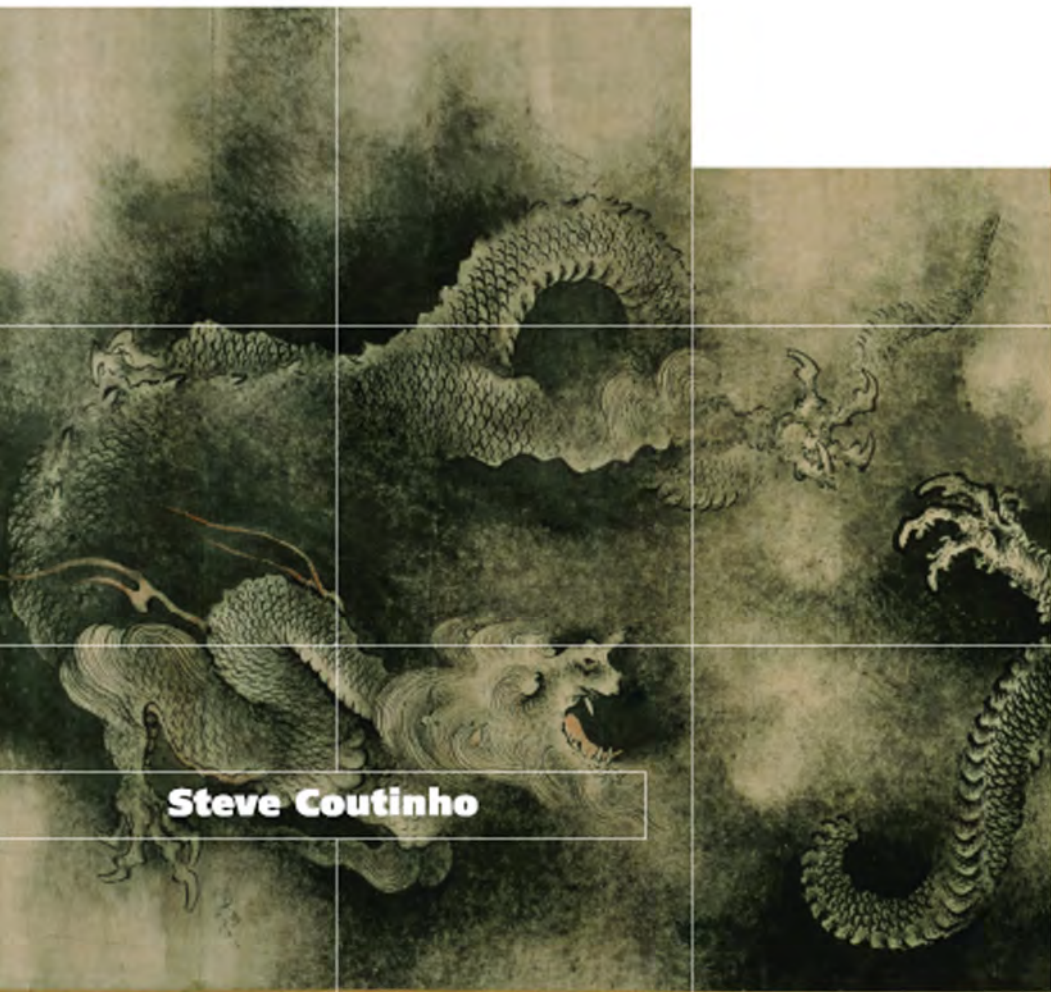


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Zhuangzi and Early Chinese Philosophy

Vagueness, Transformation and Paradox



Steve Coutinho

Vagueness: 'East' and 'West'

The *Zhuangzi* is without doubt one of the richest and most intriguing among the world's philosophical texts, and so one would expect the field of *Zhuangzi* studies to be immense. Yet Laozi and Confucius, Augustine and Aquinas, Wittgenstein and Heidegger attract far greater attention than this mad man of Chu, leaving him in the shadows to wallow in the mud. Perhaps this is because he is such a madman, perhaps because he is too playful: his games take us far beyond the familiar into realms that verge on the grotesque. Perhaps it is also because his writing is extraordinarily difficult to decipher, in part because of its historical and cultural difference, but also because his text is 'self-consciously' semeiotic, playing with the very conditions of meaningfulness that it discusses. For these reasons, it is not obvious what reading strategies may appropriately be brought to the text. Was *Zhuangzi* writing an analytic text, or a deconstructive one? A religious text, or a philosophical one? A political text or a spiritual one? He tells stories, paints vivid pictures: but are these to be understood literally, figuratively, allegorically, metaphorically? If figuratively and metaphorically, how reliable are twentyfirst century western readings of these ancient images and metaphors? The obstacles to understanding may thus appear insurmountable: in the next two chapters I pursue a more detailed exploration of the problems and methods of interpretation. Yet, with even a superficial reading one senses that this text is deep with human significance. Even if we do not fully understand, we can see that important issues are being addressed with great sophistication and extraordinary skill. Our immediate impression is that this work will repay a profounder contemplation, and that an effort to unravel its complexities will be richly rewarded.

The *Zhuangzi* is an extraordinarily complex text. Interwoven amongst its many strands, there are to be found elements that remind us of a sceptical attitude, other elements that hint of relativism, others still that seem inconsistent with both of these. There is much that is highly reminiscent of Mahayana Buddhist idealism; other aspects resonate deeply with the *sunyavada* of Nagarjuna, or seem to anticipate the development of Zen. Now, when we first come across any strange and perplexing phenom-

on, our natural tendency is to want to make it less strange by magnifying what seems most familiar. It thus becomes tempting to read the *Zhuangzi* by assimilating it to familiar philosophical doctrines. But a hasty application, or imposition, of such philosophical categories may not necessarily be of the greatest help. Indeed, the practice of looking for what is familiar may well have the unintended consequence of covering over the deeper import of ideas that are difficult to follow precisely because they are unfamiliar. The second chapter, for example, entitled *Qi Wu Lun*, 齊物論, 'Discussion on Smoothing Things Out,' reflects at length on issues concerning knowledge and language, but it bears little resemblance to a western treatise on epistemology or philosophy of language. For this reason it would be wise to refrain from a too hasty classification of the text as 'epistemology' or 'philosophy of language.' Moreover, in this same chapter we find, juxtaposed with paradoxes about language and knowledge, a definite existential mood: tired musings on the contingency and apparent futility of living and dying. Is this 'existentialism' or 'philosophy of language'? Or is it some bizarre hybrid: linguistic existentialism? At some point it becomes clear that forcing our familiar categories in an attempt to clarify the unfamiliar only results in making the text more confusing. It is without doubt instructive, and indeed indispensable, on our first approach to identify similarities with familiar schools and concepts, if we are to find a way in to an appreciation of the text. But as a next step, we must then be sure to notice where the similarities end, and to pay great attention to where and why the incompatibilities arise: this should curtail any tendencies we have to impose our preconceptions on what may turn out to offer something unexpected.

Recently, in the west, there has been some growth of interest in passages of the *Zhuangzi* that are concerned with human knowledge and understanding. What have drawn the greatest attention are aspects of the text that display a tendency toward some kind of relativism on the one hand, and those that display a contrary tendency toward some kind of scepticism on the other. A. C. Graham, following the traditional interpretation of the Jin dynasty commentator Guo Xiang, presents *Zhuangzi* as emphasizing the radical equality, and equal acceptability, of all things, all differences, and all perspectives.¹ This has been expressed in western interpretations through the language of radical relativism. Indeed, one might say that the received interpretation of *Zhuangzi*

¹ A. C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu The Inner Chapters: A Classic of Tao*. See also chapter four below.

is that he is a radical relativist. Paul Kjellberg and Lisa Raphals,² perhaps out of a sense of dissatisfaction with this interpretation, seek to re-read the text from another standpoint. Beginning with a thorough appreciation of the philosophies of the ancient Sceptics, such as Sextus Empiricus, they engage in the painstaking process of finding, collating, and interpreting parallels from the *Qi Wu Lun*, and other chapters. In this way, much light is thrown on aspects of the text that resonate with the epistemic attitudes of these western philosophers.

I propose to explore another possibility; one that I sincerely hope does not attempt to force the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* into a preformed 'ism,' or into an *ad hoc* combination of such 'isms.' This does not mean that I attempt to approach the text from its own cultural point of view: this, alas, is clearly impossible. I have not been inculturated into that context and so cannot presume to read from it. Indeed, the philosophical and interpretive devices I use are utterly western, and I make no apology for this. Since I am a product of western culture attempting to understand a culture that is 'Other' to me, there is no possible alternative. Nor, on the other hand, do I claim to 'reconstruct the original meaning.' This, alas, is also impossible! For a genuine reconstruction of the original context of meaning would require that I perform the impossible task of erasing my own context of interpretation: my own historical, cultural, linguistic and philosophical context, and also that of my readers.

Between these two extremes—that of forcing the text to conform to my own preformed conceptual constructions, and that of attempting to uncover the original thought behind the text—there lies another possibility. I must start from my *de facto* starting position. I cannot but start from my cultural, philosophical background, but I can take care not to *hastily impose* my cultural categories and methodologies, not to insist that if I cannot force a text or a tradition of thought into my preconceived moulds then it could not possibly make sense. Of course, my starting position itself is not necessarily self-contained or well defined. Indeed, the starting position of some people is already multi-cultural, fragmented, inconsistent, and in process of construction! I suspect that this is true of all of us to a greater or lesser degree. Instead, I start from my inevitable starting point, however complex and unfinished it is: but then I must be willing to shift my position, I must be open to unexpected changes. I must be especially open to the possibility

² *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, edited by P. J. Ivanhoe and Paul Kjellberg.

that there may be *deep* differences even in modes of thinking: pre-suppositions, basic concepts, cardinal associations, and fundamental metaphors, perhaps even structural relations between ideas. But the deepest differences are the hardest to see: so, I must be *on the lookout* for signs of difference, and I must *welcome* them. I must not allow my belief in a common human bond to blind me to whatever differences there may be, no matter at what level.

There is a growing tendency to express impatience with the postmodern call to reclaim the voice of the Other, or rather, to allow Others to reclaim their own voices, to allow those voices to be heard on their own terms. 'Otherness' has become a catchword, a standard tool for critique of the 'tradition.' There is, however, a danger of exoticizing the Other: objectifying and distancing 'it' as a fascinating object of curiosity. There is also a danger of Othering the Other, of excluding the Other precisely by categorizing it as 'Other' (with a capital 'O')! While these are important cautionary reminders, it does not follow that we should universalize without any sensitivity to difference whatsoever. Besides, I think it is far too early to be yielding to any expressions of reactionary impatience. We have not even begun to understand humanity in all its difference, and already we are getting tired of it. Being open to difference is painful and difficult, and indeed sometimes dangerous—but it is a necessary task, and an ethical responsibility, even with something so apparently trivial as interpreting a text.

Now, the reading that I explore emphasizes a number of intriguing passages that are not usually taken as central to the philosophy espoused by the *Zhuangzi*. 'A discourser has a discourse, but what is said is exceptionally indeterminate.' 'Using a horse to show that a horse is not a horse, is not as good as using a non-horse to show that a horse is not a horse.' 'If we wish to affirm what we deny and deny what we affirm, nothing is as good as illuminating it on the grindstone of nature.' These passages are usually understood by subordinating them to the parts of the text that have a more relativist, conventionalist, or fallibilist feel. My reading shifts these passages from the periphery to the center, and thereby produces a very different understanding, one that displaces the hints of relativism and scepticism with a very different sensibility. These passages suggest a very sophisticated attitude toward language, one that has *strong resonances* with the most recent of twentieth century linguistic theories. It is these resonances that I wish to exploit, not, I hope, by imposing the western ideas on the text, but by *sounding the textual material simultaneously and listening for the overtones*. Thus, my aim is not to unmask the real Zhuangzi as a deconstructionist, or has having

discovered concepts of vagueness, open texture, and family resemblance. Unfortunately, for purposes of stylistic convenience, I find that I must often resort to this sort of direct attribution. Thus, I talk quite freely about Zhuangzi's aims, thoughts, and intentions! But the 'imputations' implied by such language go quite against my explicit intentions, and I urge the reader to make appropriate emendations: to read my apparent attributions not as direct attributions, but as *hermeneutic explorations*. Dichotomies and indeterminacies, clearings and penumbræ, as they appear from the standpoint of transformation: these will be both the tools and the materials with which I shall attempt to fashion my alternative interpretation. But, while sounding these traces through the text, I urge the reader to listen carefully for the clashes and the dissonances, and to struggle to understand what kinds of *deep differences* might be responsible. If vagueness and open texture somehow resonate deeply in these ancient Chinese texts, and yet at the same time seem somehow artificially imposed and jarring, I suggest the following hypothesis: this paradoxical state might be a sign of differences at the deepest levels of significance, structural differences at the very heart of the webs of understanding.

A prerequisite to interpreting any text is to place it in its historical, cultural, and philosophical context. The particular elements of context that one emphasizes will shape the possibilities of interpretation. If one emphasizes the Confucian context of early Daoist texts, for example, this leads to the familiar reading of Daoism as essentially a critical response to Confucianism. I choose instead to place greater emphasis on the philosophy of the Mohists, in particular the concurrently developing philosophy of the 'later' Mohists. Zhuangzi makes quite explicit reference to their concepts, especially when expressing his most complex and enigmatic ideas about language. The later Mohists articulate some very clear conditions of linguistic evaluation. Their attitude, I shall argue, is one that asserts a dichotomy of values, variously characterized as acceptability, *ke* 可, and unacceptability, *buke* 不可, or affirmation, *shi* 是, and rejection, *fei* 非. One might, as we shall see, characterize it as an attitude of 'bivalence.' The word 'bivalence' is a term of art from logic: it refers to the existence of two and only two mutually exclusive values, Truth and Falsehood. What I am calling an attitude of bivalence is one that sees in the world, or imposes on it, such mutually exclusive dichotomies. Dualistic worldviews, then, are typical products of an attitude of bivalence. The later Mohists, I argue in chapter five, quite explicitly claim that any assertion must be either affirmed or rejected, it must either be acceptable or unacceptable; it must be one or the other, and it certainly cannot

be both. It can thus easily be seen to be an expression of an attitude of bivalence. The Mohist discourse of *shifei*, affirmation and rejection, acceptability and unacceptability, plays a pivotal role in the philosophical discussions of the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. For this reason, a deeper understanding of the more complex passages devoted to Zhuangzi's reflections on *shifei* thinking requires a closer and more sustained investigation of the significance of affirmation and rejection in the later Mohist *Canon*. Moreover, the reflections on linguistic evaluation of the later Mohists also take place within their own context: the philosophical thinking of Mozi and the early Mohists. We will thus acquire a deeper understanding still by tracing the roots of such dichotomous thinking back to the political theorizing of the early Mohists. When placed in this context, new aspects of Zhuangzi's concern with language begin to surface, and their significance can in turn throw light on other aspects of Zhuangzi's philosophy.

The Mohists were the first among the Chinese thinkers to value simplicity and clarity in expressing doctrines and values. They took simplicity and clarity to new levels in the iterative structure of their arguments, and in their insistence on the importance of clearly determined dichotomies. Zhuangzi, in contrast, sees language as extremely open and unsettled—although words do say something, what they say is extremely vague, profoundly unsettled. We find a further indication of this when Zhuangzi suggests that we should affirm what we reject and reject what we affirm. Indeed, he gives us this advice as a direct response to the dichotomous thinking espoused by the Mohists. He also gives us a very cryptic piece of advice with regard to affirming what we reject: 'Using a horse to show that a horse is not a horse, is not as good as using a non-horse to show that a horse is not a horse.' A. C. Graham valiantly tries to throw light on this baffling passage by interpreting it as a reference to the conventional nature of language: if we simply switched linguistic terms and called a cow 'horse' we could show that a horse is not a horse.³ Unfortunately, this does not strike me as a very insightful or interesting philosophical claim; it is at best an infantile word game, and it does not succeed in showing how it is possible for a horse not to be a horse. I hope to show that following up the leads of dichotomousness and bivalence as expressed in the later Mohist *Canon* yields the possibility of a new and more persuasive direction of explanation.

³ A. C. Graham, *Chuang-Tzu The Inner Chapters: A Classic of Tao*.

For this new explanation I introduce some of the ideas concerning determinacy and indeterminacy that have been influential in contemporary western philosophy. There are several different kinds of indeterminacy of language that have been explored in twentieth century philosophy, and indeed one that has been known, but marginalized, since the Stoics. Quine and Wittgenstein have put forward interesting and influential ideas on the nature of meaning, and specifically on its indeterminacy: Quine's naturalistic rejection of *a priori* knowledge and analyticity depends on an understanding that what we can know is constrained by an openness or indeterminacy in what we mean; Wittgenstein's excursions into the ill-defined borderlands of our concepts epitomize a philosophical methodology that eschews essences for family resemblances, and clustering (and re-clustering!) concepts. The positivist philosopher Waissman's metaphor of porosity, or open texture, can throw light on the connection between Zhuangzi's concern for indeterminacy and vagueness and his tendency toward imaginative exaggeration. The Stoic interest in vagueness and sorites paradoxes provides a link between the thought of Zhuangzi and the spatio-temporal paradoxes of Huizi. These are some of the strings that will be sounded while we peruse the text: and we shall listen for where it resonates in sympathy. But, even if we find the resonances persuasive, we must not be hypnotized into imagining that we have discovered what the text 'really' says: we must also pay close attention to where we force it to ring out of tune.

In keeping with the spirit of pluralism and indeterminacy, I do not attempt to prove the 'truth' of my reading through detailed refutations of alternative readings. Such an endeavour seems clearly misplaced when dealing with texts as rich and fertile as the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. This, however, is not to adopt an irresponsible (though, alas, all too popular) relativism with regard to the meaning of the text, but arises out of an acknowledgment of two undeniable facts. The first is that the *Zhuangzi*, as is generally the case with classical Chinese texts, leaves its own meanings open. It is a text that is suggestive, indirect, using allegory and metaphor among other tropes to hint at the ideas it both conceals and conveys. And it is through the exploration of these allegories and metaphors that we shall uncover the clues, hints, and traces of what I believe to be more formative and pervasive significances. Indeed, classical Chinese philosophical works in general are as much works of poetry as they are explorations of ideas, and the use of poetic techniques involves the exploitation of tropes such as polysemy, ambiguity and metaphor. This is especially true of Daoist

texts such as the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. It is thought by some that merely acknowledging the openness of meaning is to open the floodgates of nihilism, scepticism and relativism. Such a worry is, however, unfounded. Acknowledging openness of meaning is not a *carte blanche* permitting random interpretation that defies all constraints. Allowing ambiguity, vagueness, and metaphor to function, as we indeed do in ordinary everyday language, as well as in poetry and literature, is by no means tantamount to an 'anything goes' relativism. Vague, ambiguous, and metaphorical language can function as vague, ambiguous or metaphorical *only* if there is some degree of constraint upon possible interpretation. Indeed, it is impossible for meaning to lack all determination whatsoever, for this would fail to differentiate meanings from one another, and result in meaninglessness. Indeterminacy is a matter of degree and becomes a threat only if taken to extremes.

The second fact that favors a more open approach to interpretation is that the evidence to which we may appeal for uncovering the concerns and doctrines of Chinese philosophical texts of the earliest period is, to say the least, sparse. When a text is indeterminate, knowledge of its context can help to delimit possible and probable meanings, and to make (provisional) judgments that set aside certain readings as improbable. Much of the problem in reading a Zhou dynasty text is that its deliberate indeterminacy is multiplied by an exasperating indeterminacy of context. Such a problem will be familiar to scholars of ancient Greek philosophy, as it also occurs in the interpretation of the earliest stage of Greek thought—the fragments of the pre-Socratics. When so much of the context itself remains unknown or indeterminate, the semiotic task turns in on itself, producing higher order problematics of interpretation, requiring us to attempt to engage in the apparently circular task of reconstructing elements of cultural and textual context from the evidences within the text itself. Such a task, despite the apparent circularity of the reconstruction, ought not to be ruled out as altogether impossible. Umberto Eco, in *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, demonstrates in his reading of the *Song of Songs* that the significances of what he calls an alien 'cultural encyclopaedia' need not be viewed as hermeneutically irretrievable.⁴ One might think of these contextual values and significances as leaving their traces in the fragment in the way that a hologram is able to do, although unlike a holographic image, our reconstruction of such cultural significances must always remain to a very high degree tentative and hypothetical, and always

⁴ Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*.

incomplete.⁵ Given these two manifestations of openness and indeterminacy, of text and of context, it seems clear that though we may work hard to produce persuasive readings, it is both naïve and irresponsible to suggest that we can establish with finality *the* unique definitive reading, or refute decisively the alternatives with which we have little sympathy.

Having established some background and touched on some methodological issues, I shall now briefly introduce the contrast with which I approach the early Chinese texts: dichotomy and penumbra, or clarity and vagueness. I shall highlight the significance of **clarity** and distinctness in the western tradition with a brief historical sketch. This sketch is admittedly an oversimplification and something of a caricature, but its purpose is very modest. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive account of all the variations in attitude toward clarity and vagueness of all the various philosophers who constitute the western tradition. Rather, the purpose is simply to outline a general cultural tendency. The claim is to establish only that clarity and determinacy have been and continue to be idealized throughout the western tradition, while vagueness and indeterminacy have been seen as obstacles to those ideals. There have indeed been exceptions, philosophers who have reacted strongly against the presuppositions behind these ideals, but they serve only to make more emphatic and dramatic the central and formative role of clarity in western thinking.⁶

Now, judgments of similarity and difference have applicability only from within some context of judgment. Things are similar or different only with regard to some specific characteristic, or from some particular context of comparison. One who loves the colour red may take crimson and vermilion to be vastly different, but to a person comparing them with green and blue, the differences become less significant than their similarities. The same goes for cultural and philosophical comparisons: Locke and Hume would be seen as standing at opposite ends of the philosophical spectrum to a specialist in early British empiricism, but when their ideas are compared with the philosophies of Heidegger and Jaspers,

⁵ The phrase 'tentative and hypothetical' has something of a realist ring. In chapter two, however, we shall see that this is not a matter of having discovered what the text really means.

⁶ For a more thorough investigation into the historical tendencies of western and Chinese philosophical thinking, see Hall and Ames, *Anticipating China: Thinking through the Narratives of Chinese and Western Culture*, and also, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*.

their similarities far outweigh their differences. When the philosophies of the western tradition are compared with those of the Chinese tradition, not surprisingly we encounter the same phenomenon. When a judgment is made from within the tradition, it is the contrasts between the claims and doctrines that show up as significant; when one judges across traditions, previously hidden similarities begin to emerge. Comparing the western tradition with early Chinese philosophy, differences of philosophical temperament, aim, and method, become quite prominent. It becomes quite evident that the ideals of clarity and distinctness, for example, did not exert the same kind of force on the method, style, and content of Chinese philosophy. One simply does not, for example, find continuous dialectical argumentation aimed at the most rarified levels of conceptual analysis and clarification, as one does throughout the history of western philosophy.

The Contest of Clarity and Vagueness

Vagueness, indeterminacy, penumbras of uncertainty and even inconsistency are very disturbing phenomena. They epitomize the antithesis of everything philosophers desire, and the negation of everything that philosophy ought to strive for. It is a commonplace that the project of philosophy involves the search for, among other things, clarity, understanding, and truth. Indeed, William James saw fit to define the very practice of philosophy as 'the uncommonly stubborn attempt to think clearly.' Vagueness, however, seems to pose an obstacle to the achievement of these ideals. We identify vagueness with confusion, uncertainty, and as a psychological failing rather than as an independent and ineradicable phenomenon with which we are obliged to come to terms. When we criticize one another for being vague, it is such confusion and uncertainty that we attack, and we demand clarification, explication, and specification as remedies. We are unwilling to take seriously, or grant much respect to, thoughts that evidence carelessness and confusion. In this way, philosophers have tended to dismiss or devalue not only what is vaguely expressed, but also the phenomenon of vagueness itself as an object or theme of investigation. The phenomenon of vagueness has in recent years been attracting interest among analytic philosophers, and it is almost invariably the 'problem' of vagueness and the problems that it causes that attract attention. Just as we seek to diminish any effect of vague expressions through procedures of clarification, explication and disambiguation, so at a metalinguistic or philoso-

phical level such techniques are brought to bear on vagueness itself, sometimes with the ideal of abolishing vagueness altogether, but always with the hope of dissolving the logical problems and paradoxes to which it gives rise.⁷

Among the pre-Socratics, the philosophers of the Eleatic tradition—whose origins have been linked to the 'mystery cults' of central Asia—Parmenides, Pythagoras, and perhaps Xenon, rejected the uncertainties, indeterminacies, and contradictions of the temporal world of flux in favour of a 'spiritual' realm of eternal, unchanging, self-consistent truth. And even Heraclitus, who saw the world not as substantial but as an 'ever living fire,' acknowledged that the flux flows and transforms according to a guiding principle of proportion: *logos*. For Socrates and Plato, following the mystico-mathematical tradition of Pythagoras, the goal of the philosopher was the pursuit of the celestial, spiritual realm of Ideal Forms, whose essence stands in absolute purity and clarity, and this was to be achieved in no small part through the dialectical practice of conceptual clarification and deductive argumentation. Despite the heckling of some dissenting voices, most notably the Sophists, the Greek tradition thus set western philosophy on a course shaped, in large part, by what I shall call an 'analytic' attitude: one defined by the search for definition, essence, clarity, and deductive validity, and conversely by the demand for the eradication of vagueness, ambiguity, and indeterminacy. It was often accompanied by an explicit devaluation of poetry, myth, and metaphor as obstacles to the attainment of truth, even if the philosophers who devalued them felt free to make use of them as

⁷ Timothy Williamson has been a staunch defender of the epistemic view of vagueness, according to which vagueness arises out of ignorance. According to this extremely counterintuitive view, there is a precise, but unknown, number of hairs, the loss of which turns a non-bald person into a bald person, and similarly an exact height at which a person becomes tall! See his book, *Vagueness*. See also his article, 'Vagueness and Ignorance,' which is reprinted in Rosanna Keefe, *Vagueness: a Reader*.

Kit Fine has championed a supervaluationist theory of vagueness, which proposes a semantics for vague terms that aims to solve the logical problems to which vagueness gives rise. Supervaluationist theories appeal to the notion of sets of 'precisifications' or 'sharpenings' of vague terms. For each sharpening the extension of the term is divided into two distinct sets (that of the term and that of its complement). A basic sentence with a vague predicate is then said to be 'super-true' (or 'super-false') if it turns out true on all sharpenings; otherwise it is neither true nor false. For a full discussion of the supervaluationist approach, see Kit Fine, 'Vagueness, truth and logic,' which is also reprinted in *Vagueness: a Reader*.

rhetorical devices. The Hellenistic period likewise followed the same analytic attitude, favouring deductive argument, definition, and theoretical clarification, as can be seen both in the argumentative method and the systematic development of logical theory of the Sceptics and Stoics. Even in the religious thought of the medieval period, Scholastic theodicies and *logical proofs* of the existence of God exemplified paradigmatically the purposes of deductive and definitive thinking. Clarity of definition and validity of logical deduction are still highly valued tools in much of the work of recent theology and philosophy of religion.

With the flourishing of the Renaissance, however, we run into an interesting phenomenon. The symbolic, alchemical, and indeed 'correlative' thinking of this period provides a salient and significant—and too often neglected—countercurrent to the overall trend that I have been sketching. Allegory, myth, and metaphor become central tools of philosophical reflection, whose aim is to uncover deeper and yet deeper levels of cosmological and spiritual significance. With Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibnitz, the rational and logical discourse of consequences, following the model of the mathematical sciences, again took hold of the reins of philosophy, and even the empiricists, though they abandoned the model and methods of mathematics for acquiring knowledge of the world, nevertheless maintained the need for definition, disambiguation and precision in the formulation of that knowledge. Kant and Husserl in the Continental tradition continued the Rationalistic search for essences, necessities, apodicticities, and at present in the English speaking world, philosophical analysis seems to have become in many ways definitive of all philosophical thinking.

This is not to say that there has been no assertion of the 'subaltern' voices throughout the history of western philosophy. Indeed, the most vociferous of those whose concern it was to establish the 'right method' for philosophical thinking, were speaking out against the threat, real or perceived, of those who did not believe in the efficacy or necessity of such thinking. Sceptics, relativists, sophists, nihilists and irrationalists pervaded Plato's world, the medieval world of the Christian, Jewish and Islamic philosophers, the worlds of Descartes, Kant and Husserl, and in recent times, following in the footsteps of Nietzsche, voices like these continue to hound those who still profess to believe in the ideals of Modernity. In a less extreme vein, the pragmatic philosophies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, rejecting some basic presuppositions of the tradition, attempted to make do without foundations, without certainties, and without necessities, and since the second half of this century the

naturalistic philosophies of Quine and Wittgenstein have done much to reshape the presuppositions even of analytical philosophy. In the Continental tradition, Heidegger's phenomenology rejected the conception of Being as *ousia*—'substance' or 'presence'; and the influence of the subsequent tradition of French intellectuals on the humanities is causing some degree of alarm in the more conservative philosophy departments. What emerges from this reading of the history of western ideas is that the tradition is characterized by a tension between the *dominant* ideals of clarity, essence, and truth, and the dissension of those who refuse to conform.

In contrast, the explicit ideal of theoretical clarity and precision and the need to eliminate all traces of indeterminacy have never exerted a comparable influence on the style and method of Chinese philosophical reflection. One does indeed find the Confucian doctrine of the *rectification of names, zhengming 正名*, Xunzi's development of this doctrine, the paradoxes of Huizi, the treatises of Gongsun Longzi, and the canons of the later Mohists. But, I maintain that the significance of these in the Chinese tradition is very different. It does not amount to what I have called an 'analytic' attitude, and to the extent that anything like an analytic attitude emerges in the Chinese tradition it does not maintain a deep influence on the methodology of the dominant modes of Chinese philosophy.

Confucius' concern for the rectification of terms is one of the first examples that come to mind of a concern with clarity of language in the Chinese tradition. In Book 13, chapter three, of the *Analects* Zi Lu asks Confucius what is the first thing he would attend to if he were to entrusted with the government of the state of Wei, he replies that the most pressing and important matter is nothing other than the 'rectification of terms'⁸ This might, at first blush, be mistaken for a concern with precision and accuracy in one's definitions. But a closer look at Confucius's explanation reveals not an abstract concern, but a *pragmatic* one. If names and titles are not correct, then people will be confused about the proper mode of conduct, and affairs and duties will not be reliably accomplished. Rather, *one must live up to the expectations and honours of one's own title, and bestow titles and evaluative terms on others appropriately and according to merit.* Zhang Dainian⁹ points out that Confucius is very careful to *evaluate people* with the

⁸ *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, translated by Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont.

⁹ Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*.

most appropriate title: distinguishing 'renown' from 'excellence,' 'benevolence' from 'sageliness.' Now, this is indeed a concern for a kind of clarity: it is the clarity of *disambiguation*, and of choosing the most appropriate term from a number of synonyms. But this pragmatic concern with disambiguation is quite distinct from the theoretical concern with an abstract, pure, precision that characterizes the 'analytic' attitude that I have identified as distinctive of much of the western tradition. I shall take up this theme again in chapter five.

Now, Xunzi continues Confucius' concern with the rectification of terms in a chapter given that very title, and his concern lies within the same pragmatic context: that of bringing social harmony to the community.¹⁰ Although he is generally opposed to the doctrines of the Mohists, Xunzi agrees with them that social harmony requires uniformity, and uniformity requires conformity. He agrees that diversity is a source of disorder, and results only in social disruption. And he especially disapproves of linguistic diversity.

Now, Xunzi explicitly characterizes *zhengming* in terms of clarity, *míng* 明, and distinction, *biān* 辨, *bié* 別. But this concern with clarity and distinctness is of a very different kind from that of the analytic attitude that I have characterized as motivating the dominant western philosophical tradition. Looking more closely at the differences provided by the context and by the details, we see a very different kind of 'clarity' and 'confusion' that are at stake. Firstly, Xunzi is most worried about the confusion caused by using terms incorrectly, by abandoning traditional usage, and by proliferating new terms without respect for tradition. It is the multiplicity of new terms, and of the new ideas and values that they express, and the resultant ambiguity that is the prime source of confusion, not a vagueness or indeterminacy in the meanings of those terms. Xunzi is concerned about the new ideas that are beginning to spread: especially the very un-Ruist ideas of the later Mohist Canon, the Daoists, and the so-called 'Logicians.' Instead of relying on the established usage of established ideas, these thinkers invent new terms, sometimes to express old ideas, sometimes creating new ideas. They cause even greater confusion by putting terms together in paradoxical and contradictory ways: that is, in ways that contravene established usage. Xunzi believes that if this is allowed to escalate, the result can only be confusion, disruption of fluent communication and, thereby, social disorder. It is

¹⁰ Hsün Tzu, *Basic Writings*, translated by Burton Watson.

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conditions
or mappings

in controllers
(instruments
of articulation)
rather than
absolute
calibration

especially important that evaluative terms maintain their integrity, so that people may also not be confused about what is virtuous and what is not.

Now, Xunzi goes out of his way to provide some clarifications of terms that he considers to be of vital importance, those pertaining to 'humanity': *xing* 性 nature, *qing* 情 emotions, *xing* 行 conduct, *zhi* 知 understanding. But, if we look in detail at the definitions that Xunzi provides, we notice that they are not definitions at all. The kinds of 'definitions' that Xunzi provides are more like glosses, brief characterizations that aid understanding, but do not expend much effort at clarification. The very first gloss provides a perfect example: "That by which life is so, call it "*xing*".' 生之所以然者，謂之性。 Such a gloss certainly does not provide anything remotely resembling necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of terms, and no time is spent on a dialectical refinement of the definitions through a consideration of varied examples and counterexamples. Moreover, Xunzi's glosses rely on terms that are far from transparent, and he sometimes even defines terms in a circular manner with reference to themselves. This is true of his glosses on *zhi* knowledge, and *neng* ability: "The means of knowing in a person, call it "*knowing*".' 所以知之在人者，謂之知。 He sometimes gives two glosses for the same term (as he does with *xing* 性, *neng* 能, and perhaps *zhi* 知), the second using the term itself in its own gloss. Now, given that this occurs in the context of a discussion of the pressing need for 'rectification of terms,' it is thus exceptionally clear that whatever is meant by this phrase, it cannot be a call for the articulation and refinement of precise definitions.

Although Huizi is counted among the 'Logicians' we have nothing left of his philosophy but a few dialogues with Zhuangzi, and a series of paradoxes. Neither of these is sufficient to demonstrate anything resembling what I have called an analytic attitude. Gongsun Longzi's *Bai Ma Fei Ma*, 'A white horse is not a horse,' treatise, however, I think does exhibit something like an extended discussion concerned to explore in detail the necessity of a certain kind of distinction: between what a thing is and how it is described. It is notable, however, that Gongsun Longzi's work, his concerns, and his methods, have little to no influence on the dominant concerns and methods of Chinese philosophical thinking.

The later Mohist *Canon* is another example of a tendency toward something like an analytic attitude. I shall take up a detailed consideration of the later Mohists in chapter five. For now I shall simply note that as with Xunzi, even if there is a need for some kind of clarity, this is not the kind of perfect abstract clarity

that requires refinement through dialectical argumentation, but even at its most abstract remains rooted in pragmatic concerns. And as with Gongsun Longzi, the subject matter and motivation for this style of thinking rapidly fell out of favor, and remained lost and forgotten for close to two thousand years.

Joanne Birdwhistell¹¹ has suggested that the commentarial tradition of later periods might be thought to exemplify a concern for disambiguation of possible meanings of classical texts. Certainly, it is true that the traditional commentaries not only provide glosses, explications, and interpretations of the traditional texts, but also register disagreements over interpretations, and responses to other interpreters and commentators. But, as with Confucius and Xunzi, this is a concern not with *vagueness* as such, but with *ambiguity*, a different linguistic phenomenon altogether. And, again, it must be kept in mind that this disambiguation did not take the form of extended dialectical refinement of the terms and claims in question. Moreover, the commentaries themselves, the disagreements recorded, and the reasons given, are often highly condensed and obscure, and, as often as not, cause more confusion than clarification. Finally, if the commentators were concerned with clarifying possible ambiguities, this concern never entered into reflective philosophical discourse as a thematized distaste, or explicit rejection, either of vague language and expressions, or of the phenomenon of vagueness itself—as indeed has been the case in western philosophy since its very beginnings.

Now, it is far from my intention to suggest that the ancient Chinese did not argue, that they were not rational, or that they never saw fit to make clarifications. Arguments, clarifications, explications abound in Chinese texts. What it does mean is that reason giving, argumentation, and clarification, have had a different philosophical significance from that of the west. They are practiced always within a context of pragmatic concerns, and not with the aim of a perfect, abstract, objective precision. One will struggle in vain, for example, to find in the philosophical repertoire anything resembling the endless striving after truth and clarity through the dialectical refinement of definitions from the continual adducing of examples and counterexamples. And, in particular, one will be hard pressed to find the explicit theoretical assertion of clarity, distinctness, argumentation, and truth as the goals of philosophical inquiry.

¹¹ In a personal communication, at the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy conference in Honolulu, 1998.

It is, however, my particular contention that in the Daoist thinking of Laozi and Zhuangzi, there is a recognition and appreciation not only of ambiguity, but also of something like the kinds of vagueness and indeterminacy that have been the scourge of western philosophy. Vagueness is not regarded with suspicion, but is simply an acknowledged characteristic of the world around us, and the paradoxes it engenders are not treated as logical puzzles to be solved by analysis and distinction making, but instead are treated as embodying insights, meditation on which will deepen our understanding of the way of things. According to the *Laozi* the outer boundaries of the outer regions are always unsettled: *tiandi* and *dao* are without bounds, without limits, perhaps finite, but inexhaustible. In the *Laozi* then, it is the outer boundaries that are called into question. In the *Zhuangzi*, it is the inner boundaries that are the focus of deconstruction, or dissolution: there is a recognition that the 'whole' is not a monotone uniformity, but is itself a pluralistic congeries of differences. Each region melts into the next in a series of interdiffusing clines of culture, value, and way of life. As one ventures away from home, differences build upon differences and the similarities and familiarities gradually dissolve. Yet the natural way is to make room for a plurality of ways: each region can coincide with others without universalization, and can thus respect the differences that go to make up the whole. There is no battle for control of the whole by imposition of the individual and parochial. Differences blend and jostle together at the intersections, without worrying about exactly which side of the 'divide' anything belongs to.

Overview

In the next chapter, I establish some social and historical background for understanding the context in which Zhuangzi flourished, and also for understanding the socio-cultural significance of the discussion of boundaries, dichotomies, transformation, and penumbrae. Chapter three raises important interpretive issues, and explores attitudes towards the determinacy and indeterminacy of interpretation of several methodologies. The issues of indeterminacy of meaning raised are themselves directly relevant to the discussion in the *Zhuangzi* of the indeterminacy of meaning! Chapter four introduces the philosophy of the Mohists, a philosophy whose attitudes towards simplicity, clarity, and 'dichotomy' form the philosophical material that the *Zhuangzi* redefines and 'deconstructs.' Chapter five introduces a very specific kind of in-

determinacy—‘vagueness’—and attempts to abduce the significance of vagueness for understanding the processive Daoist world view as expressed in the *Laozi*. In chapter six, the significance of vagueness is extended to incorporate the phenomena of open texture and family resemblance. The role of the imagination of continuous transformation, and the construction of ‘anomalies’ (hard cases, penumbral cases), in opening the texture of meaning, give a sense to the vastness of roaming beyond the boundaries of the *Xiao Yao You*. Finally, chapter seven attempts to draw together these elements in a detailed reading of the central passages of the *Qi Wu Lun*: explaining why we should want to affirm what we deny, and how to find a horse that is not a horse!

All translations are my own. The problems of relying on literary translations, imbued with the translator’s own interpretation, for philosophical purposes are well known to scholars of Ancient philosophy. One cannot of course produce an uninterpreted translation, but a philosopher can at least attempt to minimize interpretive flourishes that go too far beyond the more central and explicit meanings, and can also draw out any plausible peripheral significances that may be of philosophical relevance.