2002

[Introduction to] On the Epistemology of the Senses in Early Chinese Thought

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Introduction

This monograph is about sense discrimination in the classical period of Chinese thought.[1] It focuses on the ordinary functions of the human senses, as presented in philosophical texts of the Warring States era (roughly dating from the fifth to third century B.C.E.). As the title suggests, the main senses under consideration are hearing and sight, particularly in relation to the function of the heartmind.[2] A culture's understanding of the physical senses may reveal implicit features of its world view. With that in mind, this work attempts to identify the views on sense discrimination in these texts and subsequently tries to determine what such views imply about the construction of reality in Warring States thought.

This work may have significance for a controversial topic. The results of this analysis seem to corroborate a particular interpretation of early Chinese cosmology—one that views it as distinctive and as having great value.[3] Many features of early Chinese cosmology have been used to argue for its distinctiveness. In this Introduction, I will focus on two of them: its holism and its appreciation of change. The distinctiveness of these features may be highlighted by means of a contrast to the history of western metaphysics.[4] I will outline that contrast in order to explain how my analysis may be used to advance the argument for the distinctiveness of early Chinese cosmology. Then I will describe how the view of sense discrimination in Warring States China supports the contention that early Chinese cosmology is indeed holistic and rooted in change.

Warring States China

A brief historical overview may help situate the texts used in this study. This work is based on the classics of Chinese philosophy, written during what is known as the Warring States period (480–

221 B.C.E.). The Warring States refers to a succession of civil wars among competing territorial states, which took place as a result of the disintegration of the Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1050–256 B.C.E.). The Warring States period ended with the unification of the empire under the Qin, 221–206 B.C.E. Both before and during the Warring States period, a variety of important changes occurred. Within this period, there were significant changes in standards of living: the use of iron developed, especially in agricultural use, and farming replaced hunting as the primary means of sustenance. At the political level, something like a feudal system, based on a hereditary nobility, was replaced by a proliferation of small competing political units, in which power was concentrated in the hands of local monarchs. Through direct taxation on land controlled by the military and hereditary elite, the monarchs effectively eliminated the earlier manorial management system. The result was an increase in social mobility in the form of an opportunity for official court appointments not based on kin relations. In this context, a lower order of artisans emerged and vied for jobs at court. The competition among the states themselves also helped foster an environment in which capable individuals could take on roles that were previously hereditary.

These developments contributed to the rise of a cultural elite that interpreted social ideals. This cultural elite passed on their instruction through disciples, who normally paid a token fee for instruction. Those who were educated could sell their services to territorial states as specialists in things like ritual or even warfare. They often traveled from state to state, in search of an audience for their recommendations regarding social reform. Certain territorial states in particular "collected" some of the most sought-after scholars, giving them titles and stipends, in an effort to enhance their state's reputation. In this role, scholars might have had some small effect on matters of state. More significantly, some of these scholars' words were gathered and written down, forming the texts that are now referred to as classical Chinese philosophy.

Texts

As a particular tradition was passed down from master to disciples, one might speak of "schools of thought" developing in Warring States China.[5] The texts discussed here are later considered to belong to three schools: Confucianism, Mohism, and Daoism. However, because organizing texts into schools of thought was not significant in the Warring States period, it is best not to think of these texts in such terms.[6]

Given modern developments in the field of sinology, it is no longer possible simply to treat Warring States texts as the products of individual authors.[7] Thus, the six texts drawn from here should not be taken as authored by Confucius (d. 479 B.C.E.), Mozi (ca. 480–390 B.C.E.), Mencius (ca. 382–300 B.C.E.), Zhuangzi (ca. 365–280 B.C.E.), Xunzi (ca. 310–215 B.C.E.), or Laozi (dates unknown). Rather, it is probably safest to assume that all of these texts are compilations by a number of authors (of more or less similar persuasion) written over extended periods of time. In other words, we should probably think of these books as *layers* of texts.

Nevertheless, the multilayered nature of these texts need not undermine the main arguments proffered here. The claims I make should be taken as either claims about the philosophical texts of the Warring States period in general or claims about tendencies specifically located within one or another of these texts. (While the latter type of claim involves positing some minimal amount of consistency in the philosophical position represented in a given text, it by no means requires that the texts be the product of single authors.)[8] At this point in the development of sinology, it does not seem possible to do more than make tentative general claims about the view of sense discrimination within the period and within the individual texts. There is barely enough information about sense discrimination in these texts to support even that goal. Given the dearth of data, it is not yet possible to identify nuanced changes in the function of sense discrimination terminology over the course of the Warring States period. If such a thing can ever

occur, it must wait until sinology arrives at a greater state of confidence and precision regarding the dating of the layers in these texts. In the meantime, studies like this one may be of use in depicting a particular aspect of the historical period as a whole or trends in individual texts.

There is a reason why this analysis of sense discrimination focuses on philosophical texts, from among the dozens of received texts of the Warring States period. The texts I have chosen are philosophical in a sense that does not necessarily accord with the standards of modern western philosophy. That is, they are philosophical insofar as they employ arguments that have "depth and intricate implicit structure" to engage the subject of ethical and political reform.[9] Because of the deep structure of the arguments in these texts, focusing on them presents a double opportunity. It allows me not only to suggest the current predominant view of sense discrimination, but also to test that hypothesis. In other words, after establishing what I take to be the overarching view of sense discrimination from these texts as a whole, I can also use the individual texts to check the validity of my thesis, by showing how the overarching view functions differently in the deep structure of competing arguments.

The main body of the work describes the predominant view of sense discrimination. The first chapter introduces some general ideas about the senses as a group. The second and third chapters attempt to explain the significance of hearing and sight, as well as their relation to the heartmind. The fourth chapter develops the discussion in relation to a polarity that is particularly important in determining how these texts represent a world view. Finally, the last chapter aims to establish the validity of what I identify as the overarching view of the senses by providing some examples of how that view is put to different uses. The final chapter describes how the shared view of sense discrimination actually functions to support different philosophical positions represented in different texts.

Contrasting Metaphysics

In a work of this sort, comparison and contrast are unavoidable. My ability to understand sense discrimination in the Warring States depends in crucial ways on how I see it in relation to my own tradition. Throughout the work, I explicitly use elements of the tradition more familiar to me to explain what I think is noteworthy about the views represented in the Warring States texts. I presume similarity in the process of selecting the items I think can be compared.[10] But of course I also presume difference, because there is no sense in comparing things that are identical.[11] In my attention to difference, I do not mean to fall into the Orientalist trap of implying that Warring States thought is merely remarkable for its contrast to "the West." As far as possible, this study endeavors to present the intricacies and internal dynamics of Warring States views on its own terms. I hope my determination to do that conveys my conviction that Warring States China has a subjectivity of its own. Still, the best justification for the legitimacy of the comparative elements in this work may be its results. As Ben-ami Sharfstein puts it,

> The question is not whether the differences exist, because they do, but what we should make of them; and the answer often lies in the conscious or unconscious decision to pay no attention to the context, or, more accurately, to make use of only the criteria that fit our need at the time, that is, to intuit or hypothesize or discover the context that is most pertinent to our need.[12]

To that extent, the value of this work may depend on whether I can put these things I have compared into a meaningful context. Especially for non-sinologists, that comparative context may be the most important implication of this study.

The History of Western Metaphysics

The search to identify a permanent substrate of reality was a shared *problematique* in ancient Greek philosophy. The ancient Greeks considered a variety of candidates for this role. For instance, Thales (c. 640–546 B.C.E.) contended that everything was composed of water; Anaximenes (c. 611–547 B.C.E.) argued for the primacy of air. When single elements seemed insufficient, other thinkers proposed combinations, like earth and water, or earth, air, fire, and water.[13] Even Heraclitus (c. 500 B.C.E.), famous for the claim that "everything is becoming," still posited something—fire—as a fundamental eternal substance. Starting with Pythagoras (fl. 540–510 B.C.E.) and his theories of numbers, determining the permanent substrate could also capitalize on the notion of a super-sensible, intelligible world. Hence, in spite of his mistrust of sense perception, Plato (c. 428–348 B.C.E.) could find solace in the clarity with which the intellect knows things like the super-sensible form of the Good. Likewise, Aristotle's (384–322 B.C.E.) confidence lay in a purely formal and unchanging God and the idea that, as matter decreased in proportion to form, things became increasingly stable and knowable. The sensory world of flux and becoming could be transcended in favor of a permanent and eternal foundation. Thus, in various ways, the Greeks managed to identify the permanent foundation of reality.

Underlying their project was the belief that the eternal alone is real. The idea is expressed in its most extreme form by the Eleatic school, which denied the reality of change. Parmenides (fl. 5th cent. B.C.E.) argued that there is no such thing as change, and Zeno (fl. 5th cent. B.C.E.) defended this with various arguments against motion.

The critique of the heritage of this conviction is well known. As Jacques Derrida describes it, the subsequent history of metaphysics perpetuates a particular contradiction.[14] It constructs its notion of presence on the basis of a metaphor of perceptual presence—the moment, or "now." But the now itself is a form of

absence, because it is defined by what it is not (the past and the future). If reality is understood on the basis of being present in the moment, then it must in some way be absent. According to Derrida, this language of presence spawns a string of metaphysical oppositions, like intelligible and sensible, soul and body, that are always haunted by the absence of full-presence. Thus, regarding the history of western metaphysics, he says,

> Its matrix...is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word. It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence *eidos*, *arche*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject), *aletheia*, transcendentality, conscious-ness, God, man, and so forth.[15]

Derrida surveys the later history of western metaphysics, noting how such names for fundamentals continue to designate invariable presence. He identifies "Being as full-presence" as the foundation for the Cartesian cogito. He also finds appeals to a similar grounding in Kant (in the transcendental unity of apperception, which is the noumenon beyond the flux). He uncovers it as well in Hegel's use of self-consciousness. (This condition of all consciousness, Derrida argues, depends on a notion of Being as pure presence.) Likewise, Derrida contends that, in spite of Heidegger's desire to think presence differently than the Greeks, he too presumes that something that *is* must be identical to itself.

All of this, Derrida argues, inherits the Greek conception of eternal self-presence, which is rooted in a metaphor tainted with absence. The language Derrida uses to express this absence is *differance*—difference and deferment. But for the purpose of comparison to early Chinese metaphysics,[16] this might be phrased in terms of change. At the risk of oversimplifying, Derrida's point could be taken as saying that the history of metaphysics succeeds

only by repressing change—because change is the difference between the past, the present, and the future. The Greek denial of change (a denial frequently associated with a rejection of the senses) contributed a persistent problem to the history of western metaphysics. According to one interpretation of early Chinese metaphysics, this is a problem that the Chinese of the time did not share.

Metaphysics in Warring States China

The search for something permanent is one of the deepest of the instincts leading men to philosophy.
—Bertrand Russell[17]

At least according to some sinologists, Russell might have found Chinese thinkers to be lacking in a basic philosophical instinct. By contrast to the Greeks, the Warring States Chinese showed no apparent interest in identifying a permanent substrate of reality. Their cosmos was continuous and holistic (in the sense that the parts had to be understood in relation to the whole). It was also subject to a continual process of change.[18] Its philosophers sought only order (rather than Russell's permanence), and the cosmology merely presented a variety of forms of constancy amidst change.

Holism and change are only part of what has been called the "organismic" nature of the early Chinese cosmos.[19] Many additional signs of early Chinese organicism have been highlighted by sinologists. As Donald Munro points out, the application of the term organismic to early China dates back to the work of Joseph Needham, for whom organicism meant, among other things, having developmental patterns like an organism.[20] The idea of organicism is taken up by Frederick Mote, who argues that organicism is evident in the dearth of early Chinese creation myths. Like an organism, he argues, the early Chinese cosmos is

not presented as something created *ex nihilo*. Instead, he contends, it is a spontaneous self-generating process.[21] Although Tu Wei-ming disagrees with Mote's claim about the absence of creation myths, he views early Chinese creation myths as still conforming to the framework of organicism. Tu identifies this framework as having three features: continuity, wholeness, and dynamism.[22] The notion that organicism means continuity is elaborated by Kwang-chih Chang. Chang understands the early Chinese cosmos to be organismic in the sense that it posits no rupture between humanity and its natural resources. Chang's interpretation of organicism suggests (although it does not say so explicitly) that even the nature/culture divide was not fundamental to the formation of early Chinese thought.[23] While all of these understandings of organicism may be valid, in this Introduction I will focus only on holism and change. My purpose will be to show that these two organismic features are also characteristic of the view of sense discrimination in Warring States philosophical texts.

Determining the nature of Warring States cosmology is difficult, because it is neither as overt nor as systematized as it later becomes. When cosmological speculation is fully synthesized (perhaps as early as the end of the Warring States, but certainly by the first century B.C.E.), the cosmos is seen as being composed of *qi* 氣, which appears in two main aspects: as *yinqi* 陰氣 and *yangqi* 陽氣. *Qi* is sometimes rendered "energy/matter," or "psycho-physical stuff"—both translations emphasizing that, although it is material, it resembles energy in being volatile. *Qi* is also connected to breath and wind, but it is sometimes rendered as "vapor" to distinguish it from "air," which is an element (and hence a candidate for a permanent substrate of reality). Unlike an element, *qi* is context dependent. *Yinqi* and *yangqi*, the two main aspects of *qi*, indicate dark, cold, and passive, on the one hand, and bright, warm, and active on the other. But it is significant that something can be *yin* with regard to one thing and *yang* with regard to another. (In addition to its *yin/yang* aspects, in post–Warring States formulations, *qi* also appears as part of the so-called five

phases—wood, fire, soil, metal, and water—which relate to one another as conqueror to conquered.) Thus, even in later systematized cosmologies, *qi* is not an eternal substrate—its form changes according to its context.

In the Warring States period, the cosmology based on *qi* was not yet fully systematized in this way. In the philosophical texts, many instances of the character *qi* refer to human *qi* (and, to a lesser extent, animal *qi*). There are also some rarer references to atmospheric *qi*. For instance, there are cases of cloud *qi* (*Zhuangzi* 1/29), heaven and earth's *qi* (*Zhuangzi* 6/68), and night *qi* (*Mencius* 6A8). In one case, *qi* does seem to refer to a fundamental constituent of things. The *Xunzi* notes,

> 水火有氣而無生
> Water and fire have *qi* but do not have life.
> (*Xunzi* 9/69)

However, as of the fourth century B.C.E., the term *qi* did not connote the single basic component of all things. This is apparent in the *Lunyu* 16/7 reference to "blood and *qi*," which suggests that blood did not consist of *qi*. We must be careful then, not to read later cosmological systems back into the Warring States use of *qi*. In Warring States texts, *qi* is an important feature of the cosmos, but it does not have the singular position it later gains. In any case, it is not, in the Warring States or later, a permanent substrate of reality.

The cosmology of the Warring States period is holistic in the sense that all parts are interrelated within the functioning of the whole. Warring States astronomy and calendrics convey a conception of heaven and earth as macrocosm, to which human life should be microcosmically synchronized.[24] With the help of astrology, the Warring States period witnessed the creation of a calendric system that formed a blueprint for the king's behavior by mimicking the regularity of the stars. The *Yi Jing* (*Book of*

Changes) presents similar clues as to the implicit holism in Warring States cosmology. In the *Yi*, one also finds a strong tendency to relate human affairs to natural affairs. Moreover, its hexagrams and line statements indicate inter–dependent relations between important pairs in the cosmos, such as heaven and earth and male and female.[25] Archaeological evidence also points to holistic tendencies in early Chinese cosmology. Mortuary customs from as early as the Shang Dynasty (approximately 1570–1050 B.C.E.) indicate a belief that material goods, such as servants and chariots, would continue to confirm one's status in the afterlife.[26] In a sense, there is nothing "outside of the world," or "other worldly" in this type of afterlife. Oracle bone inscriptions suggest a belief that recently dead ancestors linger close enough to their descendants to be propitiated by sacrificial offerings. With the passage of time, the ancestors show less involvement with the living and presumably become increasingly tenuous, before dissipating entirely. In this holistic picture, heaven and earth, and everything in between, are part of a self-contained continuous creation in which there is no external creative agent and no drastic rupture between creator and created.

Because there is nothing outside the world, Warring States Chinese cosmology cannot help but reconcile itself to changes. As the title of the *Yi Jing* indicates, change is fundamental to the early Chinese cosmos. The *Yi* is a book about change, and within it, even the associations attached to specific images alter according to their context.[27] The creation of astronomical and calendrical systems also depended upon change, that is, they depended upon the ordered celestial regularities associated with the seasons, which set the standards for proper human conduct. Moreover, the transition undergone by deceased ancestors—becoming increasingly detached from social affairs—also represents an afterlife that is not static or atemporal. Rather, the dead ancestor continues to be part of an inevitable dynamic of change.

Like the conception of great cosmic powers, the conception of ordinary people in the Warring States is also

holistic. As is frequently noted, the same character (*xin* 心 heartmind) denotes the source of both emoting and thinking. Thus the human person is not broken down into separate reasoning and emoting capacities. The person is also not divided into one immutable soul and an impermanent body. Instead, there are many souls, which separate and disperse after death.[28]

Holism is also apparent in the emphasis on the value of society. From periods prior to and including the Warring States, artistic representations of humans favor depictions of anonymous people working collectively, rather than individual well-known heroes.[29] These collective social relations are also indicated by the Neolithic and Shang practices of burying accompaniers-in-death.[30] Although the practice may have died out by the Warring States, its earlier existence represents a reminder that the bonds uniting persons go beyond even the boundaries of death.

In addition to being holistic, the understanding of the human person also reflects the centrality of change. One of the medical conceptions in the Warring States period identifies health with change.[31] In this conception, the free movement of blood and *qi* in the body's "vessels" guarantees the body's health. Hence, stagnation is the cause of illness. Insofar as freedom of movement was necessary for sustaining the body, a sick person was treated by encouraging a holistic internal motion. Thus, like the cosmos, the ancestors, and the ruler, the composition of the human person was holistic and rooted in change.

In sum, early Chinese cosmology appears to be organismic in its emphasis on holism and change. Perhaps as a result of these organismic features, early Chinese cosmology did not create a metaphysics of presence. This is not to say that early Chinese cosmology is alone in managing this feat, or that early Chinese thought did not create its own set of baneful philosophical problems. However, at least in light of this contrast, early Chinese cosmology seems to have some distinctive value.

Organismic Cosmology and Sense Discrimination

In order to briefly describe the connection between organismic cosmology and the view of sense discrimination I find in these texts, I will, once again, focus on holism and change.

Holism

The presentation of sense discrimination in these texts supports a holistic conception of the human person:

(1) There is no sign of the view that sense discrimination must be transcended in favor of a super-sensible form of knowing.

(2) Sense discrimination itself is characterized by holism, insofar as sensing is integrated into the world. The senses' discriminations are a system constituted by contrasts. The senses discriminate among these contrasts, rather than making contact with brute uninterpreted sense data. Hence, there is nothing in the process of sense discrimination that is pure and untouched by human signification. In other words, there is nothing to mediate and alienate the senses from the world. (For instance, in discriminating between sounds, there are no bare, uninterpreted sound data. Before the ears even hear—which is to say, while they are listening—they establish a continuous interpretive contact. The effort of listening itself channels what is being listened to, framing it within a range of human significance.)

(3) The heartmind is integrated with the other senses. It behaves like the senses and seems to be considered a sense function. It is not distinguished from the other senses in its ability to know its discriminations. Moreover, although it does have a special knowledge capacity (for verifying the operations of seeing and hearing), it does not do so from a position of detachment from the body.

(4) In contrast to the role of vision in Platonic and Cartesian models of knowing, vision is not privileged in this scheme. (Hearing is not privileged either.)[32] The ears and eyes, while performing a more important function than the other senses, maintain a parallel relation with one another. This is not a pseudo-equivalence, veiling a superior term's mastery over an inferior term. Each of the two senses is valued for its strong points and criticized for its weak points. Trust and verification of knowledge requires the participation of both.

Change

No element of sense discrimination escapes change or has contact with a realm outside of change:

(1) The heartmind's pondering is likened to moving eyes in search of a needle. This suggests that the heartmind moves. Ideally, it may be "unmoved"—in the sense of not being led astray by the attractions and repulsions that tug at it. But this sense of being unmoved merely clears the way for the heartmind to respond like a mirror to everything it encounters. (The Warring States metaphor of the mirror indicates responsiveness, rather than re-presentation and detachment.)[33]

(2) Change also plays a significant role in the aural/visual parallels in the text. Change, in the form of action, is the correlate of seeing, just as speech is the correlate of hearing.[34] A form of change is therefore one-half of the equation that constitutes the foundation for trusting people and for verifying knowledge.

(3) The analysis of sense discrimination reveals that there is an element of change implicit in the use of an important character in Warring States philosophical texts. Standard translations of *shi* 實 (as "reality," "substance," or "stuff") do not do justice to the notion of change inherent in the use of the character. Drawing upon the implications of the parallelism between the ears and eyes,

this work calls into question the translations of *shi* in Warring States texts. Traditional understandings of the term *shi* seem to present it as comparable to analytic philosophy's "medium-sized dry goods"—the hard stuff that forms the basis of reference.[35] On the contrary, I argue that the way *shi* functions is best understood as "fruit," due to its organic connotations of growth and development. Although fruit does suggest solidity, my argument is that uses of *shi* have more to do with something brought to completion or fruition, rather than solidity or substance. (After all, in a cosmos where heaven is simply tenuous, while the earth is solid, there is no pressing reason why substance should connote reality.) Translating *shi* as reality, as if that consisted of dry hard goods, leads to a misconception of the notion of reality in Warring States philosophical texts.

This view of sense discrimination fills a gap in our understanding of Warring States thought. Moreover, these elements of holism and change in the view of sense discrimination support the claim that early Chinese cosmology is organismic. They seem to represent one coherent way of understanding the senses from the context of a cosmology in which there is no eternal substrate of reality.