he overlooked other possible uses for them. Zhuangzi suggests they might have been useful in making rafts on which one might float on rivers and lakes; the point is that, even so long as we are interested in the *utility* of gourds, as Huizi himself was, we need to remain open to the enormous variety of ways in which gourds might potentially be useful. Our commitment to the conventional perspective that gourds are useful as containers or drinking vessels may blind us to other

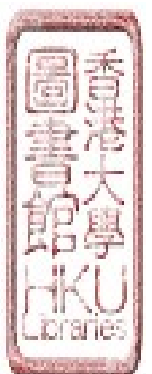
²⁷⁹ Zhuangzi 2/1/35-42.



perspectives on their utility. That “gourds are useful as containers or drinking vessels” seems to hold for ordinary gourds, but it does not hold from the perspective of “the large”, since in the case of large gourds, gourds are not in fact useful for these purposes. Attachment to our familiar perspective on gourds – their typical use as drinking vessels – should not blind us to other possible uses for them. Huizi took the utility of gourds as being their usefulness as containers or drinking vessels, and so concluded that the gourds in question being too large for this purpose had no utility; Zhuangzi pointed out that there is a perspective which Huizi had not considered – utility not as a container but as a raft – from which this is not so. Were Huizi claiming knowledge about gourds that did not fail to hold from some perspective (perhaps something like “gourds grow from seeds”), he would be immune to this type of Zhuangist criticism. Similarly, if he were to see the limits of the claims like “gourds are useful as containers” – namely, that this is a claim which may be true in many circumstances, but not in all cases – he would also avoid making the mistake of assuming that *all* gourds are useful as containers, and only containers.

Secondly, consider the example of the useless tree.²⁸⁰ Huizi compares Zhuangzi’s words to a great tree that is large but has knotted branches and is unsuitable for use as timber; he declares that Zhuangzi’s words, like the tree, are useless. Zhuangzi’s response does not try to directly refute Huizi’s claims, but instead talks about wild animals that exist without worrying about the limitations of what they can and cannot do, though they are skilled in different ways. Zhuangzi suggests that Huizi worry less about the tree’s so-

²⁸⁰ Zhuangzi 3/1/42-47.

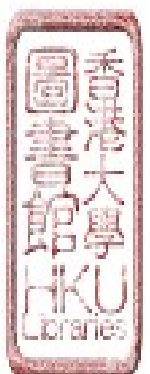


called “uselessness”, and instead find a suitable place for it and relax in its shade, for (being useless as timber), it will surely not be cut down.

In this example, too, Huizi failed to see all the possible perspectives available. Again the text seems to be emphasizing that “utility” is not an absolute; it only makes sense to talk about utility from some particular perspective, in both senses of the word distinguished above. A thing can be useful to me, or useful to you; or can be useful as a source of timber or as a catcher of mice; but nothing is “useful” or “useless” in an absolute, perspective-independent sense. The perceived uselessness of the tree (from Huizi’s or the carpenter’s perspective) is actually *useful* from the perspective of the tree, for it prevents it being cut down. Equally, even if we remain committed to the perspective of utility to us, rather than bemoaning the uselessness of the tree, we could consider an alternative perspective *on* its utility to us – despite its knotted branches, it would still be useful as a source of shade beneath which to rest. Again new perspectives, both that of the tree itself, and that of an alternative mode of utility, are used to show how Huizi’s “knowledge” that the tree is useless is contingent upon perspective, and so in an important sense flawed.

Thirdly, consider the examples given by Wang Ni when asked whether he knew what it is that all things agree upon.²⁸¹ These examples are particularly relevant to the question of lesser knowledge, greater knowledge, and the relationship between the two. Firstly, Wang Ni replies to the question with his own question: “How could I know that,” suggesting that it would be beyond his ability to know such a thing, not (as is clear from the examples he

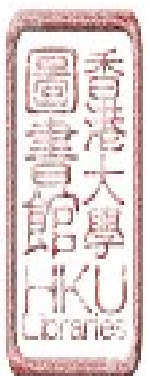
²⁸¹ Zhuangzi 6/2/64-73.



goes on to give) because he is unable to know what some things take as so or not-so, but rather because he is unable to be sure that there is any particular thing which *all* things take as so or not-so. He gives three concrete examples: the right place to sleep, the right taste, and the right idea of beauty. In each case, he gives examples of how the answer depends upon one's perspective – humans and other animals disagree in each of the cases, so there is no one universally “right” answer.

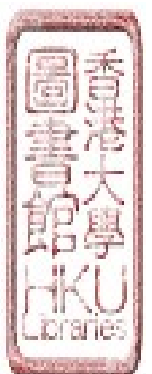
At the end of the passage, Nie Que further asks whether, given that Wang Ni does not know such things, might not the “perfect man (至人 *zhi ren*)” know? This is interesting because it might be very tempting to say that claims which hold true from *all* perspectives constitute some sort of “universal truth” – and if so, it would make sense to say that these truths, though perhaps not knowable by ordinary men, could be known by a sage. But Wang Ni does not answer in the affirmative, and instead emphasizes the great differences between a sage and an ordinary man. A sage, he says, is like a spirit, and can “ride the clouds and the *qi*”, and “wander beyond the four seas”.²⁸² So different a being from ourselves would very likely have a very different perspective from our own. This raises another issue, which seems to suggest that Wang Ni might actually be answering in the negative: with a sufficiently powerful imagination, we can surely come up with *some* circumstance or perspective from which *any* individual statement will not hold. The possibility of the sage, with his vastly different perspective on the

²⁸² A broadly similar point is made at the beginning of the *Da Zong Shi* chapter, where it is stated that “There must first be a True Man (真人) before there can be True knowledge (真知).” Only the true man, like the sage, can provide us with “True knowledge” (*Zhuangzi* 15/6/4).



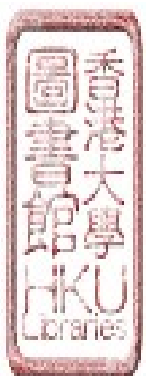
world to ours, seems to be one possible instance of this. As long as there is the possibility of a sage such as Wang Ni describes existing, there seems to be no way we could say for certain what it is that all things take as so or not-so, because we simply have no way of knowing what a sage would take as so or not-so from his perspective. There is always the chance that, despite everyone we know taking something as so or not-so, they are nonetheless wrong, and a sage would in fact disagree with them.

These examples together suggest two key points. Firstly, in ordinary cases we can improve our epistemic situation by considering other perspectives on the matter under consideration. A commitment to a knowledge claim that holds from a broader range of perspectives will put us in a better epistemic position than a commitment to a claim holding from a narrower range of perspectives. We will face less risk of accusations of our not knowing the thing in question if others, both from their own perspectives and other perspectives that they might consider, will accept that our claim also holds from these perspectives. Similarly, we will also be in an epistemically superior position if we recognize, at least implicitly, the limited range of perspectives from which what we claim to know holds. By qualifying our knowledge claims, we again avoid accusations of failure to know, by excluding perspectives from which we have already recognized our knowledge claim does not hold. Secondly, even if we do this, no matter how many perspectives we consider, there is still the chance that through failing to consider *all* of the perspectives, we will fail to know in an absolute sense – and this may simply be an aspect of the human condition which we should learn to live with.



Thus when we look at any one of our claims to knowledge, we can think about how it changes under substitution of perspective. If it holds up from many different perspectives, we have good reason to think of it as being “greater knowledge”; if it is highly contingent on our current perspective, it is surely “lesser knowledge”, unless we can cultivate an awareness of how it is importantly dependent upon certain relevant perspectives. There is a clear sense in which possessing “greater knowledge” is epistemically better than possessing “lesser knowledge”, namely that it holds true in a greater range of situations. But we should not expect to be able to find “ultimate knowledge” which holds in all perspectives, if only for one simple reason: there’s no way we could even grasp all the available perspectives to begin with.

In rather the same way that science aims to find a simple and coherent explanation for myriad phenomena – a theory of mechanics, or even a theory of everything – the Zhuangist position suggests that we should concentrate less on the specifics – gourds make good water vessels, a house is the right place to live – and more on the bigger picture revealed by noticing what is common to many specific cases – big, light, and hard things can float on water, and creatures live in environments conducive to their wellbeing. Generalized knowledge is much more useful than specific knowledge, and specific knowledge can easily confuse us into making the wrong judgment or decision when we forget that it only holds from a narrow range of perspectives. Specific knowledge only really applies in a very small range of cases – as soon as we try to apply it outside the appropriate range, we commit a cognitive error and may reach invalid conclusions. We need to be



aware of these limits, and of other perspectives from which our specific “knowledge” would not be so, in order to avoid making these errors.

5.2.6. Knowing more of what there is to know

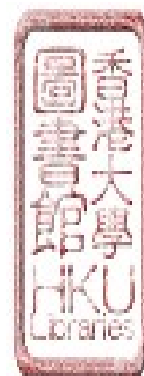
One aspect of lesser knowledge when contrasted with greater knowledge is that it is “incomplete”: it misses, in some important way, salient aspects of whatever it is that is claimed to be known. It is not that lesser knowledge is wrong in and of itself, but rather that it somehow fails to capture a sufficiently large part of whatever is in question. What actually is wrong is taking this partial, narrow view as being representative of a broader whole than it actually is.

This idea is closely related to the *Xunzi*’s warnings of how people get themselves into trouble by being blinded, “blinkered,” or fixated by one corner of things and so fail to see the “greater pattern”. The *Xunzi*’s descriptions of how those of “partial knowledge” look upon only one corner of the Dao (曲知之人觀於道之一隅)²⁸³ seem clearly related to how the *Qiu Shui* talks of “greater knowledge”, which looks upon things from far and near (大知觀於遠近).²⁸⁴ The *Xunzi* clearly frames a very similar problem – that our knowledge can be twisted by seeing just one corner of the Dao – to which Zhuangist ideas propose the solution of examining the issue from multiple perspectives.

Interestingly, the *Xunzi* also gives a list of concrete examples of what things cause blinding: desires and dislikes, beginning and end, far and near,

²⁸³ *Xunzi* 21/103/12.

²⁸⁴ *Zhuangzi* 42/17/15-16.

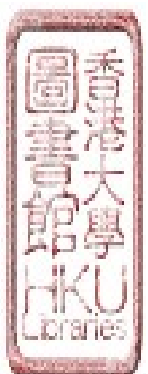


deep and shallow, past and present.²⁸⁵ When combined with the further examples it goes on to give, it seems that many of the causes of blinkering can be broadly termed “perspectives” – either our perspective in the sense of our internal psychological state (desire or dislike), or in the sense of our location and situation in the world (looking at something from far away). From these it is clear that the *Xunzi*, just like the *Zhuangzi*, sees perspective as something that can cause us to reason badly by way of failing to appreciate the bigger picture. Again this reinforces the Zhuangist stance that there is no skeptical question of the existence of an external world waiting to be solved here; the question is merely whether or not we are correctly grasping it, as we may have been blinkered by our perspective. The *Xunzi*’s proposed solution to the blinkering problem is that we eliminate the biased perspectives, and approach the matter at hand with an empty, focused, and calm mind.²⁸⁶

Although the *Xunzi*’s treatment in some ways closely parallels the Zhuangist stance, it is interesting to note that the *Xunzi* is in a way much more unilateral in its condemnation of “blinkering”. “Blinkering” is presented as something that is simply bad; in the *Xunzi*’s presentation, the perspectives involved offer no direct positive contribution to our attaining knowledge, but are merely obstacles to attaining knowledge that must be done away with. The *Zhuangzi*, by contrast, often seems to delight in pointing out unexpected or unanticipated perspectives on the matter at hand. Unlike the *Xunzi*, for the *Zhuangzi* individual perspectives, though limiting if taken as being representative of the whole, are also crucially valuable in themselves,

²⁸⁵ *Xunzi* 21/102/12-13.

²⁸⁶ *Xunzi* 21/103/25-21/104/10.



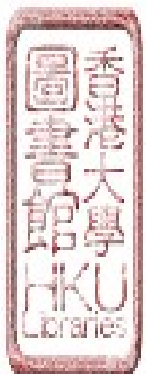
because each inherently biased perspective itself makes up a small part of the whole.²⁸⁷ For the *Zhuangzi*, it would be foolish for us to *only* appreciate the world from the perspective of a cicada, just as it would be foolish to appreciate it only from that of a giant Peng bird; but at the same time, both of these perspectives are valuable because they can help give us insight into a “greater knowledge” of what the world might be like from the full range of perspectives available to us – not merely what the world is like contingent upon our own size. The *Zhuangzi*, unlike the *Xunzi*, emphasizes that it is just as foolish for us to *not* appreciate the world from some perspective as it is to *only* appreciate it from that perspective.

5.3. Knowledge and *dao*

5.3.1. Zhuangist skepticism, greater knowledge, and *dao*

The interpretation of Zhuangist skepticism outlined in the previous section will be plausible only if it can cohere with other key claims that the *Zhuangzi* makes about knowledge. In particular, there must be some explanation for how the seeming endorsement of “greater knowledge” squares with the seemingly negative stance much of the text takes towards knowledge in general.

²⁸⁷ In other words, the *Xunzi* sees biased perspectives as being blinkered and so *seeing* or *capturing* only part of the whole, whereas the *Zhuangzi* sees them as simply *being* part of the whole. Therefore *all* perspectives are important to the *Zhuangzi*, whereas for the *Xunzi* there can be one unbiased perspective which is more important than all others.



“Daoists” are often associated with the slogan of “abandoning knowledge”,²⁸⁸ and indeed this slogan appears several times in the *Zhuangzi* (though only in the outer chapters), the implication being that to follow the *dao*, knowledge is not only not required, but can actually have a detrimental effect. Even in the inner chapters, knowledge is at one point described as “an instrument of conflict” and a “deadly weapon”.²⁸⁹

At the same time, the *Qiwulun* also appears to be endorsing the men of old when it says of them that “their knowledge reached an extreme point”, which is described as “holding that nothing had ever existed”; closely followed by the alternative views that “things existed, but there were no boundaries between things”, and that “there were boundaries between things but not yet *shi* and *fei*”.²⁹⁰ It would seem that for someone holding such views, on the pre-Qin conception of knowledge, there might be relatively little that one could claim to know – certainly knowledge of everyday external objects, for example, would seem out of reach for someone committed to the non-existence of such objects. The inner chapters also point out that while our life is limited, knowledge itself has no corresponding limit – and pursuing the limitless with the limited will surely lead to trouble.²⁹¹

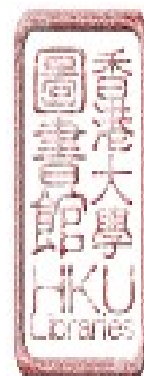
However, it is worth noting that neither of these passages suggest that knowledge is necessarily a bad thing to possess in all cases – they merely make the point that it may be difficult to attain, and it may distort our way of

²⁸⁸ 棄知 or 棄智; the slogan is most closely associated with the *Daodejing*, which claims that “discarding sages/sageliness and abandoning knowledge would bring a hundredfold benefit to the ordinary people”.

²⁸⁹ *Zhuangzi* 8/4/6-7.

²⁹⁰ *Zhuangzi* 5/2/40-41.

²⁹¹ *Zhuangzi* 7/3/1.



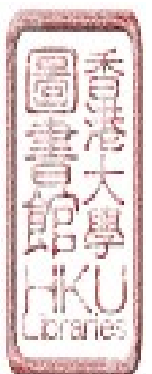
living if we value it above all else. In the story of Cook Ding which immediately follows the discussion about pursuing limitless knowledge with a limited life, Cook Ding, whose skill in butchering oxen the *Zhuangzi* explicitly associates with *dao*, pointedly notes in his explanation that during his skillful execution of the task, his *perceptual* knowledge (官知 *guan zhi*) ends. It seems clear from the context that while engaged in the task, Ding might not know such things as where he next ought to move the knife, or which joint it is that he is cutting through, but one thing the story demonstrates that he very clearly does know is how to butcher oxen.

Similarly, even in those passages focusing on skeptical doubt, many assumptions are made as to the knowability of things. If the reader were expected to be skeptical that “monkeys live in trees”, or skeptical about what “monkeys” are, or of how we might come to know such things, then the argument for doubting there being one “right place” would seem largely nonsensical.

So the focus of these less radical-sounding parts of the text seems not to be that we should abandon *all* knowledge, but rather that we should not pursue knowledge itself as if it were some kind of panacea or universal solution to all our problems.²⁹² Knowledge is not of value in itself; but at the same time, some knowledge may be useful as a means to living a good life.

More radical passages of the text go on to imply that since knowledge is not inherently valuable, and is always “provisional” in the sense that it

²⁹² This seems to be the mistake that the *Tian Xia* chapter attributes to Hui Shi – though he “daily used his knowledge to debate with others,” from the standpoint of heaven and earth this had no more significance than the frantic buzzing of a mosquito (*Zhuangzi* 94/33/80-85).

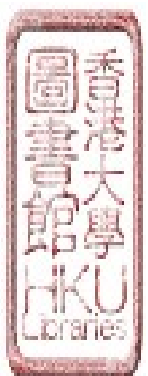


might subsequently turn out to be merely “lesser knowledge” prejudiced by perspective, the ideal situation would be one in which we abandon all knowledge. This is the position taken in several places by the “spirit man” or “true man”, who takes such a radical stance towards the world that he gives up all *shi-fei* distinctions, thereby seemingly also giving up agency and ceasing to live a recognizably human life – “even the knowledge of the ant he puts away; his plans are simply those of the fishes. Even the notions of the sheep he discards.”²⁹³ Although this radical stance does not seem representative of the whole text, the observation that parts of the *Zhuangzi* appear so radically critical of knowledge in general sits uneasily with the claim that “greater knowledge” is in any way preferable to “lesser knowledge” – the “spirit man”, for one, would presumably view both as equally worthless.

In addressing this puzzle, it is worth first reiterating that it seems clear that the distinction between “lesser knowledge” and “greater knowledge” is a relative rather than an absolute distinction. What may be considered “greater knowledge” in one situation might easily be viewed as “lesser knowledge” in another. Therefore the claim that “greater knowledge” is in some way preferable to “lesser knowledge” does not imply that “greater knowledge” is somehow absolutely correct or justified in some way whereas “lesser knowledge” is not.

With this in mind, the distinction between lesser and greater knowledge can actually be seen as a link between more moderate and more radical Daoist positions. The moderate position takes it that we can know

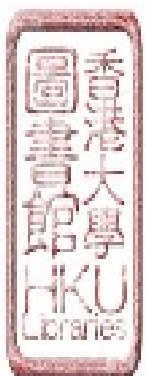
²⁹³ *Zhuangzi* 69/24/96.



some things, at least in the sense of having the ability to draw *shi-fei* distinctions that, though not ultimately privileged or justified, are useful to us in achieving our provisional, contingent aims. Whatever knowledge we think we have, we might on reflection come to see that in fact it is merely “lesser knowledge” which we might want to give up or qualify – perhaps in favor of some other “greater knowledge”. The more radical stance does not contradict these ideas, but merely is more demanding in what constitutes “knowledge”: if we are looking not for “greater knowledge” (from some particular standpoint), but “*great* knowledge” which holds from every perspective, then it seems very likely that the result will be simply that there *is* no knowledge, and that all talk of knowledge is ultimately futile.

Clearly, the more perspectives one demands that one’s knowledge claims hold from, the fewer the things one can legitimately claim to know. This could be viewed as a process of progressive enlightenment: first seeing the highly perspective-contingent “lesser knowledge” claims to be unsatisfactory, then proceeding in the direction of increasingly “greater” knowledge which seemingly avoids the perspective-dependent fallacy; but ultimately coming to realize that *all* knowledge claims are contingent upon some range of perspectives. Viewed in this way, the radical stance is the culmination of the ideas of the less radical stance – it merely takes these ideas to what in principle at least might be seen as their natural conclusion.

Greater knowledge also seems closely connected to other Zhuangist concepts related to following *dao*, particularly the two related concepts of “clarity” (明 *ming*) and the “hinge” or “pivot” of the *dao* (道樞 *dao shu*). The *Qiwulun* draws a contrast between the petty, perspective-dependent drawing



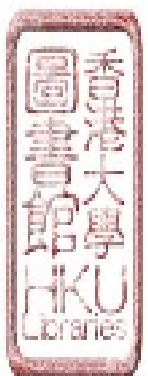
of *shi-fei* distinctions from one's own perspective exemplified by the opinionated stances of the Confucians and the Mohists, who "*shi* what each other *fei* and *fei* what each other *shi*", and clarity, which is presented as a superior stance.²⁹⁴ In the course of this discussion, it becomes clear that the *dao* is obscured by the drawing of these petty distinctions,²⁹⁵ and a solution is proposed by means of the "pivot of the *dao*". The description of the pivot of the *dao* appeals to the two general perspectives of "this" and "that", seeing a debate between whether something is "this" or "that" as directly analogous to the *shi-fei* debates of "this" and "not-this".²⁹⁶ The text makes the point that if I argue with you about whether some thing which happens to be close to me is "this" (as I would claim from my perspective) or "that" (as you would from yours), then there surely is no fact of the matter as to whether the thing is ultimately (果 *guo*) "this" or "that". The implication is that the same may be true in cases of *shi-fei* – people may be arguing over questions that simply have no ultimate answer, because they depend crucially upon perspective.

The pivot of the *dao* is intended to bring clarity (明 *ming*) in such cases. The text defines the pivot as the place where "this" and "that" obtain their complement. Upon reaching the pivot, one stands "in the centre of a ring," can "respond endlessly," and "endlessly *shi* things and endlessly *fei*

²⁹⁴ Zhuangzi 4/2/21-31.

²⁹⁵ Referred to as "小成" or "lesser achievements/completion" – a term closely paralleling the use of "小知" or "lesser knowledge" to refer to knowledge commitments to such distinctions. In other passages, "completion" is explicitly tied to the drawing of *shi-fei* distinctions and causing injury to the Dao. See Hansen (2003, 147) and Fraser (2009, 448-449).

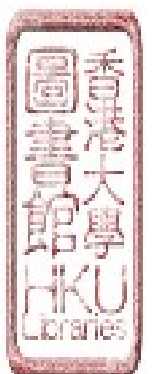
²⁹⁶ As noted in chapter 2, the same word "是 *shi*" can mean "so/take as so" and "this", and so appears in the phrasing of both these debates – one as "彼是" one as "是非". See Hansen (1983a, 45-46).



things”.²⁹⁷ Putting aside the details of how best to interpret the metaphor of the pivot, it seems clear that reaching the pivot is somehow supposed to allow us to “get outside” the this-that or this-not-this debate in question. From the pivot, we do not simply take up a single stance of “this” or “that”, but, rather than denying that either position is correct, or taking up a third position (such as “there are no this and that,” or “this” and “that” in no way exist or make sense), the point seems to be that we should appreciate all these different perspectives from a neutral standpoint. We might want to *shi* a thing in one case, but also to *fei* it in another – standing at the pivot, we are free to choose between these possibilities in specific cases, though we may deny that any one stance is ultimately privileged.

Thus clarity seems to promote a type of understanding that affirms the value of greater knowledge, and explains how lesser knowledge should be viewed. Clarity is not attained through some alternative means or capacity than our ordinary access to the world through individual perspectives, as “unblinkered” knowledge appears to be in the *Xunzi*, but through appreciation both of the many differing perspectives that are available, and of their limitations. Lesser knowledge is inherently flawed in that it commits us to something that is so only from a range of perspectives. Though we might go along with it in particular cases, we should not mislead ourselves into thinking it is ultimately correct. It might well be that, for a particular monkey, living in a tree is “the right place”. There is no need to deny this; the important point is just to realize that the tree is not somehow universally the right place.

²⁹⁷ *Zhuangzi* 4/2/30-31.

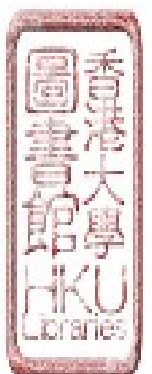


This line of interpretation supports the view of “greater knowledge” as “relativized” lesser knowledge – the idea that, even though we may be committed to something which does not in fact hold from a wide range of perspectives, if we are able to *see* that it does not, and would not claim that it held from other perspectives, we again seem to be in a better position than the monkey who claims the tree ultimately is the right place, or the Confucian who insists that three years of mourning is the right funeral ritual for all.

5.3.2. Knowing and the Zhuangist ethical stance

The opening line of the *Yang Sheng Zhu* chapter makes the point that while our life is limited – eventually we must all die – there is no corresponding limit to knowledge, at least in principle. The problem rather is that we, as beings inevitably limited by our finite lifespans, strive to attain this “unlimited knowledge”, foolishly believing this to be an achievable goal.

This in turn ties in with some foundations of the Zhuangist ethical stance. Although the Zhuangist expresses skepticism that one might know what it is that all things take as *shi* or *fei*, this is not the same as explicitly claiming that there *is* no such thing as *shi* or *fei*, or denying that there might at least in principle be some things which all things do, in fact, take as *shi* or *fei*, but rather indicates a skepticism about our ability to come to know that such things are in fact the case. The same emphasis on our finiteness and inability to imagine *everything* – we might be able to imagine some aspects of what it is like to be a monkey, or a fish, but can barely conceive of what it might like to be a sage – can be seen as underwriting both skepticism about our own claims to knowledge and those made by others.

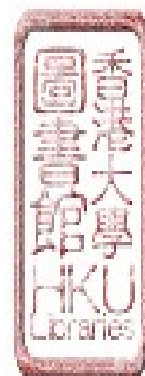


Leaving aside the issue of whether, as Hansen argues, skepticism actually is the basis for the *Zhuangzi's* normative stance, or, as Fraser contends, both skepticism and normative views are grounded in a meta-ethical theory about the nature of value, there does seem to be a sense in which our fundamental inability to know things such as what is universally right at least strongly supports the Zhuangist stance of ethical pluralism. If we cannot know that our way is truly better than anyone else's, we have no justification for forcing it upon others – even if we do not deny that there might indeed be a best way.²⁹⁸ Important too is the realization that the skepticism involved is not particular to what I can know, but to what anyone, short of the fantastic sage, can know. The realization that nobody can know the universally right way weighs in favor of my taking an accepting stance towards others – they might be right, or I might be right, but after all neither of us *knows* that he is right.

Chad Hansen draws attention to a further issue, which he sees as being a key motivating factor of the *Zhuangzi's* ethical stance: the problem of infinite regress or circularity in giving justification for one's norms.²⁹⁹ If each norm is justified by appeal to another norm, with no norms justified in any other way, we ultimately “run out” of justification, leaving us without persuasive justification for our practices except in terms of other norms that we are committed to, and, according to Hansen's interpretation, this motivates tolerance of alternative schemes. On the present interpretation,

²⁹⁸ However, as Fraser points out, skepticism about our ability to know what is universally right may not be sufficient alone to motivate tolerance of others. (Fraser 2009, 453).

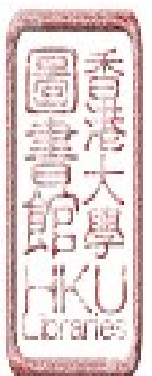
²⁹⁹ Hansen (2003, 143).



this sits uneasily with the stance of the text, because such a regress problem of justification is not limited to normative claims, but to all knowledge claims, and yet we have seen that there are knowledge claims of which the text does not appear to be skeptical. However, given the apparent interest of the text in justification and its relevance to conceptions of knowledge, considering how such a regress of norms might have been viewed by the compilers of the *Zhuangzi* may be of use in better understanding how the Zhuangist ethical stance relates to its views of knowledge.

Firstly, it is worth noting that for those such as Mohists and Confucians, paradigmatic examples of *shi-fei* debaters against whose absolutist conceptions of *dao* the *Zhuangzi* is opposed, justification often ends in appeals to basic goods against which perhaps few of their contemporaries would argue – order, benevolence, righteousness, and so on. Though a Confucian would reject the suggestion that benefit can be grounds for abandoning key ritual practices, and a Mohist would balk at the suggestion that rites and ritual can be justification for anything, appeals to the fact that something “promotes order” or “encourages filial piety” appear in principle to be viewed as acceptable justification by both.

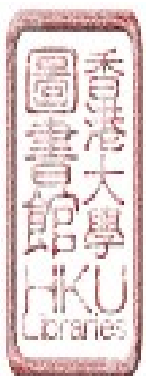
With this in mind, the intractable nature of the Confucian-Mohist debate seems to be due less to the two having radically different ethical outlooks grounded in fundamentally opposed values, than that their systematizations of their views – their proposed normative ethical systems and the justification for them – are incompatible, despite being grounded in the affirmation of broadly similar basic goods. Thus it would have been clear to contemporary thinkers interested in the debate that basic goods, even



supposing we are all be able to agree upon their importance, are ultimately insufficient to determine an entire ethical system – benevolence, righteousness, filial piety, and so on do not in themselves determine any one particular *dao*. Many of the same basic goods can be (and indeed were) appealed to as justification for Confucianism as for Mohism.

The *Zhuangzi* on the other hand does appear to be suspicious of even values nominally shared by Confucian and Mohist, such as benevolence and righteousness. This raises the question of whether for the *Zhuangzi* anything is to be valued in anything more than a highly contingent sense. If the *Zhuangzi* claims that *all daos* are equal in that they can only be contingently justified, while none is “ultimately” justified, we are quickly faced with the “Daoist Nazi problem” – the claim that a Zhuangist can produce no objection consistent with his own views to someone who wishes to follow a *dao* that would ordinarily be condemned as morally objectionable, such as a “Nazi *dao*”. We can imagine an individual who devotes his life to practices that most of us would consider abhorrent – in the following discussion I will use “killing innocent babies for fun” as an arbitrary example of such an activity practiced by the hypothetical Nazi – and also turns out to be extremely successful at achieving his aims. The worry is that by devaluing conventional morality, the *Zhuangzi* denies us the possibility of saying that either such a *dao* or the actions of such a person are in any sense wrong, and thereby ends up making a “Nazi *dao*” appear no less legitimate than any other.³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ The *Mozi* appeals to a broadly similar example in its argument against the authority of conventional morality: suppose there is a state in which it is the custom to kill and eat one’s first-born son, and that this is accepted by those in power and the common people – even so, this alone would not make such a



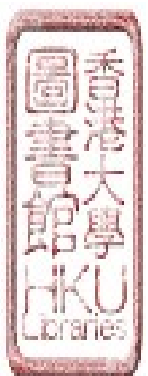
Certainly for the *Zhuangzi*, even fundamental values and basic goods *can* be questioned, as for example when it questions whether death is truly something to be disvalued.³⁰¹ But so can everyday knowledge claims – the butterfly dream passage clearly makes problematic even claims such as “I know that I am Zhuang Zhou”³⁰² – though as we have seen, the text is not in general radically skeptical about the possibility of knowledge. The more radical strand of thought in the *Zhuangzi* highlights the regress of justification that Hansen points out – however this type of regress is not unique to normative claims, but shared by all knowledge claims. If we attempt to follow the line of thought of the less radical strands of the *Zhuangzi*, we will presumably have to accept that justification must eventually stop somewhere. This allows us to accept that we do know that monkeys live in trees and Zhuangzi to accept that he knows that he is Zhuang Zhou. But can this less radical stance also allow us to suspend our skepticism about *some* ethical knowledge?

For the *Zhuangzi*, the problem with Mohist and Confucian doctrine is less that it makes normative claims which are false, unjustified, wrong, or go against some “correct” *dao* – though some of these might also be so – as that the things they are claiming to know absolutely are clear instances of “lesser knowledge”. It doesn’t matter how long the correct mourning period is claimed to be; the problem is with claiming that there is such a thing as a universally correct mourning period in the first place, and that we could

practice *right* (*Mozi* 39/25/75-78). The related “Daoist Nazi” problem is that a Zhuangist cannot simply condemn such a practice as wrong without being drawn into the very sort of petty *shi-fei* debate he so disdains.

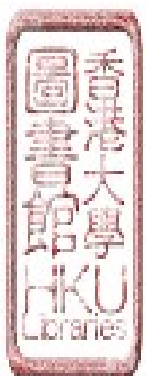
³⁰¹ *Zhuangzi* 6/2/80-81.

³⁰² *Zhuangzi* 7/2/94-96.



somehow come to know it. Realizing that such a thing cannot be known, because what is “correct” in that case depends importantly upon perspective, makes us strongly suspect that there simply is no such thing as a correct mourning period or ritual, and makes us suspicious of those claiming otherwise. But at the same time, it is worth noting that there is no immediate reason to think that this must necessarily be the case for all claims involving “correctness” or normativity, since the source of doubt in the mourning period case comes from the way the subjective acceptability of the claim varies with individual perspective. This leaves open the possibility that some claims as to what is correct do indeed hold across all recognizably human perspectives. Such claims would clearly have to be very different to the petty *shi* and *fei* of the Confucians and Mohists – indeed, they would have to be claims about which people simply do not disagree.

This suggests that one potential response to the Daoist Nazi scenario might be for the Zhuangist to simply argue that the Nazi case is one in which people who otherwise may follow a variety of different *dao* have such overwhelming agreement that the Nazi is in the wrong that condemnation of his actions is no less correct than our mundane and uncontroversial observation that monkeys live in trees. The claim that “killing innocent babies for fun is wrong” might be an example of a normative claim that seems so obvious to human beings that we accept it as valid in much the same way we accept the claim that monkeys live in trees – and in particular, we don’t see it as importantly dependent upon perspective, nor do ordinary people



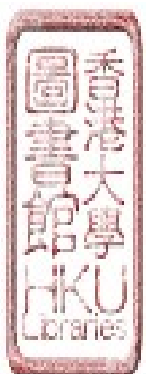
see it as requiring any particular justification.³⁰³ Just as the existence of a lunatic claiming that monkeys live in little yellow submarines is not normally considered a counterexample to the commonsense claim that monkeys live in trees, so the existence of a disturbed individual who sees nothing wrong with killing innocent babies for fun might also not constitute a genuine perspective from which the latter claim fails to hold.

But at the same time, it seems that particularly in view of the Zhuangist's emphasis on the range of available or possible perspectives, there is another relevant and important perspective which we must consider: the perspective of the Nazi himself. The Nazi perspective, being by hypothesis an actual perspective, is surely at least as real a perspective as that of the sage. Yet from the Nazi's own perspective, again by hypothesis, there is nothing wrong with killing innocent babies for fun, and so a wise Zhuangist,³⁰⁴ looking at things from as many perspectives as he can, would have to concede that "killing innocent babies for fun is wrong" is lesser knowledge and contingent upon perspective.

Does this mean that the *Zhuangzi* is committed to such a radical relativism about value that it simply can give no response to the hypothetical Nazi? I think that here there are still ways in which the Zhuangist can

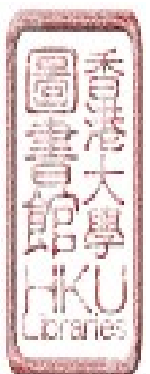
³⁰³ A similar case – that of our instinctive reaction to seeing a child about to fall into a well – is famously cited in the *Mengzi* in the course of arguing for a Confucian *dao* (*Mengzi* 3.6/18/4-12). Perhaps the Zhuangist issue with such claims is less that they might not truly hold for everyone, but that even supposing that they did hold, they still could not be used as evidence in favor of any one particular *dao*, such as the *dao* for which Mengzi argues, because they could equally well serve as evidence for some alternative, incompatible *dao*.

³⁰⁴ By "wise Zhuangist" I mean someone who endorses the views on lesser and greater knowledge as interpreted here, and additionally values "greater knowledge" over "lesser knowledge".



respond without needing to commit himself to knowing the universal “wrongness” of the original claim.³⁰⁵ Firstly, the Zhuangist would surely point out that knowledge itself is importantly limited in this way, and the question of what we can know about the Nazi case is not in itself particularly special. The vast range of perspectives that can be considered mean that we cannot attain great knowledge, in ethical and non-ethical cases alike. We might tentatively endorse the claim that “killing innocent babies for fun is wrong”, since it does appear to hold from many perspectives, but this alone provides no real challenge to the hypothetical Nazi himself, since it is precisely from his perspective that it fails. But this does not mean that the *Zhuangzi* has nothing to say about the Nazi or his *dao*. For one thing, it seems clear that if I myself were a Zhuangist, it would be *foolish* for me to follow a Nazi *dao*. Committing myself to a *dao* in which I claim to know that “killing innocent babies for fun is acceptable” for instance would appear to be an unwise thing for me to do considering that such claims fail from so many perspectives – for instance from those of the babies, their families, and virtually all of society, as well as perhaps possible past and future perspectives I myself might actually occupy. Similarly, it seems that I can also quite consistently condemn a Nazi *dao* follower, not because his actions, commitments or *dao* are “wrong” in any absolute sense, but rather because he is stupid in failing to see these important perspectives on his situation. Depending upon the Nazi’s other beliefs and commitments, a skilled Zhuangist might well be able to point out a perspective that the Nazi himself would find persuasive – perhaps

³⁰⁵ Here I am following the approach suggested in Fraser (2009, 455 and footnote 41).

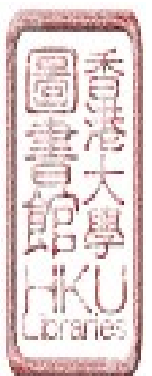


reflecting upon the fact that he too was once an innocent baby might lead him to question his actions, or perhaps the thought of his own offspring being killed for fun by himself or others might lead him to reevaluate his beliefs. Thus it seems that there are avenues of response open to the Zhuangist that avoid his being drawn into a petty *shi-fei* debate over the universally correct *dao* and its justification.

Such criticism is necessarily weaker than simply condemning the Nazi's actions outright – this is an inevitable consequence of the *Zhuangzi*'s skepticism about our knowledge of uniquely privileged perspectives and ultimately correct *shi-fei*. Even if we conclude that he is stupid, we cannot completely eliminate the possibility that the Nazi's way of life, though not universally right, was after all the right way *for him*, just as we cannot eliminate the possibility that after death it may turn out that we have been wrong to value life so highly. The *Zhuangzi* allows such possibilities, but at the same time offers guidance based on the perspectives available to us – and encourages us to think about and reflect on a wider range of them than we might otherwise do. As we embrace a wider range of perspectives, we may improve our epistemic position, but we should not expect any guarantees of being ultimately *right*.

5.3.3. Conclusion

The skepticism in the *Zhuangzi* does represent a genuine, substantive skeptical position, but at the same time the text also provides a positive methodology for improving our epistemic position, which is nonetheless consistent with its overall skeptical stance. We can't know what *everything*

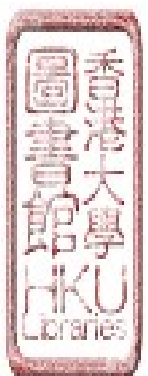


agrees on – but if our knowledge is such that it can be agreed upon from *more* perspectives, then it is in some sense *better* knowledge. The knowledge that creatures choose to live in environments that suit their way of life is surely better than the knowledge that a monkey lives in a tree – and in particular, it is much better than the mistaken claim that everyone should live in a tree. But it is also better than less clearly mistaken claims, such as that everyone should live in a house – by generalizing and reflecting, we can come to see *why* we are tempted to say people should live in houses, namely because creatures choose to live in environments that suit their way of life, and then see that there isn't any reason why someone *ought* to live in a house if by some chance doing so did not suit his way of life.

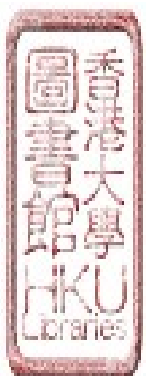
This may be one factor motivating Zhuangist political views. As Chad Hansen points out, the main task of political theory in the time of the *Zhuangzi* was “to identify the wise leader who would choose to impose a single way of life on everyone”.³⁰⁶ But being “wise” or “knowledgeable” for the *Zhuangzi* seems to entail precisely the opposite of this – we are wise only when our knowledge holds from a vast range of perspectives, and this will prevent us from claiming to “know” that any one way of life is the right one, so long as we can imagine *any* perspective from which it might *not* be right. Being wise means recognizing the varied perspectives that exist – and so realizing that there may well not be a single way of living which is right from all perspectives.

In conclusion, the *Zhuangzi* tells us how we *can* improve our epistemic position, but, in typically Zhuangist style, it doesn't tell us whether we

³⁰⁶ Hansen (2003, 154).



actually *should*. If we don't follow the advice, we will surely be foolish, but being foolish might not be such a bad thing. In any case, we certainly cannot know everything, and we should try not to forget that the single-minded pursuit of knowledge could easily prevent us from living a good life.

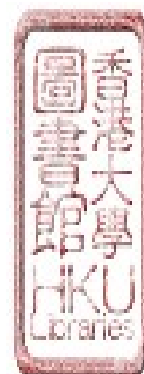


6. Conclusion

In early Chinese thought, key concepts that in much of the history of Western tradition of philosophy were thought of as primarily sentential in nature, such as truth and belief, did not play a similarly important role in understanding knowledge. By contrast, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the importance of *dao* in Chinese thought as a whole, actions and the reliable ability to perform actions – most fundamentally the ability to appropriately distinguish *shi* and *fei*, and act in accordance with these distinctions – were fundamental to the standard positive Chinese conception of knowledge.

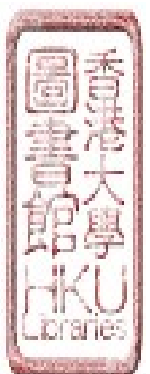
Though features of the language did not limit or determine the content of the debate about knowledge or what could or could not be said in it, they nevertheless importantly shaped its overall direction. Linguistic disanalogies between knowledge, truth, and belief, coupled with a blurring of the line between knowledge and wisdom, meant that a JTB-like account of knowledge would not only have seemed unnatural to the early Chinese, but would fail to be an adequate explanation of “knowing” in the sense of “*zhi*” due to the focus of JTB on knowledge in isolation from action. Instead the closeness of knowledge to other perceptive faculties made it natural for the same *shi-fei* framework applied to these to be used to explain knowledge.

The term “*shi-fei*” itself having both subjective and objective uses, the correctness aspect of knowledge could be characterized as ensuring that an agent’s subjective *shi-fei* adhered correctly with the objective *shi-fei*. The key question then is: what are these objective *shi-fei* by which our subjective *shi-*



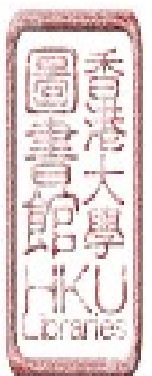
fei are to be assessed, and what is it that makes them objectively correct? Different thinkers proposed different answers, beginning with Mencius's suggestion that they might somehow develop from something innate in us present in all human beings, and Mozi's response that since it is objectivity that is being sought, surely what is required are fixed, objective standards. But which standards are the right standards? The Mohists attempt to justify theirs using reasoned arguments and appeals to what they considered to be accepted or justified values – opening these up for debate. A critical response to this approach was to suggest that standards are fundamentally inadequate for this role, because knowing often is a matter of doing – of being able to successfully perform certain actions – and there are cases in which this cannot be conveyed by means of any model. But even for those who accepted the notion that objective models might offer a suitable standard of correctness against which to measure knowledge, the very existence of the debate over what these standards were implied a need for an account of what it was that made the standards themselves correct. The *Xunzi* proposed a sophisticated solution in which what justified the standards was a combination of facts about human nature and the practical historical successfulness of the existing set of standards. The writers of the text seemingly hoped these objective *shi-fei* would coincide with those of the traditional Confucian *dao*, though the account itself would seem to imply that this might well not turn out to be the case.

Language was related to knowledge most fundamentally at the level of the word, and the most commonly used case of “knowing” was of knowing some thing; whether one knew or did not would be in large part determined



by whether, when faced with an actual instance of the thing, one applied the correct name to it. Positive *dao* advocates explained the relation between word and thing in terms of *fa* and *lei*, again underwritten by *shi-fei* distinctions. The Mohists in particular however explicitly extended this idea to apply to doctrines – *yan* – that should be promoted to ensure the flourishing of the correct *dao*: good *yan* were those that cohered with and promoted adherence to the *dao*, and the correctness of these, like individual words, could be measured using appropriate *fa*. The later Mohists appear to be continuing this quest for *fa* for the good *yan* in their investigations into the properties of language, as it appears to underlie the approach they take – in particular, they investigate the properties of *correct* language use. Their intriguing investigation yields the result that language is importantly irregular, and so the rhetorically powerful parallelism of linguistic form much valued in the classical writing style does not constitute a persuasive argumentation strategy when used alone.

This fed into developing skeptical ideas about language and knowledge in general. The Mohists, in showing how seemingly regular language use could actually be a source of fallacious or sophistic arguments that ought to be rejected, highlighted the fact that words can be used in different ways in different contexts. But if the ways words are used can be *radically* different in different contexts – and can even be forced to be quite different or opposite to their ordinary meaning in certain contexts – it would appear these differences in use cannot be accounted for by the *fa* that were supposed to give normative standards for correct word use, and this would

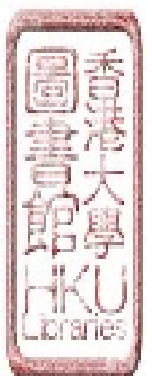


risk fatally undermining the positive account of language and its role in knowledge and justification.

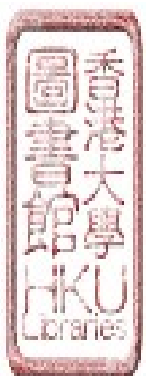
This idea was suggestive of a general line of skeptical challenge to the mainstream account of knowledge: the big problem with *fa* is not just that it is difficult to agree upon precisely what they are, or give sufficient justification for them, but rather that what the correct *fa* actually are can be different – perhaps radically different – in different cases. By the same token, how things are – the supposedly universal, objective *shi-fei* sought by the positive *dao* theorists – can also be different when viewed from different perspectives. What I *shi* and *fei* may legitimately be different to what you *shi* and *fei* – because from my perspective, things *are* different from how they are from your perspective: they do not merely *appear* to be so.

Just as Chinese thinkers were interested in a social *dao*, so too the problem of skepticism that emerges for them is in some sense a social skepticism: if I were the only being in the universe, there would be little to motivate Zhuangist skepticism, since it relies upon the difference between alternative correct sets of *shi-fei* distinctions to challenge the idea of universally correct *shi-fei* standards. With no other agents around – or only agents who happen to always agree with my own perspective – my own *shi-fei* simply are the universal *shi-fei*, and there is little to be skeptical about.

An interesting feature of the Zhuangist skepticism is that it is not only motivated by a form of relativism, but the skepticism so motivated can be read as being importantly relativist. Although one possibility is to take the skepticism to an extreme, and as suggested by primitivists and their “abandon knowledge” slogan, another more interesting possibility is to



accept the contingency of all knowledge commitments, while also appreciating that different commitments can be more or less susceptible to skeptical worries. This raises the possibility of both endorsing skeptical conclusions, while simultaneously putting them to pragmatically useful purposes. In this sense even skepticism has a practical purpose, and can be used constructively to draw important conclusions about *dao*.



Appendix: Mohist groups of correct language use

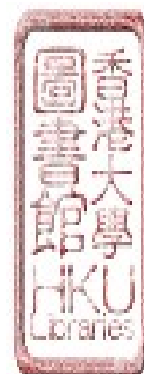
Group 1: 是而然³⁰⁷

x, y也; Ax, Ay也。	x	y	A
白馬，馬也；乘白馬，乘馬也。 A white horse is a horse; Riding a white horse is riding a horse	白馬 white horse	馬 horse	乘 ride
驪馬，馬也；乘驪馬，乘馬也。 A black horse is a horse; Riding a black horse is riding a horse	驪馬 black horse	馬 horse	乘 ride
獲，人也；愛獲，愛人也。 Huo is a man; caring for Huo is caring for men.	獲 Huo	人 person	愛 care
臧，人也；愛臧，愛人也。 Zang is a man; caring for Zang is caring for men.	臧 Zang	人 person	愛 care

Group 2: 是而不然

x, y也; Ax, 非Ay也。	x	y	A
獲之親，人也；獲事其親，非事人也。 Huo's parents are people; Huo serving his parents is not serving people.	獲之親 Huo's parents	人 person	事 serve
其弟，美人也；愛弟，非愛美人也。 His younger brother is a handsome person; Caring for his younger brother is not caring for handsome people.	弟 younger brother	美人 handsome person	愛 care
車，木也；乘車，非乘木也。 A cart is wooden; Riding a cart is not riding wood.	車 cart	木 wooden, wood	乘 ride
船，木也；入船，非入木也。 A boat is wooden; Entering a boat is not entering wood.	船 boat	木 wooden, wood	入 enter
盜人，人也；多盜，非多人也。 A thief is a man; Many thieves is not many men.	盜 thief	人 person	多 many
盜人，人也；惡多盜，非惡多人也。 A thief is a man; Hating [there being] many thieves is not hating [there being] many men.	盜 thief	人 person	惡多 hate many

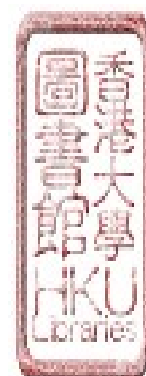
³⁰⁷ The following tables are adapted from Sturgeon (2012, 69-70), and include the relatively uncontroversial emendations to the *Daozang* edition of the text that are argued for in Robins (2010).



盜人，人也；欲無盜，非欲無人也。 A thief is a man; Wishing there were no thieves is not wishing there were no men.	盜 thief	人 person	欲無 wish no
盜人，人也；多盜，非多人也。 A thief is a man; Many thieves is not many men.	盜 thief	人 person	多 many
盜人，人也；愛盜，非愛人也。 A thief is a man; Caring for thieves is not caring for men.	盜 thief	人 person	愛 care
盜人，人也；不愛盜，非不愛人也。 A thief is a man; Not caring for thieves is not not-caring for men.	盜 thief	人 person	不愛 not care
盜人，人也；殺盜，非殺人也。 A thief is a man; Killing thieves is not killing men.	盜 thief	人 person	殺 kill

Group 3: 是而不然

x, 非y也；Ax, Ay也。	x	y	A
讀書，非書也；好讀書，好書也。 Reading books is not books; Liking reading books is liking books.	讀書 read books	書 books	好 like
鬥雞，非雞也；好鬥雞，好雞也。 Fighting cocks is not cocks; Liking fighting cocks is liking cocks.	鬥雞 fight cocks	雞 cocks	好 like
且入井，非入井也；止且入井，止入井也。 Being about to fall into a well is not falling into a well; Stopping someone about to fall into a well is stopping someone from falling into a well.	且入井 about to enter a well	入井 enter a well	止 stop, prevent
且出門，非出門也；止且出門，止出門也。 Being about to go out is not going out; Stopping someone about to go out is stopping someone going out.	且出門 about to go out	出門 go out	止 stop, prevent
且夭，非夭也；止且夭，止夭也。 Being about to die young is not dying young; Stopping someone about to die young is stopping someone from dying young.	且夭 about to die young	夭 die young	止 stop, prevent
執有命，非命也；非執有命，非命也。 Taking there being fate is not fate; Opposing those who take that there is fate is opposing fate.	執有命 take there being fate	命 fate	非 oppose, deny



Group 4: 一周而一周

Ax requires A-ing all the x; Bx does not require B-ing all the x.	x	A	B
愛人，待周愛人而後為愛人； 不愛人，不待周不愛人。 Caring for people requires caring for all people to count as caring for people; Not caring for people does not require not caring for all people to count as not caring for people.	人 people	愛 care	不愛 not care
乘馬，不待周乘馬然後為乘馬也； 不乘馬，待周不乘馬而後不乘馬。 Riding horses does not require riding all horses to count as riding horses; Not riding horses requires not riding all [i.e. any] horses to count as not riding horses.	馬 horses	不乘 not ride	乘 ride

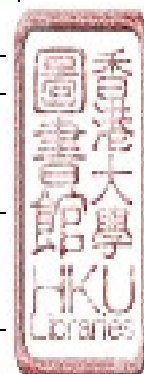
Group 5: 一是而一非

Unlike the other groups, group 5 is not composed of statements that are all formally parallel to one another, but rather of various formally parallel subgroups, each of which share the common property that things are so in the one case and not-so in another related case.

居於國，則為居國；有一宅於國，而不為有國。 Living within a state is living in the state; Having a house within the state is not having the state.
桃之實，桃也；棘之實，非棘也。 The fruit of a peach is a peach; The fruit of a <i>ji</i> (juzube) is not a <i>ji</i> .
問人之病，問人也；惡人之病，非惡人也。 Asking after a person's illness is asking after a person; Disliking a person's illness is not disliking a person.

人之鬼，非人也；兄之鬼，兄也。 A person's ghost is not a person; One's elder brother's ghost is one's elder brother.
祭人之鬼，非祭人也；祭兄之鬼，祭兄也。 Sacrificing to a person's ghost is not sacrificing to a person; Sacrificing to one's elder brother's ghost is sacrificing to one's elder brother.

之馬之目盼，則為之馬盼；之馬之目大，而不謂之馬大。 This horse's eyes are blind means that this horse is blind; This horse's eyes are large does not mean that this horse is large.
之牛之毛黃，則謂之牛黃；之牛之毛眾，而不謂之牛眾。 This ox's hairs are brown means that this ox is brown; This ox's hairs are many does not mean that this ox is many.



馬四足者，一馬而四足也，非兩馬而四足也。

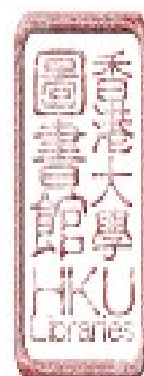
Horses have four feet:

One horse has four feet; two horses do not have four feet.

馬或白者，二馬而或白也，非一馬而或白。

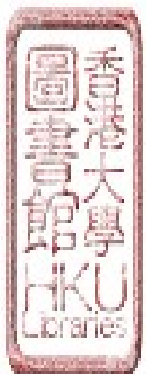
Some horses are white:

Two horses can be some white; one horse cannot be some white.

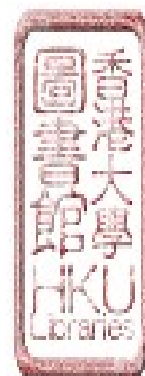


Bibliography

- Allinson, Robert, ed. 1989. *Understanding the Chinese Mind*. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Alt, Wayne. 1991. Language and Logic in the Chuang Tzu. *Asian Philosophy* 1:1, 61-76.
- Chen Gu-ying 陳鼓應. 1983. 《莊子今註今譯》北京：中華書局.
- Cook, S. ed. 2003. *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*. Albany: SUNY.
- Cua, Antonio. 1985. *Ethical Argumentation: A Study in Hsun Tzu's Moral Epistemology*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii.
- 1993. The Possibility of Ethical Knowledge: Reflections on a Theme in the Hsun Tzu. In Lenk and Paul, eds. 1993, 159-80.
- DeRose, Keith. 2009. *The Case for Contextualism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fang Wan-chuan 方萬全. 1997. On Chad Hansen's Mass Noun Hypothesis. 論陳漢生的物質名詞假設. Ye Jin-Ming 葉錦明 Ed. Luoji Sixiang yu Yuyan Zhexue. Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju 學生書局.
- 2006. Zhenli Gainian yu Xianqin Zhexue: yu Chen Hansheng Xiansheng Shangquan 真理概念與先秦哲學—與陳漢生先生商權. *Nanjing Daxue Xuebao* 南京大學學報, 2006.2, 91-102.
- Fox, A. 1996. Reflex and Reflectivity: Wuwei in the Zhuangzi. *Asian Philosophy*, 6:1, 59-72.



- Fraser, Christopher. 1999. *Similarity and Standards: Language, Cognition, and Action in Chinese and Western Thought*. PhD thesis, University of Hong Kong.
- 2007. Language and Ontology in Early Chinese Thought. *Philosophy East and West* 57:4, 420-456.
- 2008. Wu-wei, the background, and intentionality. In Bo Mou, ed. 2008, 63-92.
- 2009. Skepticism and Value in the Zhuangzi. *International Philosophical Quarterly* 49.4.
- 2010. Mohism. In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- 2011. Knowledge and Error in Early Chinese Thought. *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10:2, 127-148.
- 2013. Mohist Canons. In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
- Forthcoming. Language and Logic in Xunzi. Forthcoming in *Dao Companion to Xunzi*. Ed. Eric Hutton.
- Fung Yiu-Ming. 2007. A Logical Perspective on “Discourse on White-Horse”. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 34:4, 515-536.
- 2012. A Logical Perspective on the Parallelism in Later Moism. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39:3, 333-350.
- Geaney, Jane. 2002. *On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Graham, A. C. 1967. The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature. *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies* 6, 215-274.
- 1978. *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science*. Hong Kong: Chinese University.



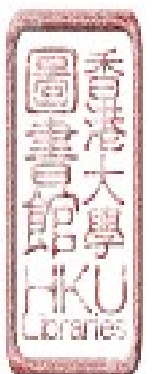
- 1981. *Chuang-tzu: Inner Chapters*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- 1983. Experimental essays on Chuang-tzu. In Mair, ed. 1983, 3-23.
- 1985a. *Divisions in Mohism Reflected in the Core Chapters of Mo-tzu*. Singapore: Institute of East Asian Philosophies.
- 1985b. Review of Language and Logic in Ancient China, by Chad Hansen. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45:2, 692-703.
- 1989. *Disputers of the Tao*. La Salle: Open Court.

Grandy, Richard. 1973. Reference, Meaning, and Belief. *Journal of Philosophy* 70:14, 439-52.

Hagen, Kurtis. 2002. *Confucian constructivism: a reconstruction and application of the philosophy of Xunzi*. PhD thesis, University of Hawaii.

Hansen, Chad. 1983a. *Language and Logic in Ancient China*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

- 1983b. A Tao of 'Tao' in Chuang Tzu. In Mair, ed. 1983, 24-55.
- 1985. Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and 'Truth.' *Journal of Asian Studies* 44:33, 491-519.
- 1987. Classical Chinese Philosophy as Linguistic Analysis. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 14, 309-30.
- 1989. Language in the Heart-mind. In Allinson, ed. 1989, 75-124.
- 1991. Should the Ancient Masters Value Reason? In Rosemont, ed. 1991, 179-207.



- 1992. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 1993. Term-Belief in Action. In Lenk and Paul, eds. 1993, 45-68.
- 1994. Fa (Standards:Laws) and Meaning Changes in Chinese Philosophy. *Philosophy East and West* 44:3, 435-88.
- 2003. Guru or Skeptic? Relativistic Skepticism in the Zhuangzi. In Cook, ed. 2003, 128-62.

Harbsmeier, Christoph. 1981. *Aspects of Classical Chinese Syntax*. London: Curzon.

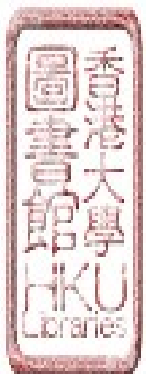
- 1989. Humor in Ancient Chinese Philosophy. *Philosophy East and West*, 39:3, 289-310.
- 1993. Conceptions of Knowledge in Ancient China. In Lenk and Paul, eds. 1993, 11-30.
- 1984. Review of Language and Logic in Ancient China, by Chad Hansen. *Early China* 9-10, 250-57.
- 1998. *Science and Civilisation in China, Vol. 7, Part 1: Language and Logic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ivanhoe, Philip J. 1993. Zhuangzi on Skepticism, Skill, and the Ineffable Dao. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61, 639-54.

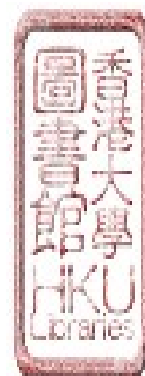
Karlgren, Bernhard. 1957. *Grammata Serica Recensa*. Stockholm: Museum of the Far Eastern Antiquities.

Kjellberg, Paul, and Philip J. Ivanhoe, eds. 1996. *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*. Albany: SUNY.

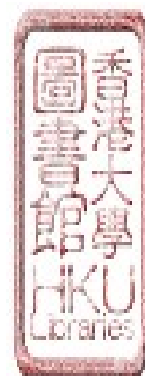
Klein, E. and Klein, C. 2011. Did the Chinese Have a Change of Heart? *Cognitive Science* 36 (2012), 179-182.



- Knoblock, John. 1988. *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*. Stanford University Press.
- Knoblock, John and Riegel, Jeffrey. 2001. *The Annals of Lü Buwei*. Stanford University Press.
- Kupperman, Joel J. 1970. *Ethical Knowledge*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- 1989. Not in So Many Words: Chuang Tzu's Strategies of Communication. *Philosophy East and West* 39:3, 311-17.
- Lee Hsien Chung. 2003. *Moxue: Lilun yu Fangfa* 墨學：理論與方法. Taipei: Yang Zhi 揚智.
- Lenk, Hans, and Gregor Paul, eds. 1993. *Epistemological Issues in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Albany: SUNY.
- Lloyd, G.E.R. 1996. *Adversaries and authorities: investigations into ancient Greek and Chinese science*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 2004. *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mair, Victor, ed. 1983. *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii.
- Makeham, John. 1994. *Name and actuality in early Chinese thought*. Albany: SUNY.
- Raphals, Lisa. 1996. Skeptical Strategies in the Zhuangzi and Theaetetus. In Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, eds. 1996, 26-49.
- Puett, Michael. The Ethics of Responding Properly: The Notion of *Qing* 情 in Early Chinese Thought. In *Love and Emotions in Traditional*



- Chinese Literature. Ed. Halvor Eifring. Leiden: Brill, 2004, p37-68.
- Robins, Dan. 2001. *The debate over human nature in warring states China*. PhD Thesis, University of Hong Kong.
- 2010. The Later Mohists and Logic. *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 31, 247-285.
- 2011. It Goes Beyond Skill. In *Ethics in Early China: An Anthology*. Chris Fraser, Dan Robins, Timothy O’Leary eds. Hong Kong University Press, 2011, p.105-124.
- 2012. Names, Cranes, and the Later Moists. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 93:3, 369-385.
- Roetz, Heiner. 1993. Validity in Chou Thought. In Lenk and Paul, eds. 1993, 69-112.
- Shaughnessy, Edward. 2006. *Rewriting Early Chinese Texts*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Schwartz, Benjamin. 1985. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sivin, Nathan. 1995a. State, Cosmos, and Body in the Last Three Centuries B.C. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 55.1: 5-37.
- 1995b. *Science in Ancient China*. Aldershot: Variorum.
- Slingerland, Edward and Chudek, Maciej. 2011. The Prevalence of Mind–Body Dualism in Early China. *Cognitive Science* 35 (2011) 997–1007.
- Smith, Kidder. 2003. Sima Tan and the Invention of Daoism, “Legalism”, et cetera. *Journal of Asian Studies* 62.1, 129-156.



- Soles, Deborah H. and Soles, David E. 1998. "Fish traps and rabbit snares: Zhuangzi on judgement, truth, and knowledge." *Asian Philosophy* 8.3, 149-64.
- Sturgeon, Donald 德龍. 2012. 《墨辯中的語言哲學》台北：花木蘭.
- 2014. Mohism, Standards, and Social Order. In *Order and Revolt: Debating the Principles of Eastern and Western Social Thought*. Ed. Wayne Cristaudo, Heung Wah Wong, and Sun Youzhong.
- 2015. Zhuangzi, Perspectives, and Greater Knowledge. *Philosophy East and West* 65:3. (Forthcoming)
- Watson, Burton. 1968. *The Complete Works Of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Columbia Press.
- Wang Zhong Lin 王忠林. 2009. 《新譯荀子讀本》台北：三民書局.
- Wong, David. 2005. "Zhuangzi and the Obsession with Being Right." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 22, 91-107.
- Yearley, Lee H. 1996. Zhuangzi's Understanding of Skillfulness and the Ultimate Spiritual State. In Kjellberg and Ivanhoe, eds. 1996, 152-82.
- Yu, Ning. 2007. Heart and Cognition in Ancient Chinese Philosophy. *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 7 (2007) 27-47.

