

From C. Fraser, “Knowledge and Error in Early Chinese Thought,” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10.2 (2011): 127–48.

Xúnzǐ on Knowledge

Xúnzǐ follows the Mohists in tying knowledge to the ability to discriminate and name things. Like the later Mohists, he refers to the capacity or faculty of knowledge as “the knowing” (*zhī* 知) (22/5).¹ Knowledge is discriminating *shì* from *fěi* properly (2/12), such that the attitudes of “the knowing” “match” (*hé* 合) the distinctions between things (22/5). Distinctions underlie the use of names. The purpose of names is to discriminate different social ranks and similar from different things, so that intentions can be conveyed and tasks carried out (22/14–15). Names can be used this way because we are all creatures of the same kind, with the same sort of constitution (*qíng* 情). Thus our sense organs detect things similarly, enabling us to establish conventions for the use of names to discriminate different kinds of things (22/16–17).² Similarities and differences between features of things are “differentiated” (*yì* 異) by means of the sense organs—the eyes, ears, mouth, nose, and body (by which we differentiate pain, itching, temperature, texture, and weight). The heart (*xīn*) differentiates cognitive, affective, and conative features.

The heart also has a function called “the verifying knowing” (*zhēng zhī* 徵知), which is responsible for cognition (22/19). The “verifying knowing” is able to recognize sounds by means of the ears, shapes by means of the eyes, and so forth. The sense organs “record” (*bù* 簿) the features of things—sounds, shapes, and so on—and the heart “verifies,” or recognizes, them (22/20). For an agent to qualify as having perceptual knowledge of something, her sense organs must “record” and become aware of it and the heart must “verify” it, such that the agent is able to “explain” (*shuō* 說) it (22/20–21). The text does not specify exactly what is meant by “explain” here. Probably the requirement is that the agent be

able to correctly apply a name to the thing, and perhaps also to explain the grounds for discriminating the thing as belonging to the kind denoted by that name. If so, then this requirement is similar to that in the “Dialectics” that to have knowledge of something, an agent must be able to “characterize” it (A5) or “sort” it (A6). In both cases, knowing how to apply a word to a thing is a criterion of knowledge, which is inherently linguistic or conceptual.³

A further similarity to the “Dialectics” is that Xúnzǐ’s theory of perceptual knowledge assigns no role to anything comparable to the Cartesian-Empiricist notion of ideas or impressions, nor to any other form of epistemic or psychological intermediary.⁴ The text’s theoretical framework comprises only features of things—such as shape, sound, sweetness, odor, or heat—the sense organs, which differentiate these features, and the heart, which employs the sense organs to “verify” or recognize them.

Xúnzǐ on Cognitive Error

An entire book of the *Xúnzǐ*—“Resolving Obscuration”—is devoted to the topic of cognitive error. This text explicitly presents what I call the early Chinese “part-whole” conception of knowledge and error. The book’s main theme is that errors in thought and action—errors in discriminating things and responding to them correctly—are due to what it calls “obscuration” or “blinkering (*bi* 蔽),” which can be avoided by employing the heart properly. Error occurs when agents become fixated on, and thus “obscured” or “blinkered” by, one “bend (*qū* 曲)” or “corner (*yú* 隅)” of things, leaving them ignorant of the “overall pattern (*dà lǐ* 大理)” (21/1, 21/25). It is due not to subjective misrepresentation of the mind-independent world, nor to a gap between appearance and reality, but to fixing our attention in the wrong direction, such that we consider only some factors rather than all those relevant to discrimination. Erroneous discrimination is thus not wholly mistaken. The problem is that it is biased or one-sided and so only partly correct.⁵

According to Xúnzǐ, such bias occurs because the heart is disturbed, misdirected, or hampered by internal conditions, such as emotions or obsessions, or external conditions, such as darkness, interference with the sense organs, or alcohol. These conditions impede the agent in responding to relevant aspects of the “overall pattern” in some situation.

Conscientious, competent agents can avoid error, because they know how to employ the heart so as to prevent such conditions from interfering with correct discrimination. Perceptual error thus is not ascribed to flaws in the functioning of the sense organs, nor is it considered evidence that perception is inherently deceptive or unreliable. It occurs not because perception or the senses are untrustworthy, but because agents have failed to employ their capacities properly.⁶

Xúnzǐ applies this theory to explain error on two levels, the general level of recognizing the overall *dào* 道 (way, teachings) or values one should live by and the concrete level of conducting oneself according to a particular *dào*. As examples of error on the general level, he criticizes other philosophers who emphasize some values but, according to Xúnzǐ, are blinkered to others. The problem with rival thinkers such as Mòzǐ or Zhuāngzǐ 莊子, Xúnzǐ thinks, is not that their teachings are utterly wrong, but that they are partial, one-sided, or incomplete. Each possesses only “one corner of the *dào*” and is blind to the rest (21/24–25). Such blinkering typically occurs when people are partial to what they have already learned and prefer not to hear of its flaws or the advantages of other approaches (21/3–4). It thus prevents them from seeking what is right (21/4).

Almost anything can cause one-sidedness or blinkering, according to Xúnzǐ. His fundamental explanation of the cause of blinkering is that the various differences between things tend to obscure each other, thus disrupting our ability to “sort” or “grade” (*lún* 倫) things properly (21/7, 21/29). (Recall that the ability to sort things correctly is also a criterion of knowledge for the Mohist “Dialectics,” according to the conception of “understanding”

presented in canon A6.) The text does not elaborate, but Xúnzǐ's idea is probably that one-sidedly or injudiciously attending to any one distinction or value makes us prone to overlook others that may also be pertinent. This failing is the crux of his attack on the one-sidedness of rival thinkers: he claims that they each emphasize one value or base their *dào* on one notion or technique at the expense of other equally important ones (21/21–26). Mòzǐ, for instance, was “blinkered by utility and did not know cultural form” (21/21): he focused so one-sidedly on material utility—and thus the benefit/harm distinction—that he neglected the importance of cultural or aesthetic form. In such cases, says Xúnzǐ, our recognition of “that one”—one side of a distinction—interferes with our understanding of “this one”—whatever falls on the other side (21/38). A further dimension of the problem is that any distinguishing feature we attend to in discriminating things biases us toward understanding them specifically by reference to that feature, when other patterns of similarity and difference are always present as well. A trivial example is that in attending to what is desirable about something, we may overlook what is detestable about it, and in attending to what is beneficial about it, we may overlook what is harmful (3/45–49). On a deeper level, any values or norms we live by will tend to blinker us toward alternative values and ways of life.⁷

The second level of error Xúnzǐ considers is performance error in following a particular *dào*. Even if an agent is committed to following the right norms or *dào*, the agent may still commit errors in concrete situations. I will discuss this form of error in the section below on Xúnzǐ's treatment of illusion, where I will argue that his underlying explanation again lies in one-sidedness. Error occurs when the agent has attended to some features of the situation while overlooking other relevant features.

Xúnzǐ's part-whole conception of error and knowledge articulates ideas that were apparently widely shared among third-century B.C.E. Chinese intellectuals. Like Xúnzǐ, several books of the *Zhuāngzǐ* criticize proponents of other views for their “partial” grasp of

the *dào*.⁸ Two chapters of the *The Annals of Lü Buwei* 呂氏春秋 advance a part-whole explanation of error similar to Xúnzǐ's.⁹ Rather than using Xúnzǐ's term *bì*, the *Annals* ascribes error or misjudgment to being “biased” or “confined” (*yòu* 囿), typically by personal preferences. “When people are confined by something, indeed they will take daylight to be darkness, white to be black, and a sage-king like Yáo to be a tyrant like Jié. Being confined makes for serious mistakes.”¹⁰ Like Xúnzǐ, the text attributes such bias to how agents direct their attention: “One who looks toward the east does not see the west wall; one who gazes toward the south does not observe the north. The intention has something it is fixed on” (Knoblock and Riegel 2000: 286). Xúnzǐ's part-whole account also coheres well with the explanation of error I suggested can be derived from the Mohist “Dialectics.” On my interpretation, for the Mohists, error occurs when the agent attends to the wrong features of things or overlooks relevant features. Xúnzǐ would explain this by saying that the agent has been blinkered, either by incorrect training or by attending to some features at the expense of others.

Avoiding Error

This and the following subsection review in detail Xúnzǐ's discussion of the causes of error and how to avoid or resolve them. The purpose of these sections is to illustrate how the details of Xúnzǐ's theory cohere with a competence model of knowledge and a part-whole model of error.

Xúnzǐ regards the use of the heart to discriminate things and guide action as a field of skill or technique, which he calls “arts of the heart (*xīn shù* 心術)” (21/28). As with any skill or art, performance in discrimination can be improved through training and conscientiousness. For Xúnzǐ, as for many early Chinese thinkers (excepting the Mohists and the *Zhuāngzǐ*, which parodies the idea), the heart is the “ruler (*jūn* 君)” of the other organs (21/44, 17/12).¹¹ As we have seen, the heart is responsible for discriminating things on the

basis of differences between them detected via the sense organs. Through its discriminating function, the heart handles cognition, judgment, and reasoning. But Xúnzǐ sees these as subsidiary operations; the heart's chief function is to guide action.¹² In one place, Xúnzǐ describes the heart as the “labor supervisor (*gōng zǎi* 工宰)” (22/40) of the *dào*—it is responsible for managing the other organs and the person as a whole so that the work of following the *dào* is performed properly. For the agent to discriminate and act according to the *dào*, the heart must be employed effectively. On their own, the sense organs can be obscured (*bi*) by external conditions, as when darkness obscures vision. But such obscuration need not lead to erroneous discrimination if the heart is employed competently. On the other hand, “if the heart is not employed at it,” Xúnzǐ says, “though white and black are before us, the eyes do not see them; though thunder drums are beside us, the ear does not hear them” (21/4–5).

To discriminate properly, the heart must maintain a balanced, attentive equilibrium, like that of a soloist awaiting the conductor's cue or a basketball player compensating for an opponent's feints. A key to proper performance—in cognitive discrimination as in sports and performing arts—is to prevent things from disrupting this equilibrium by pulling the heart off balance, leading to blinkering and one-sided, erroneous execution.

Thus the human heart can be compared to a pan of water. Place it upright and do not move it, and the sediment settles to the bottom and the clear water rises to the top. Then it is sufficient to see your beard and eyebrows and discern the fine patterns on your face. A breeze passing over it, the sediment moves below and the clear water is disturbed on top, and you cannot get even the general outline right. The heart too is like this. So guide it with pattern, cultivate it with clarity, and let nothing bias it. Then it will be sufficient to fix *shì-fēi* and settle doubts. If minor things pull it about, then externally one's uprightness will be altered and internally the heart will be biased, and it will be insufficient to decide even gross patterns. (21/54–58)

As this passage indicates, Xúnzǐ holds that proper “guiding” and “cultivating” in the arts of the heart can train us to avoid error. To discriminate *shì-fēi* and resolve confusing circumstances reliably, we can train ourselves to maintain an impartial, upright stance and an

undisturbed, unbiased heart.

The *dào*—in this case, Xúnzǐ’s preferred system of kinds (*lèi* 類), names (*míng* 名), ritual propriety (*lǐ* 禮), social roles (*fēn* 分), and associated duties (*yì* 義)—is the normative basis for such training. The *dào* provides an objective standard or “scale” (*héng* 衡, 21/29–30) to guide discrimination and action. An expert in a particular field, such as farming, commerce, or a craft, approaches that field on its own narrow terms. But an expert in the *dào* approaches all things inclusively, in terms of their relation to everything else (21/51–52). Hence the gentleman devotes himself wholly to mastering the *dào* and using it as a basis for examining things. Since he is focused fully on the *dào*, rather than particular interests or preferences, he is upright and unbiased; since he uses the *dào* as a basis for examining things, he is discerning in how he discriminates them into kinds. “Using impartial intentions to proceed with discerning sorting of kinds, one can manage the myriad things” (21/52–53).

Bias and error can thus be avoided by refraining from applying personal opinions or preferences and instead objectively weighing things according to the *dào* (21/28–30). To do this reliably, however, we must recognize the *dào* and train ourselves in it by being *xū* 虛 (“open,” “empty,” or “vacant”), *yī* 壹 (“focused” or “unified”), and *jìng* 靜 (“calm” or “still”) (21/34–35). By “openness,” Xúnzǐ means “not letting what one has already learned interfere with what is to be received” (21/36–37): though the heart is constantly storing things in memory, it can remain open to new learning. By “focused,” he means “not letting that one interfere with this one” (21/38). As we have seen, the nature of cognition for Xúnzǐ lies in discriminating things from each other. In doing so, he says, we implicitly recognize both things jointly, in relation to each other, and thus the heart is directed in two ways. Still, he says, we can also understand each thing on its own, without interference from how we discriminate it from other things. By “calm,” he means “not letting dreaming and fancies disrupt knowing” (21/39). The heart is always in motion, Xúnzǐ thinks: during sleep, it

dreams; while unoccupied, it wanders in idle fancy; while engaged, it plans. Yet we can also maintain a form of calm, through which we can avoid distraction by the imagination or irrelevant thoughts. By being open, says Xúnzǐ, one who seeks the *dào* may enter it; by being focused, one who undertakes to follow it may master it; by being calm, one who contemplates the *dào* can become discerning (21/39–40). These psychological techniques, along with training in *dào*, supposedly provide a means of preventing blinkering or one-sidedness and thus error.

Xúnzǐ on Illusion

“Resolving Obscuration” explicitly discusses perceptual error, including error due to illusion. The conception of “obscuration” or “blinkering” (*bi*) shifts slightly in this discussion. Here, instead of attributing obscuration or blinkering primarily to psychological factors that bias the agent’s attention and discrimination, Xúnzǐ attributes it to external circumstances that interfere with normal perception, as when darkness hampers vision or distance obscures the size of things. His main claim is not that sense perception is misleading or unreliable, but that only a “fool” (21/73) injudiciously discriminates whether things are “so” or not in potentially confusing circumstances. A cognitively competent agent recognizes and compensates for such circumstances and so avoids error. Part of our basic cognitive competence, for Xúnzǐ, is the ability to respond to “doubtful” conditions by withholding judgment accordingly:

Whenever in observing things there is doubt, if the heart within is not stable, then external things are unclear. Our thinking (*lǜ* 慮) being unclear,¹³ it is not yet permissible to fix “so” or “not-so.” (21/67–68)

With appropriate care, error can be prevented even in confusing perceptual conditions. For ultimately it is due not to the conditions that temporarily obscure observation, but to how we employ the heart in response to them.

Xúnzǐ mentions seven types of circumstances in which in observation there are

confusion and grounds for doubt (21/68–73). First, there are familiar cases of perceptual illusion and hallucination. Someone walking in the dark may take a horizontal stone to be a crouching tiger or an upright tree to be a person following him, because “the darkness obscures his eyesight.” Pressing on our eyes, we take one thing to be two; covering our ears, we take a “*mò mò*” sound to be “*xiōng xiōng*,”¹⁴ because “the circumstances disrupt the sense organs.” From a mountaintop, oxen below look similar to sheep, because “the distance obscures their size.” From far below, tall trees on a mountain look similar to chopsticks, because “the height obscures their length.” The point of these examples is not that perception is deceptive or that appearances may fail to represent reality accurately. It is that we need to employ the heart carefully. An agent whose heart is stable and thinking is clear attends to the overall circumstances, not just to partial, yet misleading similarities between aspects of the situation and familiar things. “So from a mountaintop looking down at oxen, they are similar to sheep, but someone seeking sheep does not go down to lead them away. . . . From the foot of a mountain looking up at trees, ten-meter trees are similar to chopsticks, but someone seeking chopsticks does not go up to break them off” (21/71–72). Presumably, the norms and skills involved in discriminating things such as tigers, people, number, sounds, sheep, and chopsticks include provisions for discounting or compensating for the effects of unfavorable observational conditions. So an agent competent in these norms and skills performs properly even in such conditions.

The remainder of the examples confirm that Xúnzǐ’s theme is not that perception or observation is deceptive, but that potentially confusing circumstances call for special care and discretion. The further examples are intoxication, unreliable means, and incompetent testimony. A drunk will foolishly attempt to leap a wide ditch, taking it to be a mere gutter, or will stoop while exiting the city gate, taking it to be a low doorway, because “the alcohol disrupts his spirit” (21/70). Here the issue is not perception, but how circumstances that

disrupt normal functioning, as intoxication does, can cause massive failures of judgment. We do not discriminate whether we look attractive by our reflection in moving water, because “the water’s position is disturbed” (21/72). Nor do we discriminate whether there are stars in the sky by asking the blind, because their “functional proficiency is confused” (21/73).¹⁵ As with drunkenness, these would amount to attempting to discriminate things, as Xúnzǐ puts it, “by using confusion to resolve confusion.” In such cases, error is almost inevitable (21/74).

For Xúnzǐ, then, error due to illusion is a subset of a more general sort of error resulting from an inept attempt to discriminate so from not-so in confusing circumstances when the heart is unstable and thinking unclear. The source of error lies in the agent’s incompetence or poor judgment, not the misleading nature of perception or appearance. When illusion occurs, the agent discriminates on the basis of some genuine similarity between his circumstances and models or exemplars of the kind in question, and thus is indisputably in touch with the world. In some respects, the outline of a horizontal stone may indeed resemble that of a tiger, or the shape of distant oxen in the valley below may indeed resemble that of nearby sheep. The problem is that these limited similarities are an insufficient basis for discriminating the stone as a tiger or the oxen as sheep. For the similarity is only partial, and there are other, dissimilar features to which a competent agent should also attend, even if “confusing” or “obscuring” circumstances make doing so more difficult than usual.¹⁶ If agents do attend to the overall circumstances, employing a “stable” heart and “clear” thinking, they will recognize that the similarity is insufficient and will avoid error. Illusion thus provides grounds for concluding that perception is reliable, not unreliable, provided the heart is employed properly.

Notes

¹ References to the *Xúnzǐ* give chapter and line numbers in Xúnzǐ (1966).

² I follow Lǐ (1979: 513) and Hansen (1992: 325) in reading “all those of the same kind and same affects” as the antecedent of the pronoun *qí* 其 (their) in the phrase *qí tiān guān* 其天官 (their sense organs) at 22/16, for I see no other plausible antecedent. The verb phrase *yì wù* 意物 at 22/16 I take to be roughly equivalent to *yì wù* 臆物 (to detect or measure things), *yì* 意 being used in a way similar to how it is at *Xúnzǐ* 26/14. A crucial interpretive point is that *yì wù* is unlikely to refer to mental representations or images of things, as, for instance, Knoblock (1994: 129) and Graham (2003: 213) interpret it. In contexts where it is used as a verb, as it is here, *yì* 意 can be interpreted as “intend,” “think,” “detect,” “assess,” or “suspect,” but is unlikely to mean “represent” or “form a mental image,” as it refers to the directedness of the sense organs toward their object, rather than an “input” from the object through the senses to the heart. Moreover, were the text referring to images or representations, it would likely use the word *xiàng* 象, as it does a few lines later when it states that the heart “represents” (*xiàng*) the *dào* through verbal discrimination and explanation (22/40). Geaney correctly rejects the “mental representation” interpretation but takes *yì wù* to be a noun compound meaning roughly “intentional thing” (2002: 37–39). This reading is difficult to defend grammatically, since it makes the nominalizing particle *yě* 也 redundant.

³ Geaney suggests that since the text places a pragmatic condition on knowing, the form of knowledge it articulates is not perception (2002: 48–49, 203 fn. 85). Her reading is intriguing, but I think a simpler yet equally comprehensive interpretation is that the text is articulating a conception of perceptual knowledge or recognition that incorporates a pragmatic requirement. This interpretation coheres with *Xúnzǐ*’s view that the activity of the sages is what divides things in the natural world into kinds (19/78–79) and thus underwrites our ability to have knowledge of those kinds. One must grasp the traditional, conventional

distinctions embodied in language, as passed down from the sage-kings, in order to qualify as having perceptual knowledge.

⁴ Here I agree wholly with Geaney in rejecting interpretations—such as Cua’s (1985: 31), Watson’s (1963: 142–43), and Knoblock’s (1994: 130)—that ascribe a role to sense data or sense impressions in Xúnzǐ’s theory (2002: 201, n. 83). The text explicitly discusses only the “differentiating” activity of the sense organs and heart and the “verifying” activity of the heart (22/16–21). It mentions nothing corresponding to sense impressions or sense data.

⁵ Dan Robins also notes these aspects of Xúnzǐ’s explanation of error (2008, sect. 8).

⁶ Geaney makes a series of similar observations (2002: 40–41).

⁷ As we have seen, for both Xúnzǐ and the Mohists, cognition is based on discriminating different kinds of things. So Xúnzǐ’s account implies that some form of blinkering is inherent in the very structure of cognition and that any values we hold or *dào* we follow in some sense blinker us to alternative values and *dào*. This point is among the grounds for both the skeptical arguments and the normative stance of the *Zhuāngzǐ*. For further discussion, see Fraser (2006) and (2009b). Ironically, Xúnzǐ himself does not note these consequences of his view, but instead asserts that the *dào* of Confucius is comprehensive and unblinkered (21/27).

⁸ See, for example, *Zhuāngzǐ* 13/40, 17/6ff., 24/33ff., 25/74, and 33/11ff. (the last passage is probably a Hàn dynasty text). (Citations to the *Zhuāngzǐ* give chapter and line numbers in Zhuāngzǐ 1956.) A. C. Graham long ago noted that criticism of opponents’ views as narrow or one-sided rather than outright wrong is common in third century B.C.E. and later texts (1989: 378). Much of the discussion in Book 2 of the *Zhuāngzǐ* is driven by the thought that in discriminating things one way rather than another, there is always that which we overlook and thus fail to see (2/57–58).

⁹ Compare Knoblock and Riegel (2000), sect. 13.3 and 16.7. Translations from the text are my own.

¹⁰ Knoblock and Riegel (2000: 400). The *Annals* uses the graphs 宥 and 尤 for the word *yòu* instead of 囿 (see *Zhuāngzǐ* 24/34, 33/80), but all three graphs seem to express the same word.

¹¹ For discussions of the early Chinese metaphor of the heart as political sovereign and the sense organs as bureaucrats, see Sivin (1995) and Geaney (2002: 17–22).

¹² Donald Munro was the first to call attention to this aspect of the role of the heart in early Chinese thought and the intriguing contrast between it and Greek conceptions of the mind, which instead emphasize its role in knowledge and reasoning (1969: 51–59).

¹³ *Lǜ* is “forethought,” or thought directed toward determining what judgment or action to undertake.

¹⁴ Some commentators suggest that the phrase *mò mò* 漠漠 refers not to a sound but to silence.

¹⁵ Even in the case of the blind being unable to see the stars, Xúnzǐ’s explanation is that their “functional proficiency” (用精) is “confused,” not that they are in some way cut off from the world.

¹⁶ Xúnzǐ’s discussion of perceptually confusing circumstances does not explicitly apply part-whole rhetoric to explain error. The emphasis is instead on competently noting when one’s thinking is unclear or when some aspect of the circumstances produces “obscuration.” But a part-whole explanation can easily be extended to fit the examples. If we attend only to part of the situation—the rough similarity in shape between a stone and a tiger, as viewed in the dark, or that in size between oxen and sheep, as viewed from a distance—then we might

mistakenly take a stone to be a tiger or oxen to be sheep. But if we attend to all aspects of the situation, including the darkness and the distance, error is unlikely.