

# Conceptions of Knowledge in Classical Chinese Philosophy

Hui-chieh Loy and Daryl Ooi

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## Abstract

The paper discusses five conceptions of knowledge present in texts traditionally associated with the thought of such thinkers as Kongzi, Mozi, Mengzi, Xunzi, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Hanfeizi. The first three maps onto conceptions of knowledge familiar to contemporary ears: skill knowledge (knowing-how), propositional knowledge (knowing-that) and objectual knowledge (knowing by acquaintance); while the next two map onto less commonly discussed conceptions of knowledge: motivational knowledge (knowing-to) and applied knowledge (knowing-how-to). The discussion aims to complement existing projects in the literature that look at related issues more explicitly from the standpoint of the ‘native’ concepts. The paper concludes with some comments on the early Chinese philosophical concerns with knowledge and its relation to broader conceptions of ‘philosophical’ projects.

## Key Words

Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, Legalism, Action

## 1. Introduction

The period from the time of Kongzi (“Confucius”; 551-479 BCE) and ending with Han Feizi (280-233 BCE), which largely coincides with the “Warring States Era” of Pre-Imperial China, is often considered the “Classical Period” of Chinese Philosophy. During this period, several influential philosophical orientations saw their genesis, including most prominently: Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism and Legalism. The first two became long-lasting intellectual traditions that survived (with many changes along the way) into the modern era. Though some of the texts associated with these orientations do contain discussions relating to knowledge, the received view holds that developing a systematic epistemology was not the primary emphases of these philosophical orientations in the Classical Period. Nonetheless, it doesn’t follow from the above that the Classical Period Chinese Philosophers did not care about epistemological issues. In fact, epistemological concerns played a crucial role in the development of political, ethical, and religious aspects of early Chinese Philosophy.

Rather than focus on passages talking about ideas denoted by those terms traditionally associated with “knowledge” (*zhi* 知 is the usual suspect),<sup>1</sup> we will instead, introduce five conceptions of knowledge *present* in texts traditionally associated with the thought of such thinkers as Kongzi, Mozi, Mengzi, Xunzi, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Hanfeizi. The first three map onto conceptions of knowledge familiar to contemporary ears: skill knowledge (knowing-how), propositional knowledge (knowing-that) and objectual knowledge (knowing by acquaintance);

while the next two map onto less commonly discussed conceptions of knowledge: motivational knowledge (knowing-to) and applied knowledge (knowing-how-to).

The claim we are making, however, is not a *linguistic* one, namely, that there are clear words or phrases in the original language that map directly to know-how, know-that, objectual knowledge, know-how-to, and know-to; the equivalences are at best imperfect. We are also not suggesting that the Classical Chinese philosophers were mainly concerned to clarify the differences between these five conceptions of knowledge or develop systematic theories about them. Rather, when we say that these five conceptions were present, we mean that the Classical Chinese philosophers employed ‘knowledge’ in these ways, in their recorded thinking and arguments. In so doing, our aim is to complement existing projects in the literature that look at related issues more explicitly from the standpoint of the ‘native’ concepts.

## 2. Skill Knowledge (Knowing-how)

The modern distinction between skill knowledge and propositional knowledge is often attributed to Gilbert Ryle.<sup>2</sup> A simple way to distinguish between them is as follows: Someone possesses propositional knowledge about  $p$  just in case she knows that  $p$  is the case; and someone possesses skill knowledge  $\Phi$  just in case she knows how to  $\Phi$ .<sup>3</sup> (We use the term ‘is the case’ to accommodate a more general way of talking about what is commonly known as ‘the correspondence theory of truth’: and this can be variously thought of in terms of ‘is true’ or ‘accords with the Way’. We clarify this use later in the chapter.) Perhaps the most common conception of knowledge often attributed to Classical Chinese Philosophers is skill knowledge, typically knowledge associated with a specific *craft*.<sup>4</sup> In a humorous passage in the *Analects*, we read:

A man from Daxiang said, “Your Confucius is really great! With his vast learning, he has still not managed to excel in any particular field.” The Master heard of this and said to his disciples: “Which skill should I cultivate? Shall I take up charioteering? Shall I take up archery? All right, I shall take up charioteering.” (*Analects* 9.2)<sup>5</sup>

When faced with the charge that he has not made a name for himself in any craft, Confucius remarked that he would take up charioteering and implied that he would excel in it! The point here being that Confucius was not well known in performing any craft not because he could not achieve it, but because he chose not to do so—he could if he wanted to. The larger point of the passage instructs readers about the flexibility of the morally exemplary person (君子 *junzi*)—that they would be able to excel in a range of things if only they put their minds to them. Not only does the morally exemplary person know *how to do something* they also know how to do it *well*.

This is, of course, not to say that acquiring and excelling at skill knowledge is easily attainable. We read in the *Mengzi*:

Mencius said, ‘A carpenter or a carriage-maker can pass on to another the rules of his craft, but he cannot make him skilful.’ (*Mencius* 7B5)

That is, possessing instruments related to some craft does not automatically translate into one possessing that craft. (The passage is also Mencius’ subtle dig at the Mohists for (apparently) thinking that moral conduct can be reduced to the application of doctrinal formulas.) Having the skill knowledge requires something more in the person and gaining that something more

takes training. A common theme, throughout Confucianism, is that one needs to put in deliberate effort to develop their skill. For instance, in the *Xunzi*, we read:

How does one know the meaning of the dance? I say: The eyes do not themselves see it, and the ears do not themselves hear it. Nevertheless, it controls their postures, gestures, directions, and speed. When all the dancers are restrained and orderly, exerting to the utmost the strength of their bones and sinews to match the rhythm of drum and bell sounding together, and no one is out of step, then how easy it is to tell the meaning of this group gathering! (Xunzi 20.170-176)

... if a person puts even one amount of effort into following ritual and *yi*, he will get back twice as much. (Xunzi 19.48-50)-

Various kinds of skill-knowledge were also considered integral to the development of human civilization. We read in the *Mozi*:

In antiquity, before people knew how to make clothing, they wore garments of skins and furs with belts made of grasses. In winter they were neither light nor warm and in summer neither light nor cool. A sage-king would consider this situation not to accord with the requirements of man's essential nature. Thus, a sage arose and taught women how to make silk and hemp and how to weave grass cloth and silk fabric from which to make clothing for people. The "Law for Making Clothes" stated: "In winter, underwear should be of spun silk so that it is light as well as warm. In summer, underwear should be made of linen fine enough so that it is light as well as cool. One should be careful to do this but no more."

Thus the sages made clothing that suited the body and was comfortable on the flesh. (Mozi 6.2)

In antiquity, before the people knew how to make boats and carts, they could not carry heavy loads nor travel to distant places. Thus, a sage-king arose and created boats and carts to facilitate the activities of their subjects. (Mozi 6.4)

Note, however, that the Mohists focused on skill-knowledge they deemed useful for developing the material well-being of human society through their ability to produce various implements (i.e., what we might call "technology" in the broad sense).

Compared to them, the Confucians tend to focus on skills that bring joy to the skilled agent and their beneficiaries as well as for developing the moral well-being of society. Consider, for instance, the craft of playing musical instruments. For the Confucians, the 'correct' performance of music was integral for the ethical cultivation of the people. The point here is not so much that the *morally exemplary person* would possess such skills, but rather, that the development and performance of these skills in society are valuable for guiding people in that society towards attaining Confucian aims. For instance, Xunzi writes about music:

Sounds and music enter into people deeply and transform people quickly. Therefore, the former kings carefully made for these things a proper pattern... When the situation is like this, then the common people will all rest secure in

their dwellings and delight in their villages, such as to provide sufficiently for their superior. (Xunzi 20.61-71).

And so I say: Music is joy. The gentleman takes joy in attaining the Way... If one takes the Way to regulate one's desires, then one will be happy and not disordered... The instruments made of metal, stone, silk, string, and bamboo are the means to guide one's virtue. When music proceeds, then the people will turn toward what is correct. (Xunzi 20.135-142).

For Confucians such as Xunzi, the skill knowledge of playing music well (in specific ways) was important—for it produces joy, moral cultivation, and material well-being.

The *Zhuangzi* is full of stories about different kinds of skill-knowledge. In a famous passage, we read of a Cook who was masterful at carving up an ox for a king. We read,

At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee—zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm... (Zhuangzi 3)

In response, the King remarked, “Ah! It is wonderful that skill can reach such heights!” Unsurprisingly, the Cook explains that *skill knowledge comes in degrees*. There are cooks who are “ordinary,” cooks who are “good,” and there are cooks like Cook Ding, who stand in a league of their own.

The Cook further explains how *skill knowledge can be acquired and developed*. Like most types of skill knowledge, the Cook's ability was acquired through long practice. He tells us,

When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. (Zhuangzi 3)

In addition to practice, the Cook tells us that his ability to be great at carving is due to his being in tune with the Way (to simplify, think of the Way in the *Zhuangzi* as a kind of Principle—a metaphysical non-agent—according to which people ought to live and society ought to be organized if they were to flourish). Thus, the mere *practicing* of a task is insufficient for the acquisition and development of one's know-how. Put differently, practice alone does not necessarily make perfect. After all, many people may spend a significant time and energy practicing a task, without becoming excellent at it. Instead, one needs to practice the task *in accordance with the Way*, and only then will one be able to follow the Cook in acquiring and developing their skill knowledge.

Interestingly, discussions of skill knowledge in Chinese Philosophy seldom involve the idea that the development of skills is *for its own sake*. Rather, the development of skill knowledge is typically connected with other concerns more central to the project of these philosophers, such as ethical cultivation and nourishing life. For instance, while the *Zhuangzi* is filled with skill stories, the point they telegraph is never really about the skill knowledge itself. The Cook's demonstration of butchering an ox (going along with the flow, *wuwei*) was not primarily a lesson about butchering, but, as the King remarked at the end of the story, “From hearing the cook's words I have learned how to nourish life!” (see also Analects 19.7).

### 3. Propositional Knowledge (Knowing-that)

Chinese Philosophers were also concerned about whether we can attain propositional knowledge that something is the case. From the outset, it is worth noting that there is a lively and important debate about whether early Chinese Philosophers had a concept of (semantic) truth. An argument can be made that if they did not have a concept of truth, and if we accept the premise that possessing propositional knowledge of  $p$  is equivalent to knowing-that  $p$  is *true* (or false), then the early Chinese Philosophers did not, in fact, care about propositional knowledge.

The debate turns on the question of what it means to say that the Chinese Philosophers ‘had a concept’ of (semantic) truth. For the purposes of this essay, we propose the following preliminaries. First, we are not asserting that the early Chinese Philosophers were concerned about truth and propositional knowledge *in the same way* that contemporary epistemologists care about truth and propositional knowledge. Within the surviving corpus, there was little concern with formulating complex accounts of truth or propositional knowledge. The ancient thinkers, for the most part, did not propose explicit doctrines on this subject, nor did they argue with each other directly about nuances across alternative accounts.<sup>6</sup> Neither did they, at least in the Classical period, debate the metaphysical status of true propositions—such as whether there exists some truth ‘out there’ and whether we are in an epistemic position to grasp it.

Second, despite the above, we do assert (and we suggest that most scholars would be willing to agree with us) that the Chinese Philosophers operated with at least an *implicit thin* conception of truth in their writings. That is, they often worked with what we can take to be truth-like apparatus. For instance, unsurprisingly, they often debated over whether something is the case, or whether it is not, for instance, whether providential ghosts exist, whether virtue and application makes a difference to the outcomes (i.e., whether fatalism is the case), whether having the government staffed by virtuous gentlemen will bring about an orderly state, or whether it’s more about having uniform rules and appropriate incentives, or for that matter, whether such and such an individual is morally virtuous or vicious. They also, of course, made common truth-related assumptions, such as ‘that Confucius was a real figure who lived (even though I’ve never met him before)’, ‘that Yan Hui died at a young age’, ‘the governments are filled with morally corrupt leaders’, and so on. On this score, an important way in which early Chinese Philosophers expressed a concern over whether something is the case is through asking whether a ‘name’ (i.e., a term) appropriately applies to a thing or a state of affairs. This is functionally equivalent to asking whether a proposition is true.

To sum up, we assume that the early Chinese Philosophers were at least concerned about truth in the sense that they were (sometimes) concerned about whether something is the case or not. Understood in this light, they were concerned with propositional knowledge insofar as they cared about whether an agent would be able to *know-that* something was the case. With this in mind, for any agent to possess propositional knowledge about  $p$  just is for that agent to know that  $p$  is the case (without any strong metaphysical assumptions attached). In the rest of this section, we will provide examples to show that the early Chinese Philosophers were (at least) concerned about propositional knowledge *in this sense*.

First, apart from caring about whether something is or is not the case, early Chinese Philosophers were concerned about the *justification* that one may have for taking propositions to be so, and so how one might know which proposition is the case, especially in face of doctrinal disagreement (which can be phrased in terms of conflicting propositions). Mozi and his followers, for instance, articulate “Three Gnomons” or “Three Standards” to resolve such disagreements, so that one can better know which of the conflicting propositions one should accept:

Our Master Mozi taught us: “All those who set forth doctrines and discourses must first establish a gnomon before offering a doctrine. To offer a doctrine

without first establishing a gnomon is, to use an analogy, like trying to establish the direction of sunrise and sunset on a revolving potter's wheel: although one could distinguish one direction from the other one, it is impossible to define them precisely. This is why there are three standards that doctrines should meet." What are the three standards? We say they are: Test whether it has a proper basis, a proper origin, and can be put to proper use. In what should it be properly based?

Examine the deeds of the early sages and great kings. What should be its proper origin? Scrutinize what the ears and eyes of the crowd take to be the truth. Where should it be properly put into use? Issue it as a regulation in the country and among the myriad peoples and observe how it functions. These we call the three standards. (Mozi 37.1)

The Mohist "Canons and Explanations" expands on the idea that an important way we justify purported knowledge is by acquiring empirical data through our faculties, something related to the first "Gnomon" or "Standard" above:

Canon: The knowing is the capacity.

Explanation: (Knowing, capacity.) As to the knowing, it's that by which we know, such that we surely know. Like eyesight. (Mozi A3)

One's faculties, in this case, eyesight, provide the *capacity* for knowing. An application of this idea can be seen in this passage about how we may know whether ghosts and spirits exist:

If it is given that the question of whether ghosts and spirits exist or not is one that must be investigated, then when I want to investigate this matter clearly, what kind of argument is admissible? Our Master Mozi said: "The method used by the whole world to determine whether something exists or not is to rely upon what the great mass of people knows from the evidence of their own ears and eyes and to use this as a standard for determining whether something exists or not. If someone has genuinely heard something with his own ears and seen something with his own eyes, then it must exist. But if no one has either heard or seen it, then it must not exist. If this is the case, why not try going into villages and districts and asking? If from antiquity to the present, from the birth of humankind to the present day, people have seen evidence of ghosts and spirits and heard their voices, how could we say that ghosts and spirits do not exist? But if no one has ever seen or heard them, how could we say that ghosts and spirits exist?" (Mozi 31.3)

Second, we find *sceptical concerns* raised by some philosophers. Perhaps most famously, the *Zhuangzi* records various kinds of sceptical worries, including worries about whether we can be certain about what we know.

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he were Zhuang Zhou who had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou. (Zhuangzi 2)

On a common reading, Zhuangzi is expressing scepticism about how certain we may be about our knowledge—in this case, knowledge that he is Zhuangzi rather than a butterfly. It is thus unsurprising that scholars sometimes compare Zhuangzi's scepticism with the scepticism derived from Descartes' dream argument.<sup>7</sup>

It should again be emphasized that propositional knowledge is seldom (if ever) pursued for its own sake. Rather, propositional knowledge is typically instrumentally important for helping us attain more pragmatic goals. In an interesting passage in the *Mencius*, we read,

[Po-Li His] knew that the ruler of Yü was beyond advice and left for Ch'in. He was seventy then. If at that age he did not know that it was undignified to secure a chance to speak to Duke Mu of Ch'in through feeding cattle, could he be called wise? Yet can he be called unwise when he remained silent, knowing that advice would be futile? He certainly was not unwise when he left in advance, knowing the ruler of Yü to be heading for disaster. (Mencius 5A9)

Thus, Boli Xu's knowledge that the Duke could not be remonstrated with and that the Duke was in trouble was instrumental in guiding Boli Xu's actions. Thus, while propositional knowledge was often assumed by early Chinese philosophers, it was not typically treated as valuable in and of itself, but something that enables us to live and act well.

#### 4. Objectual Knowledge

Objectual knowledge, sometimes called knowing by acquaintance or experience, often refers to knowledge of an object that one may possess which can only be attained by experience of that object. Common examples include 'I know John' or 'I know the taste of a bitter melon'. This kind of knowledge is often thought to be distinct from propositional knowledge, since when one says, 'I know John', one often means more than 'I know facts about John'. It is also distinct from skill knowledge since one may know how to distinguish between sweet and bitter, but not have the knowledge of what a bitter melon tastes like. Thus, we read in the Mozi:

Now suppose there were a man who, having seen something slightly black, called it black, but on seeing something very black, called it white. We would certainly conclude that this man did not know the difference between black and white. Suppose, having tasted something a little bitter, he called it bitter, but upon tasting something very bitter, he called it sweet. We would certainly conclude that he did not know the difference between bitter and sweet. (Mozi 17.2)

Therefore the teaching of our Master Mozi says: "This obscures what righteousness is. How is this different from obscuring the difference between black and white or the difference between sweet and bitter?" Suppose there were a man who, when you show him something slightly black, calls it black, but when you show up something very black, calls it white. He would certainly have to explain, "My vision is confused, so I cannot distinguish black from white." Or suppose there were a man who, when you give him a taste of something slightly sweet, says it is sweet, but when you give him a taste of something very sweet, says that it is bitter. He would certainly have to explain, "My taste buds are messed up, and so I cannot distinguish sweet flavors from bitter. (Mozi 28.7B)

Knowing the distinction between black and white, and between sweet and bitter, involves being able to recognise an object to be either black or white, sweet or bitter. To be able to do so, one needs to have previously experienced blackness, whiteness, sweetness or bitterness. This experience and ability to recognise something as being in accord with that experience just is objectual knowledge.

Similar to skill and propositional knowledge, objectual knowledge is seldom valued for its own sake, as opposed to its being important for cultivating life.

## 5. Motivational Knowledge (Knowing-to)

The next two conceptions of knowledge are less commonly discussed in contemporary introduction to epistemology classes, but Chinese Philosophers often care about knowledge in these senses.<sup>8</sup> We begin with knowing-to. On our characterisation, one possesses motivational knowledge (one knows-to  $\Phi$ ) if one both knows *that* one should  $\Phi$  *and* one is motivated to  $\Phi$ . In this way, knowing-to presupposes knowing-that. And one possesses applied knowledge (one knows how-to  $\Phi$ ) if one both knows how to  $\Phi$  in general *and* one is able to  $\Phi$  in a particular situation. Given this characterization, while knowing-how-to and knowing-to are *distinct* from the earlier conceptions, they are also related. This is because the first component of knowing-to  $\Phi$  is a knowledge that one should  $\Phi$ . Thus, if Jack knows-to be filial to his parents, part of what this means is that he knows that he should be filial to his parents. Or if Jamie knows-to save a child from falling into a well, part of what this means is that she knows that she should save the child from falling into a well. The second component of knowing-to  $\Phi$  is a motivational component.

In contemporary discussions, there is a debate about whether one's knowledge that one should  $\Phi$  involves a motivational component—crudely, internalists argue that it does, and externalists argue that it does not. Some Chinese Philosophers think that if one *really knows* that one should  $\Phi$ , one would (be motivated to)  $\Phi$ . That is, barring competing motivations or physical obstructions, one's motivation to  $\Phi$  would result in one actually  $\Phi$ -ing. A later Chinese Philosopher (Wang Yangming; 1472-1529) called this tight connection between knowledge and motivation the Doctrine of Knowing and Acting. To explain it, Wang draws on an analogy between loving the good and loving a lovely sight. The moment one sees a lovely object (or the good), one is immediately drawn towards it, or motivated to love it. But how strong should this motivation be? Let's begin with these two alternatives:

Knowing-to (motivation): One knows-to  $\Phi$  if one knows that one should  $\Phi$  and one is motivated to  $\Phi$ .

Knowing-to (action): One knows-to  $\Phi$  if one knows that one should  $\Phi$  and one actually  $\Phi$ s.

At first glance, we may think that the latter characterization is unintuitive. Surely it is possible for one to know that one should  $\Phi$  *and* not  $\Phi$  at the same time—there are many people who do what they know they should not do. One way to respond to this concern is to argue that if one *says* that one knows that she should not  $\Phi$  and yet  $\Phi$ s, she does not actually know that she should not  $\Phi$ . In fact, in many everyday cases, when we see someone doing something that we think is wrong (say submitting the same paper to multiple journals at a time), we may typically respond with something like, “don't you know that you should not do that?” Or when a parent sees one of her children slapping the other, she may react by saying, “don't you know that you



should not slap your sister?” Such responses suggest that we often associate one’s knowledge that one should  $\Phi$  with the act of  $\Phi$ -ing.

But we may also be concerned that making actually  $\Phi$ -ing a requirement is too demanding. For we may think of various scenarios where it may be reasonable for one to know that one should  $\Phi$  but not actually  $\Phi$ ; and in such cases, one’s not actually  $\Phi$ -ing does not indicate that one does not know that one should not  $\Phi$ . Often, these cases involve a physical obstacle or competing motivations. Consider a typical dilemma: your wife and mother are both drowning, and due to various limitations, you are only able to save one. Your decision not to save the other party in this scenario does not indicate that you do not know that you should save either of the parties. With this in mind, we might think that knowing-to (motivation) would be a more reasonable characterisation of knowledge.

Nonetheless, if someone constantly claims to know that she should  $\Phi$ , but even when there are no obstructions, she never actually  $\Phi$ s, we may worry that she does not actually know to  $\Phi$ . These considerations suggest an alternative definition of knowing-to:

Knowing-to: One knows-to  $\Phi$  if, barring physical obstacles or reasonable competing motivations, one actually  $\Phi$ s.

An interesting instance of the above is implied in Confucius’ characterization of his favourite disciple, Yan Hui:

The Master said: “I can talk all day to Yan Hui – he never raises any objection, he looks stupid. Yet, observe him when he is on his own: his actions fully reflect what he learned. Oh no, Hui is not stupid!” (Analects 2.9; see also Analects 4.9, 5.10, 13.5, 14.27, 15.23)

For Confucius, the evidence that Yan Hui has learned, i.e., gained knowledge, lies in the latter’s *actions*. Confucius was concerned that Yan Hui did not raise any disagreeing queries in class, so to speak, as it made him wonder if Hui understood what he heard. The worry was dispelled by the observation of the disciple’s subsequent behavior. That is, his action is evidence for his knowledge; for knowledge, in this sense, would result in behaviors that accord with said knowledge. A similar connection is also drawn by Xunzi:

The learning of the [morally exemplary person] enters through his ears, fastens to his heart, spreads through his four limbs, and manifests itself in his actions. (Xunzi 1.145-8)

For these early Confucian thinkers, the morally exemplary person, upon learning what he should do (propositional knowledge), *goes on to act on it*, or at the very least, *wants to do so* (motivational knowledge). Presumably, this relationship between knowledge and action is not only meant to be true for the morally exemplary person, nor is it restricted to knowledge as opposed to just belief. For instance, people who adopt doctrines end up acting in accord with ~~them~~. Mengzi, for instance, explains:

If the way of Yang and Mo does not subside and the way of Confucius does not shine forth, the people will be deceived by heresies and the path of morality will be blocked. When the path of morality is blocked, then we show animals the way to devour men, and sooner or later it will come to men devouring men. Therefore I am apprehensive. I wish to safeguard the way of the former sages

against the onslaughts of Yang and Mo and to banish excessive views. Then there will be no way for advocates of heresies to arise. For what arises in the mind will interfere with policy, and what shows itself in policy will interfere with practice. (Mencius 3B9)

Since the early Chinese philosophers (especially the moralistic ones) thought that ethical belief motivates, they were also naturally pushed to think that one's knowing-that one should  $\Phi$  ought to be accompanied with  $\Phi$ -ing, reasonably barring any obstacles. Thus, knowing-to plays a crucial role in the early Chinese understanding of ethical knowledge.

## 6. Applied Knowledge (Knowing how-to)

Another possible conception of knowledge is *knowing how-to* or *applied knowledge*. One possesses applied knowledge (one knows how-to  $\Phi$ ) if one both knows how to  $\Phi$  in general *and* is able to  $\Phi$  in a range of situations. Karyn Lai describes this as “knowing to act in the moment”.<sup>9</sup> To see this conception more clearly, let's start from the common example of skill knowledge, bicycle riding. Suppose we're watching Sally ride her bicycle: she's going down the street, she looks stable, and she's cycled for a substantial distance. We conclude that Sally possesses the skill knowledge of riding a bicycle —she knows how to do it! However, as Sally is cycling, we notice that there is a bump on the road, and we're not sure if Sally knows how-to ride over that bump. Or perhaps Sally comes upon an icy road, and we're not sure if she knows how-to ride across an icy road. Simply by being able to ride a bicycle along the road, we reasonably think that Sally possesses skill knowledge about bicycle riding. But in another sense, we wonder whether she knows *how-to* navigate through different terrains and challenges. Knowing how-to, that is, knowledge relating to the application of one's skill knowledge to specific variations in situations, seems therefore to be a distinct kind of knowledge.

There is a standard move one might make if she wants to deny that knowing how-to is conceptually distinct from knowing how. She might argue that if Sally does not know how to adapt her bicycle riding to different scenarios, she simply does not possess skill knowledge about bicycle riding. That is, knowing how is equivalent to knowing how-to. One weakness of this approach is that the threshold for possessing any kind of skill knowledge would seem too high—for anyone to possess skill knowledge, they would need to be able to apply that knowledge in *any* situation. Alternatively, we might choose to be more fine-grained in the way skill-knowledge is defined, e.g., knowing how to  $\Phi$ -in- $C_1$ , versus knowing how to  $\Phi$ -in- $C_2$ , versus knowing how to  $\Phi$ -in- $C_3$ , and so on. Or we may prefer instead to say that one possesses skill knowledge knowing how to  $\Phi$  just in case she knows how to  $\Phi$  *in reasonable circumstances*. The difficulty with this approach is in determining what 'reasonable circumstances' entail. We leave that question open in this paper, and simply note that even if we adopt either of these approaches, knowing how-to will thus be redefined accordingly, but in each case, it will still involve being able to  $\Phi$  under the defined conditions.

The above issues are not fully resolved among contemporary epistemologists, and our discussion isn't meant to determine the larger issue. However, we believe that something in the range of applied knowledge would help make sense of the importance given to the idea of 'flexibility' (in Confucian thought) and 'spontaneity' (in Daoist thought). That is, a morally exemplary person's know-how is always flexible or spontaneous and therefore, is always a 'know how-to'. The previously mentioned discussion of *wuwei* and Cook Ding offers a good example. Whenever Ding comes upon a specific obstacle while carving, he has the skill to successfully overcome the obstacle. He does not merely possess skill knowledge of carving: he is able to apply his skill knowledge to any obstacles that may come his way. A lesser cook possesses know-how, but a cook that is flowing with the Way possesses know how-to. For our

purposes, we may use the notion of *responsiveness* to capture some of the nuances of flexibility and spontaneity in the application of knowledge. That is, one possesses applied knowledge just in case she knows how to  $\Phi$  and is responsive to various situations, such that regardless of the situation, she will be able to  $\Phi$ . This sentiment, as applied to crafts or skills, can be seen in passages throughout works of the early thinkers. For instance,

Confucius said, “Great indeed was Yao as a ruler! It is Heaven that is great and it was Yao who modelled himself upon it. He was so boundless that the common people were not able to put a name to his virtues.

What a ruler Shun was! He was so lofty that while in possession of the Empire he held aloof from it!

It is not true that in ruling the Empire Yao and Shun did not have to use their minds. Only they did not use their minds on ploughing the fields. (Mencius 3A4, see also Mencius 7B5, 7B6)

Yao and Shun were model rulers. Part of the reason for this is because, when they applied their hearts to any task, they would know how-to perform it successfully—in this case, whether to rule or to farm. The idea is that superior people possess such flexibility or responsiveness, such that whenever they are faced with a different task, they know how to successfully apply their knowledge. Relatedly, Mozi explains that “new tasks must be attended to each day” and

...the requisite knowledge is required to handle each task. (Mozi 9.5B)

That is, regardless of what obstacles may come, a ruler who knows how-to rule would be able to put things in order, regardless of whatever obstacles may come their way. In another humorous passage, we read in the *Zhuangzi*,

The horse lover uses a fine box to catch the dung and a giant clam shell to catch the stale. But if a mosquito or a fly lights on the horse and he slaps it at the wrong time, then the horse will break the bit, hurt its head, and bang its chest. (Zhuangzi 4)

Zhuangzi is highlighting the importance of knowing how-to respond to various situations. To take care of a horse, loving it (and all its parts) is insufficient – one needs to be able to know how-to take care of it when various circumstances arise. For instance, suppose a mosquito lands on it, it would be imperative that one knows how-to respond – responding wrongly by simply smacking the mosquito would not fit into what Zhuangzi takes a proper response to be. Thus, Zhuangzi later says,

The Perfect Man uses his mind like a mirror – going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Therefore he can win out over things and not hurt himself. (Zhuangzi 7)

Recall the story of the Cook in the *Zhuangzi* discussed above. The story is often used as an example of the Daoist teaching of *wuwei* (無為), often translated ‘effortless action’ or ‘non-action’. Think, for instance, of soccer players. In one sense, we would say that most professional players know how to play soccer well. But there are some players who seem to have a special kind of skill knowledge, and in some games, regardless of variations in

circumstances and conditions, they play extremely well. They are often then described as being ‘in form’. And often, when watching them play, they appear to do so effortlessly. In one sense, we may think of the ideal of *wuwei* as something like this—when one is in tune with the Way (even, ‘in the zone’), one is able to effortlessly perform her skill successfully, applying one’s skill to respond to the different circumstances one is faced with.

Whether in performing one’s craft or in ruling, Xunzi teaches that to actually be good at what one does, one needs to be able to successfully implement their knowledge. For instance, he explains that, when pursuing a craft,

One who misses a single shot out of a hundred does not deserve to be called good at archery. One who falls short of going a thousand *li* by the distance of even half a step does not deserve to be called good at chariot-driving. (Xunzi 1.206-9)

That is, it is insufficient that one knows how-to hit the target in archery. One needs to do it consistently, regardless of what potential obstacles one may face. Xunzi applies this idea to ruling as well:

The unchanging element among the reigns of the hundred kings can serve as the binding thread of the Way. As one thing passes by and another arises, respond to them with this thread. If one has mastered the thread, there will be no chaos. If one does not know the thread, one will not know how to respond to changes. (Xunzi Chapter 17.226-31)

One’s ability to respond to various circumstances is integral to ruling well. In this way, while the early Chinese thinkers had a concept of knowing-how, they also thought it is important for people to be able to apply their skill knowledge to various situations. We call this ability to effectively apply one’s skill knowledge to various circumstances knowing how-to.

## **7. Concluding Remarks on Epistemological Concerns in Classical Chinese Philosophy**

There has been much debate over the place of ‘epistemology’ in Chinese Philosophy. One prominent approach suggests that early Chinese philosophers were not concerned about ‘epistemology’ in the sense that ‘Western’ philosophers are concerned with it. Roughly, the difference may be cashed out in two ways. The first concerns the centrality or primacy of ‘epistemology’ in one’s philosophical thinking. In contrast to the idea that ‘philosophy’ is primarily concerned with discovering or providing justification for true beliefs, some scholars argue that Chinese philosophers did not place such a high importance on epistemological concerns. While they used a cognate term for knowing/knowledge (知 *zhi*), little ink (if any) was spilled in developing theories of knowledge, or making distinctions between different ways of thinking about knowledge. Not all scholars share this view, and there appears to be some evidence that Chinese thinkers did distinguish (at least implicitly) between different *kinds* of knowledge. In addition to our discussion above, consider a passage in the Mengzi which has been receiving some interest in recent years:

Mencius said, “What a man is able to do without having to learn it is what he can truly do; what he knows without having to reflect on is what he truly (良 *liang*) knows (知 *zhi*).” (Mencius 7A15)

Mengzi appears to be distinguishing between genuine knowledge from other forms of knowledge. Nevertheless, evidence that Chinese philosophers paid significant attention to conceptual distinctions between kinds of knowledge remain scarce.

Second, some scholars have expressed concerns that even though Chinese Philosophers appear to employ terms relating to knowledge, they are not referring to the *same thing* that ‘Western’ Philosophers tend to designate as knowledge. Attempts to do so, these scholars argue, tend to impose ‘Western’ knowledge categories and assumptions into Chinese Philosophy.

Another prominent approach to the question of the place of ‘epistemology’ in Chinese Philosophy holds that even if the Chinese Philosopher’s discussion of knowledge (or use of the term 知) might not be *identical* to standard conceptions in ‘Western’ Philosophy, there are nevertheless important conceptual overlaps or functional equivalences. Philosophers who adopt this approach argue, for instance, that, while the Chinese Philosophers may not use the term for ‘truth’ in any metaphysically robust sense (i.e., that there are truths ‘out there’), their discussions adopt the functional equivalence of saying that something is true. For instance, they describe events as being in accord with the Way, they dispute over which doctrine to adopt, and they care about whether doctrines can be justified by evidence. In this way, these scholars contend, Chinese Philosophers often discuss and employ epistemological concepts that are familiar to a ‘Western’ audience, but, of course, argue that comparisons need to be made thoughtfully and with sensitivity to their world of thought and the relevant scholarship, being careful not to overemphasize apparent similarities.

Here, we hope to propose an additional path that takes seriously the values and principles driving both these prominent approaches. Suppose we take for granted that many early Chinese Philosophers were motivated primarily by, and were reacting to, the worldly issues they observed around them—warfare among states, corrupt rulers, inequality and poverty, and widespread starvation and death. In a very real sense, their engagement with ‘philosophy’ was their attempt at trying to make sense of and at finding ways to rectify what they thought was wrong in their world, or if not that, at least to *cope* with the chaos. If we accept this characterization of at least the thinkers commonly associated with the philosophical mainstream, it is unsurprising that, for the most part, they did not spend as much time thinking or writing about conceptual distinctions in knowledge categories. Instead, their interest in what we call ‘epistemology’ was more instrumental to their moral and political aims. In this, they were not unique in the history of philosophy in seeing epistemology as, at best, a handmaiden to other philosophical goals which they took to be more important: such as ‘how to live well in the world’.

Consequently, conceptions of knowledge familiar to ‘Western’ epistemology show up when such concepts help them communicate their project. For instance, we have argued above that the distinction between good and bad ‘teachings’ is often functionally equivalent to that between true and false propositional knowledge (or worldviews). Consider Mengzi’s discussion:

The teachings current in the Empire are those of the school of Yang or of the school of Mo... If the way of Yang and Mo does not subside and the way of Confucius does not shine forth, the people will be deceived by heresies and the path of morality will be blocked. (Mencius 3B9)

As Mengzi sees it, bad doctrines are problematic precisely because they deceive people and hinder them from developing virtues (essential in their everyday lives and in governing). Relatedly, in our earlier discussion of the cook who demonstrates the importance of perfecting skill knowledge, the *Zhuangzi* concludes the story ...

“Excellent!” said Lord Wenhui. “I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!” (Zhuangzi 3)

Similar examples abound across the works of these thinkers, showing how for many early Chinese Philosophers, there is *value* to developing knowledge (and different kinds of knowledge) primarily because one’s knowledge has a direct impact on the way that one lives in the world. It is, perhaps, therefore unsurprising that examples of knowing-to and knowing-how-to are constantly alluded to. For these two conceptions of knowledge are *directly*, and arguably, *inextricably* linked to one’s actions.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For analyses of the Chinese terms associated with “knowledge”, see especially Harbsmeier 1993, 1998; Fraser 2011; Saunders 2014, and the edited volume Lenk & Paul 1993. For discussions on kinds of knowledge in Chinese Philosophy, see also Graham 1989; Huang 2017; Lai 2012; Lai & Hetherington 2015; Lederman 2022, p. 176.

<sup>2</sup> Ryle 1949. For a more recent discussion, see Fantl 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See Carlotta Pavese’s entry in this volume.

<sup>4</sup> For examples of papers that focus on analysing skill knowledge in Classical Chinese Philosophy, see the collection of essays in Lai & Chiu 2019.

<sup>5</sup> References to the *Analects* (associated with Confucius) are from Leys 2014, the *Mengzi* from Lau 2003, the *Mozi* from Knoblock and Riegel 2013, the *Mozi* ‘Canons and Explanations’ from Fraser 2020, the *Zhuangzi* from Watson 2013, and *Xunzi* from Hutton 2014. Arabic numerals refer to paragraph or section number adopted in the relevant translation.

<sup>6</sup> An exception, perhaps, can be found in the Neo-Mohists and possibly the *Xunzi*: see Fraser 2012; Loy 2011. An argument can be made, however, that they made indirect arguments about this in their debates on the philosophy of language, e.g., whether our language (and distinctions) adequately capture the Way.

<sup>7</sup> See essays in Kjellberg & Ivanhoe 1996.

<sup>8</sup> For similar discussions to what we’re calling knowing-to and knowing-how-to, see Huang, 2017; Lai & Hetherington 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Lai 2012.

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