

SUNY Series in Chinese Philosophy and Culture
David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, editors

EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES
IN CLASSICAL CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

Edited by Hans Lenk and Gregor Paul

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

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Conceptions of Knowledge in Ancient China

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The distinction between the nouns *epistēmê* (knowledge) and *doxa* (belief) was basic for the development of Greek philosophy, and for science. The task of philosophy (a concept which in ancient Greece included that of science) can simply be defined as the art of distinguishing things we know from those which we merely believe.

There is no parallel in China to Plato's *Theaitetos* with its sustained discussion of what appeared at the time of Plato to be basic problems of knowledge. We have to reconstruct early Chinese views of knowledge on the basis of the more fragmentary evidence provided by the various pre-Buddhist Chinese philosophical texts. Post-Buddhist conceptions of knowledge in China pose special problems of their own which I shall not deal with in this paper.

It is certainly not a foregone conclusion that the Chinese had anything like our concepts of knowledge. We need to demonstrate on the basis of textual evidence what kinds of notions of knowledge the ancient Chinese operated with.

On the one hand, it is striking that the ancient Chinese did not have a count noun for a belief or a piece of knowledge.¹ "Being knowledgeable," "being wise," and "knowing things" are indeed subjects of theoretical discourse in ancient China. But the ancient Chinese do not tend to speak of "the belief that p" or "the knowledge that p." Neither beliefs nor pieces of knowledge are habitually nominalised in ancient Chinese.

On the other hand, there is a clear distinction between believing something to be so and knowing something to be so in ancient texts.

South of the mouth of the Xia River there was a man called Juan Juliang. In disposition he was stupid and very fearful. When the moon was bright he was walking in the dark. He looked down, saw his shadow and thought (*yi wei*) it was a ghost following him. He looked up, saw his hair and thought (*yi wei*) it was a standing ogre. He turned round and ran. When he got to his house he lost his breath and died.²

It might be tempting to construe *yi X wei Y* along the lines: "take X and treat it as Y," so that no propositional attitude would be involved. But consider now this sentence:

[I], the stupid one, consider (*yu yi wei*) [that] the talented should die for their duty on the borders, [that] the rich should provide provisions, [and that] in this way the Xiongnu may be destroyed.³

Here the speaker expresses a humble subjective opinion. It appears that the phrase *yi wei* (believe [that]) here has two (or possibly three) clauses as its complement, but the non-finiteness of these clauses is not marked by any grammatical device. Although cases like this are rare, they do illustrate that *yi wei* cannot always be interpreted along the lines of "take the SUBJECT and consider it as PREDICATING"⁴ and that there are propositional objects of belief.

The Later Mohists took a technically philosophical interest in the distinction between believing and knowing. In China, as in the West, the notion of dreaming was of special interest in this connection:

Dreaming is supposing something to be so while one is asleep (*meng wo er yi wei ran ye*).⁵

In this section I wish to consider ancient Chinese ways of speaking about knowledge in order to reconstruct and understand ancient Chinese ways of thinking. Is the paradigm of what is learned and known in ancient China really "the Confucian virtues,"⁶ or is there a factual and scientific paradigm as well? Is there only knowledge about how to treat things, about acquaintance or familiarity with things in ancient China, or is there also knowledge that certain statements are true?

Consider Xunzi's puzzling definition:

Considering this (or: what is right (*shi*)) as this (or: right), and considering not-this (or: what is wrong (*fei*)) as not-this (or: wrong) constitutes knowing. Considering this as 'not-this' and considering what is not-this as 'this' is making a fool of oneself.⁷

When the word *shi* (this, right) is used as a transitive verb, it is customary to translate it either psychologically as I have done "to consider as right," or more pragmatically as "to treat as right." The profound question is whether in ancient China "considering something as right" was simply the same as "dealing with things as if they were right."

Let us look at some more ancient evidence for the distinction between knowing and believing things.

The trouble with the person who makes a mistake is that he does not know but believes he does.⁸

I thought Your Majesty already knew this (*chen yi wang wei yi zhi zhi*).⁹

The notion of believing or supposing something to be the case is translated by the Classical Chinese *yi wei*. The different notion of "believing in" something that has been said is expressed by *yi wei ran* (believe to be so), by *xin zhi* (believe it to be trustworthy, believe to be true), or indeed simply by the verb *ran* in its putative acceptance: "to consider to be so." However, it remains interesting that a phrase like *xin qie Yu zhi zha* must mean "believed in the deceits of concubine Yu," and certainly does not mean "believed that concubine Yu was deceitful."¹⁰

Hanfeizi took the distinction between knowing and believing very seriously indeed. He made a distinction between the factual truth of words on the one hand, and psychological attitudes (e.g., of belief) on the other.

It is in the nature of words that they are taken to be trustworthy (*xin*) when many people advocate them. Take a thing that is not so (*bu ran zhi wu*). When ten people maintain it, one has one's doubts. When one hundred people maintain it, one thinks it is probably so (*ran*). When one thousand people maintain it, it is incontrovertible.¹¹

What is this "thing (*wu*)?" Since it is something which one advocates it appears to be something like a proposition or a sentence, although it would evidently be misleading to attribute the abstract theoretical notion of a proposition or even of a sentence to the Chinese on the basis of this text alone. None the less, this sort of passage is of central importance to the issue at hand. *Xin* (be trustworthy) here refers quite specifically to what is trustworthy because it is true. Good faith is not at issue. It is worth looking at a variant of this story:

(Pang Gong) said: "Suppose one person maintains there is a tiger in the market. Would you believe it?"

(The King) replied: "No."

"Suppose two people maintained that there is a tiger in the market. Would you believe it?"

"No!"

"Suppose three people maintained there is a tiger in the market. Would you believe it?"

"Yes I would."

Pang Gong continued: "It is perfectly clear that there is no tiger in the market, but when three maintain that there is one, that makes a tiger!"¹²

Hanfeizi took a central interest in the notion of objective truth (which may or may not be known). He clearly distinguished this from the psychological notion of belief. And in case anyone should think that this clear distinction was limited to a philosopher like Hanfeizi, we might point, for example, to the fact that the story is retailed again in the historical compilation *Zhanguo*.¹³

THE REALMS OF KNOWING IN ANCIENT CHINA

There are several realms of knowing that must be distinguished for our purposes:

1. knowing things;
2. knowing how to do things;
3. knowing whether a sentence or statement is true.

In addition there are three important, distinct ways of reflecting on knowing:

4. reflecting on the nature and structure of knowing;
5. reflecting on the social usefulness of knowing;
6. reflecting on the objective reliability of knowing.

Before we turn to more detailed questions, we will do well to recall the following saying from the old *Book of History*:

It is not the knowing that is difficult. It is the acting that is difficult. The Master knew it but I was not up to it (i.e., I was unable to follow his advice).¹⁴

There is little room in traditional Chinese culture for knowledge for its own sake. There was little enthusiasm for “academic knowledge” as cultivated by philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, who continued the heritage of Socrates. For the ancient Chinese it was action that was primary, personal action and political action. Insight was valued insofar as it led to successful action.

1. “Knowing things”

We turn first to the cases where the object of the verb *zhi* (know) is a noun, which we call cases of “knowing things.” For example, the ancient Chinese commonly spoke of the importance of “knowing men” (*zhi ren*). KNOW SHUN (*zhi Shun*) meant “know Shun” while KNOW HIS SHUN (*zhi qi Shun ye*) meant “know that he was Shun.”¹⁵ The first kind of knowing we call familiarity; the second we call discursive knowing.

No knowing is more important than (the knowing) of people.¹⁶ This “knowing people” includes knowing how to handle people. Again, ancient Chinese thinkers frequently commend someone for “knowing ritual” (*zhi li*), and by this they certainly mean that the person in question is properly educated, ritually well trained. “Academic” or theoretical knowing of ritual by itself would not in ancient China have qualified one as *zhi li* in every sense of the word. Knowing ritual in ancient China is usually taken not as a purely cerebral awareness of the truth of propositions. One might plausibly argue that it is an acquired skill.

When it comes to “knowing the Way” (*zhi dao*),¹⁷ this is not cerebral knowing that something is the case. It is mainly understood as a moral and prudential skill.

The rule knows the Way, the minister knows the tasks (*jun zhi qi dao ye, chen zhi qi shi ye*).¹⁸

Knowing the Way in ancient China is knowing how to go about things. Consider the following philosophically fascinating passage:

People all use their lives and live, but they do not know that whereby they live; they use their knowledge and know (*yi zhi zhi*), but they do not know that whereby they know. Knowing that whereby one knows is called “knowing the way (*zhi dao*).” Not knowing that by which one knows is called “throwing away the treasure.”¹⁹

What exactly is this thing called “that whereby one knows?” Is it a knack of some sort, or is it some discursive knowing? Compare:

There are many people who are not aware what they practise, who do not inquire into what they repeatedly do, who follow a way all their lives but do not understand (*zhi*) it.²⁰

Notice here the insistence that the common people, the *hoi polloi*, in practice do follow (and in that sense know) their way. In practical terms they do know what they are doing and where they are going. The crucial point made by *zhi* is that they do not “understand.” In pre-Han texts, notably the *Lüshi chunqiu*, we commonly find the complaint that people know things and facts but fail to understand (*zhi*) reasons and explanations.

Confucianism is not just about training people in certain ways of treating things and in moral skills; it is crucially about making them “understand.” This involves lifting things up into consciousness. The best of Confucian philosophy consists in articulating these things in “philosophical statements.” Without understanding this point one does not begin to understand the intellectual edge of Confucian thinking. One risks cretinising the Chinese Confucian thinkers.

Interestingly, the early Confucians do not, in fact, speak often at all of “knowing benevolence” (*zhi ren*) as familiarity with the virtue of benevolence.²¹ On the contrary, Confucius keeps complaining that he does not know whether such-and-such is benevolent or not (*bu zhi qi ren*):

As for Yu, he may be given the responsibility of managing the military levies in a state of a thousand chariots, but whether he is benevolent or not, I do not know (*zhi*).²²

This is a way of saying that he did not know (*zhi*) whether the statement “he is humane” is true. Thus, contrary to appearances, we have a case of knowing that something is the case.

2. “Knowing how to do things”: competence

Consider the following two kinds of knowing:

He knew how to harm others but he did not know that others (would) harm him (*zhi hai ren er bu zhi ren hai ji ye*).²³

Knowing how to harm others is “knowing how,” whereas knowing that others might harm one is “knowing that,” discursive knowing. Knowing how to do things is expressed in the pattern KNOW + VERB PHRASE. Knowing that something is the case is normally expressed in the pattern KNOW + NOMINALIZED SENTENCE, although the sentence which is known may also be unnominalised, as we shall see presently. The point to notice here is that “knowing how” and “knowing that” are syntactically distinct in Classical Chinese.

3. “Knowing that”: discursive knowing

The question arises whether the ancient Chinese had the notion of propositional knowledge at all. One might suspect that when the Chinese believe X to be a Y, they really have no mental attitude with regard to a proposition. They only have an attitude towards X, namely that attitude which is appropriate to things of the kind Y. Again, when the Chinese know that X is Y—according to this account—that does not involve the notion of a proposition at all; it only involves *successfully treating X as Y*.

An archetypal Greek scientist would look at a statement, consider what is intended by it, that is, its content, the proposition, and then perhaps believe the statement to be true, or know it to be true. The Chinese might never entertain any belief concerning a statement. He might never claim to know anything regarding a statement. He might only know about things. The only thing he might do is learn to treat X as Y, and if he does so successfully he will use the word *zhi* (know) to indicate this success.

Let us consider, then, one of the cases where the Confucian “knowing benevolence” is discussed:

The blind will say that that which is bright is white, and that that which is dark is black. Even the clear-sighted cannot improve on this. But if we should mix up the black and white objects and let the blind pick out (the black or the white) among them, they could not do it. Hence the reason that I say the blind do not know black and white is not terminological. It is in the picking out. The reason why the gentlemen of the world do not know benevolence is not terminological. It is in the picking out (of the benevolent from the non-benevolent).²⁴

The Mohist recognizes purely terminological (*yi qi ming*) knowing concerning definitions or meanings as independent from a posteriori knowing of the world beyond language. He carefully distinguishes this from the more important “knowing how” to pick out (*qu*) things according to definitions. The blind man does *not* know how to successfully treat bright things as white, but he *does* know as a matter of terminology that bright things are white.

We may safely conclude that the Mohists spoke of purely discursive knowing. According to A.C. Graham the Later Mohists drew a distinction between knowing gained by experience and knowing which does not require experience other than that concerning the language one is using. With good reason, A.C. Graham is tempted to use the Western term “a priori” knowledge to describe what the Later Mohists were getting at. The Later Mohists thought that the logical interdependence of predicates creates a network of necessary “a priori” relations between things.

From the things that follow from each other or exclude each other, it is admissible that we know “a priori” what it is (*xian zhi shi ke*).²⁵

A detailed survey of the uses of the word *zhi* (know) in the non-logical Classical Chinese literature yields plenty of cases of *zhi* (knowing) that are neither “knowing how” nor “knowing by acquaintance.” On the other hand, a preliminary survey of the vern *ming* (be clear about) suggests that the ancient Chinese notion of *ming* tended to be one of knowing by intellectual familiarity. Hanfeizi recommends:

Compare words and know>ascertain whether they are true (*can yan er zhi qi cheng*).²⁶

For “know>ascertain whether they are true” we normally read in Classical Chinese something like “know>ascertain their truth.” Similarly, we normally say something like “He knows its being so” for “He knows that it is so.” Now in English we can say “He knows it is so,” and in Classical Chinese we find cases where the sentence which forms the object of *zhi* (know) is not—or in any case not overtly—nominalised:

This is how I know (*zhi*) the knights and gentlemen of the world know petty things but do not know Heaven.²⁷

When the ancient Chinese said they did not know whether something was the case, such wondering does not presuppose that there is a fact to wonder about.

I do not know (*bu shi*) whether Shun failed to realize that Xiang intended to kill him.²⁸

The object of knowing may also be an overt question:

I do not know (*bu shi*) how you knew (*zhi*) this.²⁹

In counterfactual cases no event or fact is envisaged:

Suppose that Jie and Zhou had known (*zhi*) that their state would be bound to be ruined and that they personally would be bound to die and would be left without offspring, then I am not so sure (*wei zhi*) that their cruelty and their wayward actions would have gone this far.³⁰

The interesting case is the *wei zhi*: Jie and Zhou are explicitly presupposed not to have known the fate they would suffer. There is no fact concerning their cruelty or waywardness under those hypothetical conditions to be acquainted or

unfamiliar with. The issue in this sort of sentence consists of what propositions one would know to be true based on certain assumptions which are known to be untrue.

From this point of view I am not so sure (*wei zhi*) that the ruler of a ruined state cannot count as a talented ruler (*wei zhi wang guo zhi zhu bu ke yi wei xian zhu ye*).³¹

If I understand the idiom *wei zhi* correctly, the truth of the object of ignorance here is in no way presupposed. On the contrary, the suggestion is that rulers of a ruined state can sometimes count as talented.

Again, Confucius expresses uncertainty about a possible fact rather than unfamiliarity with an actual fact when he advises us, sensibly:

It is fitting that we should hold the young in awe. How is one to know (*zhi*) that/whether coming (generations) will be inferior to the present one?³²

Our conclusion at this point is that discursive knowing in ancient China (as in ancient Greece and in the modern West) was just familiarity with things and knowing how to apply names to things. The ancient Chinese had notions of “a priori” terminological knowing and of “knowing that/whether” statements were true. And yet it remains a most interesting fact that the sentential object of the verb *zhi* (to know) in Classical Chinese never seems to take a syntactically complex form involving conditional and other sentence connectives. Thus in Classical Chinese we never find sentences like this one:

I know (or: believe) that if Shakespeare, although he knew no Chinese, had read some translations of Yüan drama, or if he had had a chance to see a performance, he would have been most excited.

Explicit objects of knowing and of belief tended to be syntactically simple, even more simple than Classical Chinese sentences generally tended to be.

The typical attitudes of the ancient Chinese toward knowing, their assessment of the social importance and the intrinsic nature of such knowing, and the question whether they regarded such knowing as ultimately reliable will be discussed separately in what follows.

4. “Explaining knowing”: views and theories about knowing

For the historian of science traditional Chinese attitudes toward knowledge are of primary interest insofar as science is concerned with the accumulation and advancement of learning and knowledge. Such accumulation of knowledge was not popular among Confucian philosophers:

The point in knowing (*zhi*) is not quantity, it is in carefully examining what one knows.³³

Wide knowledge is of no special concern to Confucius:

The Master said: “I knowledgeable (*zhi*)? I’m not knowledgeable! There was a vulgar person who asked me something, his mind may be all empty, but I will get cracking³⁴ from both ends and will do my best.”³⁵

After listing some prominent issues among the sophists which he regards as futile, Xunzi concludes:

Ignorance (in matters of their disputation) is not inconsistent with being a gentleman.³⁶

Confucius’s priorities for *zhi* (knowledge/wisdom) are clear:

Fan Chi asked about knowledge/wisdom (*zhi*). The Master replied: “To work for the things the common people have a right to and to keep one’s distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence may be called knowledge/wisdom (*zhi*).”³⁷

Confucius does attempt an interesting definition of knowing:

Yu, shall I teach you to know (*zhi*) things properly? When you know something to consider that you know it. When you do not know something consider that you do not know it. That constitutes knowing.³⁸

This is as close as Confucius comes to defining *zhi* (knowing).

Xunzi has a carefully balanced view on the need for knowledge:

Being knowledgeable (*zhi*) without being benevolent (*ren*) (in a minister) is unacceptable. Being benevolent (*ren*) without being knowledgeable (*zhi*) is unacceptable. If someone is both knowledgeable and benevolent then he is a treasure for a ruler of men.³⁹

Xunzi also made a rather subtle distinction between two meanings of *zhi* (know[ing]):

The means of knowing which is within man is called “*zhi* (intelligence)”; his intelligence tallying with something is (also) called “*zhi* (falling tone) (knowing).”⁴⁰

It is not improbable that Xunzi derived the inspiration for this distinction from the Later Mohists.

THE MOHIST THEORETICAL ACCOUNT OF KNOWING

It is the considerable merit of the Mohists that they recognized the central importance of the concept of knowledge in their intellectual scheme of things. They took a conceptual interest in knowledge which is alien to earlier Chinese

thinking. To start with, the Later Mohists defined a series of concepts in the semantic field of knowledge as follows:

“Intelligence” (*zhi*) is the capability.

Explanation: It is being the means by which one knows one necessarily does know. (Like [the case of] eyesight.)

“Thinking” (*lü*) is the seeking.

Explanation: By means of one’s intelligence one seeks something, but does not necessarily find it. (Like peering.) *Lü* (thinking) is interpreted here as trying to achieve knowledge. This trying is not necessarily successful.

“Knowing” (*zhi*) is the connecting.

Explanation: By means of one’s intelligence, having passed the thing one is able to describe it. (Like seeing.)

This definition of knowledge is curiously close to the etymology of the Greek word for “to know,” *oida*, which literally means “I have seen.”⁴¹

“Understanding” (*zhi*) is the illumination.

Explanation: By means of one’s intelligence, in discourse about the thing one’s knowing it is apparent. (Like clearness of sight.)⁴²

The Mohists proceeded to a fourfold classification of knowledge in terms of methods or sources of knowledge and objects of knowledge:

Knowing (*zhi*) is by hearsay, by explanation, or by personal experience.

Explanation: (How one knows:) Having received it at second hand is “knowing by hearsay.”

Knowing that something square will not rotate is by “explanation.”

Having been a witness oneself is “knowing by personal experience.”

(What one knows:) What something is called by is its “name.”

What is so called is the “object.” The mating of name and object is “relating.”

To intend and to perform are to “act.”⁴³

Thus the Later Mohists recognized and practiced

1. a science of names;
2. a science of objects;
3. a science of how names apply to objects;
4. a science of human action.

Hence the Later Mohists had an explicit scientific scheme of knowledge according to which they proceeded.⁴⁴

Having thus defined a range of concepts, the Mohists moved on to conceptual analysis:

When one knows, it is not by means of the “five roads.”⁴⁵

Explained by: duration.

Explanation: The knower sees by means of the eye, and the eye sees by means of fire, but fire does not see. If the only means were the “five roads,”

knowing as it endures would not fit the fact. Seeing by means of the eye is like seeing by means of fire.⁴⁶

Finally, the Later Mohists explained an apparent paradox of knowledge: that we can be said to know what we do not know. This, we are told, is because we are able to choose between what we know and what we do not know.⁴⁷ It seems likely that this extremely sensible explanation is a reaction to Taoist sceptical rejections of knowledge. We must now turn to a closer examination of the traditions of anti-intellectualism and of skepticism.

Anti-intellectualism and scepticism must be carefully separated: I call anti-intellectualism a negative view of the social and pragmatic importance of (proto-) scientific knowledge, and I call scepticism the pervasive philosophical doubt concerning the objective reliability of human knowledge. Ancient Chinese anti-intellectualism is concerned with the social function of knowledge, whereas scepticism belongs firmly to the realm of epistemology, the general theory of the relation between knowledge and reality.

5. “Dismissing knowledge as useless”: anti-intellectualism

It is one of the interesting paradoxes of the history of Chinese science that some of the Taoists, who contributed most to the progress of science in China through the ages, have also gone on record as “rejecting knowledge (ableness)”:

Cut off sageliness, reject intellectual excellence (*zhi*), and the people will benefit a hundredfold.⁴⁸

The obvious question is what exactly the ancient Taoists rejected when they rejected *zhi* (knowledgeableness, intellectual excellence). How exactly are we to interpret the noun *zhi* (wisdom, knowledgeableness, shrewdness, wiliness) in relevant contexts?

The Taoists certainly did not reject intuitive or practical aptitude and skill. On the contrary, they cultivated them under the name of non-action (*wu wei*). The widely celebrated “knack-passages” in *Zhuangzi*⁴⁹ bear eloquent witness to this. Like everybody else the Taoists rejected *zhi* understood as the negative quality of “wiliness,” but such trivial rejection of an intrinsically unattractive quality would be too facile to deserve so much attention and emphasis.

A detailed survey of the uses of *zhi* and *zhi* (falling tone) in the indexed literature has led me to the conclusion that these negative attitudes to *zhi* constitute a rejection of what we today might call “intellectual excellence” or even “academic excellence” and of the sort of discursive “academic” knowledge that defines “academic excellence.” Included in this concept of intellectual excellence is knowledgeableness in matters of lofty Confucian moralizing philosophy. Our ancient texts often mention *zhi* (knowledgeableness) together with *bian* (rhetorics, sophistry), which after all was a (mostly derogatory) term for what

was the pursuit of scientific knowledge for its own sake. The kind of knowledgeable-ness attacked as *zhi* is the rhetorical knowledgeable-ness of the sophists and the theoretical knowledgeable-ness of scientists like the Later Mohists as well as the moralistic knowledgeable-ness of traditional Confucian learning.

To the extent that scientific knowledge and intellectual excellence became instrumental in the pursuit of the good Taoist life (good health, long life as well as immortality), such intellectual excellence was encouraged and cultivated by later Taoists. The volumes of *Science and Civilisation in China* published so far bear ample witness to the large scale on which this has happened throughout Chinese history.

Confucians, for their own reasons, rejected *zhi* (intellectual excellence) when it was not constructively instrumental in the good conduct of the moral life and of political life. Confucius and his followers thought that intellectual excellence was secondary to moral excellence, and that the effects of intellectual excellence upon the moral qualities of the individual as well as the political qualities of the state were predominately negative. Intellectual excellence was therefore not to be especially cultivated except as a handmaid to moral edification or to political administration.

When ancient Confucian and Legalist texts address the problem of *zhi* (knowledgeable, intellectual excellence), they do not address a problem of epistemology at all. Often they address a problem of public administration comparable to the recurrent question of how much weight a president in the United States of America should put on academic expertise in his government, how many distinguished Harvard professors he should employ.

The Legalist Hanfeizi was very preoccupied with thought that intellectual excellence easily combines with insubordinacy and thus gets in the way of the strict discipline which is necessary for the well-regulated running of a state. When Hanfeizi used the word *zhi* (now read in the falling tone) he mostly thought of it as "academic knowledgeable-ness" together with such words as *bian* (rhetoric) and the like:

So-called knowledgeable-ness (*suo wei zhi zhe*) consists in subtle and mysterious talk.⁵⁰

There are literally hundreds of passages attacking such politically unproductive ("academic") knowledgeable-ness and its rhetorical as well as philosophical derivatives in Hanfeizi. One less polemical and philosophically more interesting remark concerns the limitations of knowledge:

Knowledge (*zhi*) is like eye(sight): (the eye) can see further than a hundred paces, but it is unable to see its own eyelids.⁵¹

This thought, one might suspect, belongs to the Taoist strain in Hanfeizi's work.

6. "Doubting the reliability of knowing": scepticism

Consider a piece of knowledge like "two plus two equals four." Conceivably, one might dismiss this statement as inconsequential and morally irrelevant. That would be one way of dismissing such a piece of knowledge. But a hardheaded mathematician might also do something entirely different. He might doubt that we can be absolutely certain that two plus two actually equals four. That would be a case of scientific epistemological scepticism.

The question I now propose to discuss is this: did the ancient Chinese develop epistemological scepticism as clearly distinct from what we called "anti-intellectualism" in our last sub-section? Did the ancient Chinese cast general doubt on the ultimate reliability of human knowledge?

Consider a famous saying attributed to Laozi:

Knowing to not-know is superior (*zhi bu zhi shang yi*).⁵²

Wang Bi (226–249 A.D.) comments:

If you do not know that knowing cannot be relied upon you are at fault (*bing*).⁵³

Zhuangzi asks:

Is it when not knowing that one knows? Is it that when one knows one does not know? Who knows the knowing which is not-knowing?⁵⁴

This not-knowing is quite possibly Laozi's "knowing to not-know". The theme, in any case, is a common one in the *Zhuangzi*:

Men all set store by what wit knows, but none knows how to know by depending on what his wits do not know; may that not be called the supreme uncertainty?⁵⁵

Is it that when one does not know one knows? Is it that when one knows one does not know? Who knows that knowing which is not-knowing?⁵⁶

The book *Zhuangzi*, particularly Chapter 2, asks unflinchingly and with crystalline clarity of thought the all-important question:

How do I know that what I call knowing is not not-knowing?

How do I know what I call not-knowing is not knowing?⁵⁷

Zhuangzi remains uncertain. For every level of knowledge one may have achieved in one's life, there is a higher level of uncertainty concerning the reliability of that knowledge one has achieved. Knowledge is thus inevitably built on an uncertain basis, on what we do not know, on not-knowing. And a recognition of this latter state of affairs constitutes part of the true wisdom of the Taoist sage. It is a wisdom which consists in not-knowing. A wisdom which

deserves to be closely compared with the famous *oida ouk eidôs* (I am aware that I do not know) attributed to Socrates.

For example: how do we know that we are not dreaming as we think we know something? The justly celebrated story of Zhuangzi and the butterfly seeks to illustrate that we cannot be sure.⁵⁸

The Taoist sceptical attitude is that all knowing of theorems is never quite certain. There may be delusion. We may “wake up” to higher insight which might invalidate whatever we think we know.

Zhuangzi also gives us an example from the philosophy of life:

“How do I know that to take pleasure in life is not a delusion?

How do I know that we who hate death are not exiles since childhood who have forgotten the way home? . . .

Who banquets in a dream, at dawn wails and weeps. Who wails and weeps in a dream, at dawn goes out to hunt. While we dream we do not know that we are dreaming, and in the middle of a dream interpret a dream within it. Not until we wake up do we know that we are dreaming. Only at the Great Awakening shall we know that this was a Great Dream. Yet fools think they are awake, so confident that they know what they are, princes, herdsmen, incorrigible! You and Confucius are both dreams, and my calling you a dream is also a dream.”⁵⁹

Through this poetic speech in a fictitious dialogue, Zhuangzi suggests that our knowledge is uncertain because we may wake up to find that it was an illusory dream. As the history of Taoism shows, a theoretical conviction of this sort and a commitment to the book *Laozi* as an authoritative source are perfectly compatible with the conduct of empirical science.

Apart from the argument from delusion, Zhuangzi appeals to arguments from the inevitable subjectivity of human viewpoints. Zhuangzi observes that deictic terms like “this” and “that” are inevitably subjective, and he speculates as to whether all our assessments of things might not be of the same kind:

“It’s acceptable!” Then it is acceptable. “It’s unacceptable!” Then it is unacceptable. The Way comes about as we walk it. Things become “so” because we call them “so.”⁶⁰

Zhuangzi delights in the thought that names being arbitrary, anything can become anything else by a mere change in nomenclature. If I call oxen horses, then all oxen have thereby become horses. Thus, he concludes, all knowledge is subjective and relative to the knower. Taoist enlightened not-knowing consists in an awareness of this ultimate subjectivity and relativity of nomenclature which leads one not to know whether or not “ultimately” to call things by one name or another.

Zhuangzi’s relativism is remarkably close in mood to Heraclitus. You may ask whether a non-level road “really” goes up or down. There is no objective

answer to this, as Heraclitus points out, and as Zhuangzi no doubt would have delighted in pointing out if he had thought of it:

A road is, upwards and downwards, the same.⁶¹

Sea is purest and most unclean water: for fish, drinkable and life-giving; for men, undrinkable and deadly.⁶²

The connection between knowing and not-knowing is discussed in Chapter 13 of the *Huainanzi*, which tells of fictitious person Translucence asking the equally fictitious Infinitude whether he knew the Way. Infinitude replied he did not know. Translucence went on to ask Non-Action the same question, and Non-Action replied that he did know. Confused, Translucence went on to ask Neverbegan which was right, the not knowing of Infinitude or the knowing of Non-Action.

Neverbegan replied: “The not knowing is profound. The knowing is superficial. The not knowing is internal, the knowing is external. The not knowing is subtle, the knowing is crude.”

Translucence threw back his head and sighed: “So not knowing is knowing. Knowing is not knowing. Ah, who knows that knowing is not knowing and that not knowing is knowing?”⁶³

Not-knowing, then, is by no means ignorance; it is an advanced Taoist version of *docta ignorantia*. It is not an anti-intellectual rejection of scientific knowledge. It is itself the product of an advanced piece of scientific theorizing. Zhuangzi thought that our knowledge, however well founded empirically and theoretically, is ultimately uncertain.

Zhuangzi nowhere directly and dogmatically states that we cannot know. He only persists in asking, “How do we know?” He is not an adherent of the dogma that we cannot know anything (which would make him into what in Greek philosophy would be called a dogmatic Academic). Zhuangzi simply cannot see how we can avoid uncertainty (and must count as a true sceptic along the lines that Sextus Empiricus (fl. 180–200 A.D.) was famous for in the West). The dialogue between the fictitious characters Gaptooth and Wang Ni brings this out:

Gaptooth asked Wang Ni: “Do you know what all things agree in calling right?”

“How would I know that?”

“Do you know that you do not know that?”

“How would I know that?”

“Then do (we) creatures know nothing?”

“How would I know that? But suppose I try saying something. What way do I have of knowing that if I say I know something I don’t really not know it? Or what way do I have of knowing that if I say I don’t know something I don’t really know it? Now let me ask you some questions . . .”⁶⁴

Compare the recountable German mathematician and theologian Nicholas Cusa (A.D. 1401–1464). When he published his great work of philosophy *De docta ignorantia* (1440), he quite properly entitled the first chapter *Quomodo scire est ignorare* (How knowing is not-knowing) and then proceeded to explain *Quod praecisa veritas incomprehensibilis sit* (That the precise truth is unknowable) in chapter 3. Cusa finishes this beautiful third chapter with the paradox: *Et quanto in hac ignorantia profundius docti fuerimus, tanto magis ipsam accedimus veritatem* (And the more profoundly learned we become in this ignorance, the closer we come to the truth.)⁶⁵ Cusa was, in a way, more dogmatic than Zhuangzi. He maintained a dogma on the uncertainty of theological knowledge, a dogma which by our interpretation Zhuangzi would have found questionable.

It is significant that Nicholas supports his sceptical doctrine with a wealth of geometrical arguments. He was an accomplished mathematician and interested in medicine and biology as well as many branches of applied science.

Through experimental methods he established such important insights as that air has weight and that plants absorb nourishment through the air. Being ultimately a sceptic and a Neo-Platonist mystic did not prevent him from being a proficient practitioner of science.⁶⁶

I dwell on Nicholas Cusa because his way of thinking about the ultimate statements, about theology, was close to that of Zhuangzi: *Et ex his manifestum est, quomodo negationes sunt verae et affirmationes insufficientes in theologicis* (From this we see clearly how in matters theological negations are true and affirmations are insufficient).⁶⁷

The doubting attitude to knowledge, the insistence on the justification for claiming the objective validity of apparently self-evident or commonly accepted knowledge, is a central part of rationality and a crucial factor in early Chinese intellectual history. Zhuangzi's attitude of pervasive uncertainty concerning the question of the reliability of our knowledge is the result of such rational doubt, as expounded in chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*. This chapter, therefore, must count as a central document in the history of Chinese science and epistemology.

Pyrrhôn of Elis (ca. 360–270 B.C.), the father figure of Greek scepticism, was roughly contemporary with Zhuangzi. Pyrrhôn's sceptical tradition became important in Europe from the third century onwards. It appears that Pyrrhôn visited India, and it is said that he mixed there with the "naked sophists" or fakirs (*gymnosophistoi*) and the magicians (*magoi*).⁶⁸ We are told:

(Pyrrhôn) used to say that nothing was beautiful or ugly, just or unjust, that all human action was invariably by custom and by habit, that nothing was more this or more that.⁶⁹

Thus the sceptical tradition of the West, which was so important for the development of self-critical science, may have benefited from Indian inspiration. Like his contemporary Zhuangzi, Pyrrhôn seems to have been a colorful and poetic soul. There was an anti-authoritarian and nonconformist streak in both

men. But then, it is important to remember that there is nothing particularly unscientific about being anti-authoritarian, nonconformist and doubtful about everything.⁷⁰

The early Socrates was a case in point. He refused to be certain about anything. He was a thorough sceptic. The Norwegian philosopher (and mountaineer) Arne Naess has argued eloquently for the philosophical and scientific feasibility of scepticism in his philological reconstruction and philosophical analysis of Pyrrhonism as expounded in the work of Sextus Empiricus (fl. 180–200 A.D.), which constitutes the earliest coherent philosophical exposition of scepticism that has come down to us from European antiquity.⁷¹ Indeed many philosophers of science have recognized the sceptic Sextus Empiricus as a crucial figure in the history of Western scientific methodology. And yet, Sextus Empiricus' purpose in cultivating a sceptical, noncommittal attitude to all dogma was not immediately scientific. Like Zhuangzi, he—and Pyrrhôn many centuries before him—cultivated a sceptical stance as a means to arrive at serenity, peace of mind, *ataraxia* (unruffled balance of thought). Through this quest he made a significant contribution to the history of science.

NOTES

1. When Chinese writers used *xin* (1. be faithful, be in good faith. 2. believe nominally in Chinese, the meaning is unequivocally "good faith, truthfulness," never, as far as I can determine, "belief" conceived nominally. By contrast, when the character *zhi* (to know, to be aware of) is understood nominally (usually read in the fourth falling tone, and sometimes written with a different character *zhi*), the meaning is something like "wisdom" or "knowledgeableness."

2. *Xunzi*, (Harvard Yenching Sinological Index Series (hereafter: HYSIS) 21.74, cf. H.H. Dubs, *The Works of Hsün Tzu* (London: Probsthain, 1926), p. 275.

3. Sima Qian, *Shiji* 30, ed. *Wanyou wenku* (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1939), vol. 9, p. 42.

4. It is a striking fact that indirect speech, *oratio obliqua*, which is so prominent in Latin and Greek grammar, plays no part in classical Chinese. This deserves a closer study and a philosophical interpretation.

5. A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science* (London: University of London, 1978), A24. Cf. also B10: "Is it knowing? Or is it supposing the already ended to be so?"

6. It has been claimed about the concept of knowledge in ancient China:

Knowledge is a product of learning in the sense of training, not in the sense of the acquisition of data items called concepts and facts. The paradigm of what is learned is the traditional Confucian virtues (Chad Hansen, *Language and Logic in Ancient China* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983], p. 66).

7. *Xunzi* (HYSIS), 2.12, cf. H. Köster, *Hsün Tzu* (Kaldenkirchen: Steyler Verlag, 1967), p. 13.
8. *Lüshi chungiu*, ed. Chen Qiyong (Shanghai: Xuelin, 1984), 15.2, p. 1642. Cf. R. Wilhelm, *Frühling und Herbst des Lü Bu We* (Jena: Diderichs, 1922), p. 434.
9. *Lüshi chungiu*, 9.4, p. 499. Cf. R. Wilhelm, *Frühling und Herbst*, p. 113.
10. *Hanfeizi* (Peking: Zhonghua, 1982), 14.6.26.
11. *Hanfeizi*, 48.6.6. Cf. W.K. Liao, *The Works of Han Fei Tzu* (London: Probsthain, 1938/59), vol. 2, p. 269.
12. *Hanfeizi*, 30.17. Cf. W.K. Liao, *Han Fei Tzu*, vol. 1, p. 291.
13. *Zhanguoce*, ed. Zhu Zugeng (Yangzhou: Jiangsu guji, 1985), no. 302, p. 1232. Cf. J. Crump, *Chan-Kuo Ts'e* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), p. 377.
14. *Zuo zhuan* Duke Zhao, 10.5, ed. Yang Bojun (Peking: Zhonghua, 1981), p. 1319. Cf. S. Couvreur, *Tch'ouen Ts'iou et Tso Tchouan* (Paris: Cathasia, 1951), vol. 3, p. 178.
15. *Lüshi chungiu*, 18.1, p. 1142.
16. *Huainanzi*, 20, ed. Liu Wendian (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1932), p. 27a.
17. *Mengzi*, 2A4, 6A6 et passim.
18. Fragments of Sehn Buhai, 1.7. Cf. H.G. Creel, *Shen Pu-hai* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 350.
19. *Lüshi chungiu*, 5.3, p. 265. Cf. R. Wilhelm, *Frühling und Herbst*, p. 58.
20. *Mengzi*, 5A5. Cf. D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, bil. rev. ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1981), p. 265.
21. Cf. *Lunyu*, 4.7, which according to D.C. Lau, *The Analects*, bil. ed. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1983), p. 30, does not involve "knowing benevolence."
22. *Lunyu*, 5.8. Cf. D.C. Lau, *Analects*, p. 39, where there are three comparable examples.
23. *Lüshi chungiu*, 22.1, p. 1482. Cf. R. Wilhelm, *Frühling und Herbst*, p. 389.
24. *Mozi* (HYSIS), 47.23f. Cf. Y.P. Mei, *The Works of Mo Tzu* (London: Probsthain, 1929), p. 255.
25. A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science*, p. 342.
26. *Hanfeizi*, 48.4.21. Cf. W.K. Liao, *Han Fei Tzu*, vol. 2, p. 266.
27. *Mozi*, 26.8f. Cf. *ibid.* 26.14, 27.42, and 28.50ff which has no less than four cases in point. Cf. also *Hanfeizi*, 10.11.75; 31.28.25 and 31, 32.12.7; 35.6.115; 50.10.11; *Zuo zhuan* Duke Zhao, 30.4; *Xunzi*, 28.42.
28. *Mengzi*, 5A2. Cf. D.C. Lau, *Mencius*, p. 181.
29. *Xunzi*, 31.41. Cf. H. Köster, p. 385.
30. *Lüshi chungiu*, 7.4, p. 402. Cf. R. Wilhelm, *Frühling und Herbst*, p. 88. There is another exactly parallel example in the same context.
31. *Lüshi chungiu*, 4.5, p. 232. Cf. R. Wilhelm, *Frühling und Herbst*, p. 53.
32. *Lunyu*, 9.23. Cf. D.C. Lau, *Analects*, p. 83.
33. *Xunzi*, 31.10. Cf. H. Köster, *Hsün Tzu*, p. 381.
34. This translation may sound excessively colloquial, but the original seems to be of a similarly colloquial nature.
35. *Lunyu*, 9.8. Cf. D.C. Lau, *Analects*, p. 79.
36. *Xunzi*, 8.35. Cf. H. Köster, *Hsün Tzu*, p. 74f.
37. *Lunyu*, 6.22. Cf. D.C. Lau, *Analects*, p. 52.
38. *Lunyu*, 2.17. Cf. D.C. Lau, *Analects*, p. 15.

39. *Xunzi*, 12.67. Cf. H. Köster, *Hsün Tzu*, p. 162. The *Lüshi chungiu*, 1.4, p. 45 summarizes current feeling in ancient China concerning being ("academically") knowledgeable.

If one occupies a high position one does not want to be inquisitive in a small way. One does not want to be knowledgeable in a small way. . . .

Being knowledgeable and pursuing private aims is not as good as being stupid and pursuing unselfish ends.

40. *Xunzi*, 22.5. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic . . .*, p. 269.

41. Another curious instance of such a coincidence of Western etymology and Eastern definition is the Mohist definition of *pi* (necessary), where the Latin etymology of *necessarius* is "not ceasing, not ending." This observation was pointed out to me by William B. Boltz.

42. For the text and an excellent interpretation of this sequence of definitions, see A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic . . .*, p. 267.

43. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic . . .*, p. 327.

44. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic . . .*, p. 231–234.

45. I.e., the five senses.

46. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic . . .*, p. 415.

47. Cf. vol. 2, p. 179, and A.C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic . . .*, p. 417.

48. *Laotzi*, 19.

49. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983) p. 6ff. Note that there are no such passages in *Laotzi*, while there are many in *Lie Zi*.

50. *Hanfeizi*, 49.11.3. Cf. W.K. Liao, *Han Fei Tzu*, vol. 2, p. 288.

51. *Hanfeizi*, 21.20.9. Cf. W.K. Liao, *Han Fei Tzu*, vol. 1, p. 226.

52. *Laotzi*, 71. Cf. D.C. Lau, *Tao Te Ching*, bil. ed. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1981) p. 105: "To know yet to think that one does not know is best." The Chinese text does not support this interpretation.

53. Cf. A. Rump, *Commentary on the Lao Tzu by Wang Pi* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979), p. 194.

54. *Zhuangzi*, 22.61. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, p. 163.

55. *Zhuangzi*, 25.52. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, p. 102.

56. *Zhuangzi*, 22.61. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, p. 163. In his usual pithy style *Xunzi* points out a profound paradox of epistemology which would seem to be Taoist-inspired:

Great efficiency consists in what one does not achieve deliberately. Great knowledge consists in what is beyond (deliberate) cogitation (*Xunzi*, 17.16. Cf. Köster, *Hsün Tzu*, p. 217).

57. *Zhuangzi*, 2.66. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, p. 58.

58. *Zhuangzi*, 2.94. Tr. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, p. 61.

59. *Zhuangzi*, 2.78/9. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, p. 59.

60. *Zhuangzi*, 2.33. Cf. A.C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu*, p. 53.

61. H. Diels, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidemann, 1964), fragment 60.

62. *Ibid.*, fr. 61.

63. *Huainanzi*, ed. Liu Wendian, 12, p. 1aff. Cf. the probably earlier *Zhuangzi*, ch. 22; A.C. Graham, p. 162f.
64. *Zhuangzi*, 2.64. Cf. B. Watson, *Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 45.
65. Cf. Nikolas Cusa, *De docta ignorantia*, ed. P. Wilpert (Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1964), vol. 1, p. 14.
66. Or, incidentally, from discovering a dozen unknown comedies by the Roman dramatist Plautus.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
68. Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum*, 9.61.
69. *Ibid.*
70. A useful survey on Pyrrhôn and early Greek scepticism is L. Robin, *Pyrrhôn et le scepticisme grecque* (Paris: Aubin, 1944).
71. A. Naess, *Scepticism* (London: Routledge Kegan and Paul, 1968).

2

The Way and the One in Ho-kuan-tzu

A.C. GRAHAM

The pursuit of the one behind the many is among the themes one might select as common to Western and Chinese philosophy. There is in fact one period in Chinese history, during the last decades before 200 B.C., when the One replaced the Way as the central metaphysical concept. This elevation of the One has attracted little attention because its fullest exposition is in a text, *Ho-kuan-tzu*, which was long neglected because of doubt as to its date. This book, traditionally classed under the Taoist school, carries the name of the otherwise unknown Ho-kuan-tzu (Master with the pheasant cap), presented as the teacher of the Chao general P'ang Hsüan who defeated Yen in 242 B.C. Seven of its nineteen chapters have recently appeared in a German translation by Klaus Karl Heugebauer¹. Firm external evidence of its existence is lacking until about 300 A.D. But in 1973, with the discovery in a tomb at Ma-wang-tui of two manuscripts of *Lao-tzu*, it turned out that the "Yellow Emperor" documents attached to the one transcribed in the reign of Hui-ti (194–188 B.C.) have close parallels with *Ho-kuan-tzu*. The book may now be dated with some confidence to the period 230–200 B.C., before, during, and after the Ch'in dynasty (221–206 B.C.)² It is interesting both for its philosophy of the One and for its approach to the problem of relating the *Tao* (Way) which heaven and earth *do* follow to the Way which man *should* follow.

The unification of the empire under the Ch'in and the succeeding Han dynasty encouraged the search for a unified ideology, mingling Legalist politics, Confucian moralism, and the mysticism of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu within the framework of Yin-Yang cosmology. By the second century B.C. this syncretism generally centered on the doctrine of the Way as the ultimate source derived from Lao-tzu; and when the philosophers were retrospectively classified in the six schools by Ssu-ma T'an (d. 110 B.C.), it was the Lao-tzu centered syncretists who were named the *Tao chia* (School of the Way), the Taoist school. But in the earlier experiments in eclecticism, in the *Lü-shih ch'un-ch'iu* (ca. 240 B.C.), *Ho-*