CLASSIC REPRINTS

Language and Logic in Ancient China

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Preface

For the past half century, Anglo-American "philosophy" has carried the pejorative/honorific "linguistic analysis." Chinese philosophy, christened "nonlinear" and championed by a romantic counterculture, has played the part of the antithesis. This book, in presenting Chinese philosophies of language, challenges that distinction as a way of understanding Chinese thought. Its hypothesis is that Chinese thought is like modern Western thought in that both philosophical traditions focus on language and its role in culture; Chinese thought differs radically from traditional Western thought (as Chinese language differs from Western language) in what it *says about* language and culture.

The stereotypical contrast of Chinese thought and "analytic" Western thought has blinded Sinophiles to the ways in which attention to philosophy of language can aid in understanding Chinese philosophy as a whole. Virtually all students of Chinese thought have fondly contemplated the ways in which Chinese language might explain the differences in Chinese thought, but few convincing stories bridging language and thought have emerged. The chapters which follow set out to tell a plausible story in a focused example (the thought of Kung-sun Lung) by a less ambitious, more indirect strategy. The narrative focuses on philosophy of language as an explanatory link between language and other philosophical theories. The strategy is suggested by insights into language and thought derived from contemporary Western philosophy of language.

The "linguistic turn" in Western philosophy has raised the suspicion that the traditional perennial problems of philosophy are, in some sense, based on assumptions about language. Plato's views about definitions, meanings, and truth are held to explain both his formulation of the one-many problem and his theory-solution based on abstract forms (universals and instantiations). The Cartesian and Empiricist views of the

mind-body problem, philosophy of mind, and theory of knowledge are undergirded by a peculiar view of language—including the identification of meanings with mental representations (ideas) akin to sensations. Neo-Kantians are seen as substituting the effects of language for the structuring activities of the mind in presenting phenomenal experience.

This view of the nature of philosophical problems is controversial, and I do not intend directly to argue for it in these pages. However, the very possibility of such an explanation of traditional Western philosophy should warn against any assumption that absence of these traditional philosophical concerns is evidence of nonrational thought. (And, of course, absence of such philosophical preoccupations by Chinese philosophers does not prove that the traditional problems are nonrational either.) The "philosophical problems are problems of language" view shows us that there could be a coherent theory of language which (1) could plausibly have been held by Chinese philosophers given their language and (2) would be less likely to motivate the traditional theories of abstract reality, mental representation, private meaning, propositional knowledge, and cognitive minds.

We understand the relation of thought and language in ancient China when we can present an account of the theories of language as influenced by the actual language and then an account of other philosophical issues as influenced by actual and implicit theory of language. The picture of ancient Chinese thought which emerges is significantly different from the accepted view. Radical reinterpretation is not the goal, however. This study revises the standard interpretation of Chinese thought only when that interpretation seems to have imputed an interest in issues which (1) are likely to have been generated by linguistic forms or theories about language which are absent in classical Chinese, and (2) are incompatible with other well-confirmed interests and approaches (on the standard interpretation).

The case for this strategy is buttressed by the fact that ancient Chinese thinkers shared modern Western philosophy's intense interest in language. Chinese theories of language have been largely ignored in traditional interpretations both because of their difficulty and because of the obscurity of some central texts (the Neo-Mohist Canon) which contain most of the technical detail of Chinese theories of language. The failure to understand the Neo-Mohist Canon, in turn, hindered understanding of Chuang-tzu and Hsün-tzu, who have the obvious focus on problems of language but presupposed (and drew heavily from) the Neo-Mohist treatment of linguistic issues.

This study touches on many contrasts in philosophical interests. However, it concentrates on one classical issue—the one-many problem.

Sinologists basically agree that Chinese philosophy has no obsession with abstraction, universals, or forms characteristic of the Western Platonic Realist view of the one-many problem. Kung-sun Lung is typically interpreted as the exception. His "white-horse paradox" ("white-horse not horse") is supposed to represent a classical Chinese counterpart to Platonism. The *locus classicus* of the standard interpretation of Kung-sun Lung is in the work of the best-known contemporary historian of Chinese philosophy, Fung Yu-lan. The Fung Yu-lan interpretation is consciously Platonistic. Fung suggests that the Chinese terms *ma* 'horse' and *pai* 'white' are being used to designate abstract objects—horseness and whiteness. Hence the paradoxical statement should be read as "white-horseness is not horseness." Many were skeptical of Fung's Platonizing interpretation, but few more plausible theories have been offered. Thus the abstract view of Kung-sun Lung's enterprise has come to be widely accepted—if without much enthusiasm.

I will argue that there is indeed no Platonic Realism in ancient China (also no theory of abstract sets or classes), that Kung-sun Lung does not constitute an exception, and further, that the nonabstract orientation of philosophy can be (partially) explained using the strategy outlined above. The grammatical features of Indo-European languages which explain the impetus of Platonism in philosophy of language are not found in Chinese. Absent those motivations, there would be, I suggest, less reason to suppose Chinese thinkers have postulated such metaphysical curiosities as abstract or mental objects.

Essentially, I contend that a one-many paradigm for stating philosophical questions goes along with a count noun (nouns to which the many-few dichotomy applies) syntax. Chinese language, during this classical period, tends toward a mass noun syntax (based on nouns to which the much-little dichotomy applies). Mass nouns suggest a stuff ontology and what I call a division or discrimination view of the semantic function of words (terms and predicates).

The grammatical explanans tends to illuminate an extensive difference in "metaphysical" orientation; rather than one-many, the Chinese language motivates a part-whole dichotomy. And I argue that it helps explain not only the absence of Platonism, but, in turn, of mentalism and conceptualist philosophies of mind. These philosophical developments are based on the abstract scheme for dealing with meaning (e.g., conceptualism) and are even less to be expected in Chinese thought.

This study also draws from modern philosophy for its hermeneutic method. Chapter 1 presents an argument for justifying interpretations as we

justify scientific theories, that is, as inference to the best explanation. Informally, the point is that the best way to justify an interpretation (or a philosophical view) is just to lay it out as completely and carefully as possible, then to highlight the advantages of the view one supports over the known rivals.

It will be treated as a drawback that an interpretation attributes a discredited Western traditional theory to a thinker in the absence of any adequate explanation of what could have motivated the doctrine. The tendency of interpreters to "discover" such views in Chinese thinkers seems to be connected with their own acceptance of a culture-invariant interest in the perennial Western philosophical issues. Believing that the problems are the genuine problems of philosophy and that they just "make sense," one charitably attributes the same insight to the Chinese thinker at the barest textual hint, thinking, "What else could this mean?" The insights of modern philosophy, in questioning these traditional issues, tend, therefore, to expand rather than restrict the coherent ways of assigning meanings to philosophical texts.

I accordingly regard the introduction of the discipline of philosophy into the study of Chinese thought as a liberating move. It gives the best hope of making headway on a project that all seem to accept—explaining how Chinese language influences Chinese philosophy. It is rather more than less likely to generate fresh, non-Western interpretations and demonstrate their relation to the unique features of Chinese language.

A defensive reaction, claiming for Chinese philosophy "everything found in Western philosophy," tends, I believe, to be counterproductive. The contexts into which these parallels are introduced fit the classical problems so poorly that any philosophically trained reader will find the Chinese thinkers confusing. The theoretical doctrines are attributed to Chinese philosophers who give no coherent arguments for the theories and demonstrate no insights into the classical positions they are supposed to be discussing. The defense typically asserts that they held the positions but did not believe in argument. Thus the view of Chinese thought as "irrational," "nonanalytic," or "inscrutable," is forced by the very attempt to glorify it.

There are issues of philosophy which Chinese philosophers do not see. The issues they do see are discussed competently. There are issues in traditional Western philosophy which no longer hold the interest of Western philosophers. That classical Chinese philosophers never worried such issues hardly undermines positive evaluation of their philosophical acumen.

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