

Names and Speech in Warring States Thought

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Abstract

Late Warring States (3rd century BC) texts attest to extensive philosophical interest in language, driven primarily by a concern with the role of “names” and “speech” in guiding and regulating conduct. This high level of interest is reflected in the widespread discussion of “correct names,” a topic that appears across a broad spectrum of early texts. This chapter sketches the discursive background underlying discussions of “correct names,” including the theoretical framework and assumptions that drive these discussions. To fill out this theoretical background, we sketch key features in the influential semantic theories of the later Mohist dialectical texts and the *Xúnzǐ*. We then look closely at the issue of “correct names,” highlighting several prominent discussions in the pre-Han literature. The chapter concludes by considering the critical rejection of prevailing views about names and speech presented in Daoist texts.

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names,” including the theoretical framework and assumptions that drive these discussions. To fill out this theoretical background, we will consider key features in the influential semantic theories of the later Mohist dialectical texts and the *Xúnzǐ*. We will then look closely at the issue of “correct names,” highlighting several prominent discussions in the pre-Han literature. The chapter will conclude by considering the critical rejection of prevailing views about names and speech presented in the *Dàodéjīng* and *Zhuāngzǐ*, two collections of texts identified with the “Daoist” tradition.

Speech, Conduct, and Standards

The writings collected into the early Mohist “Triads” were the first in the Chinese tradition to argue systematically for a coherent set of ethical and political doctrines. The somewhat later Mohist “Dialogues” illustrate how Mohist doctrines were promulgated to Mohist followers, proponents of rival views, and political leaders. In both sets of texts, a prominent feature of the Mohist approach to ethics and politics is the emphasis placed on “speech” or “statements” (*yán*) as a guide to conduct. The Mohists held that verbal formulations—speech or statements—can serve as models or guidelines by which to follow the proper moral and political *dào* 道, or way. Their rhetoric frequently pairs speech conceptually with conduct or practice (*xíng* 行) and mentions “modeling on” or “emulating” (*fǎ* 法) the speech presenting a doctrine or viewpoint in order to practice or carry out the *dào* it exemplifies (*Mz* 10/27, 25/12). In the Mohist political doctrine of “identifying upward,” moral reform and political unity are achieved when people emulate the speech (*yán*) and conduct (*xíng*) of worthy political leaders (11/15). People’s conduct is normally expected to correspond to their speech, and those who endorse contrasting pieces of speech—that is, different statements or teachings about *dào*—can be expected to act in contrasting ways (16/28).

What exactly is “speech,” as the Mohists understand it? The word “*yán*” (“speech”) typically refers to any utterance, pronouncement, teaching, or instruction, of unspecified length and indeterminate compositional structure. “Speech” (*yán*) is understood functionally, not structurally: any utterance that expresses a point can be “speech.” “Speech” may refer to a single utterance comprising a series of sentences making factual claims (see *Mz* 9/67 and 35/3, for example). It can refer to an ethical teaching, such as “the business of benevolent persons is surely to devote themselves to seeking to promote the benefit of the world and to eliminate harm from the world” (16/1). It can refer to a criticism or a critical question, such as “it is indeed good, but how can it be used?” (16/22). The Mohists’ own teachings are characterized as “speech,” as are views the Mohists seek to refute concerning mourning practices, the non-existence of ghosts, and the existence of fate (25/7–16, 31/102, 35/3). “Speech” is taken to express norms of what is right (46/52–60, 47/1–3) and can be applied to guide conduct (47/53–55). “Speech” that is effective in properly guiding or reforming conduct should be made “constant”—that is, regularly repeated and promulgated—while utterances that are ineffective in guiding conduct should not (46/37, 47/18). In the Mohist view, many forms of speech—not only commands and instructions but even statements of fact, such as “ghosts exist”—have consequences for action and so may be morally admirable or pernicious, depending on whether their consequences are beneficial or harmful.

Given the importance of speech in shaping conduct and thus facilitating or obstructing the practice of *dào*, the Mohists hold, we need standards (*fǎ* 法) by which to evaluate whether speech is “right or wrong, beneficial or harmful” (*Mz* 35/7), whether it is “factual or fake” (36/2), and to settle the distinctions it implicates (37/2). Mohist texts propose three main standards for speech: speech must have a basis in the precedents set by the deeds of the sage-kings; it must have a

source in facts that people can see or hear; and it must produce beneficial consequences when adopted as a basis for government policy. These three criteria reflect the emphases of the Mohist *dào*. To conform to the *dào*, our path should build on the achievements of virtuous, wise leaders in the past; it should be something that the masses of people can check for themselves using ordinary perception; and it should benefit society. (Intriguingly, none of the three criteria directly refers to whether a bit of speech is true.) Such standards are applied, the Mohists indicate, by checking whether things “match” or “conform” with them. A paradigmatic example of applying standards is using a carpenter’s set square to check whether a corner is square, a perceptual comparison of similarity between the case at hand and an exemplar.

To sum up, the Mohists hold that speech guides conduct and so must be evaluated carefully against appropriate criteria to settle whether it is appropriate. The criteria they propose combine deference to tradition, empirical observation, and practical utility. Speech that is effective in guiding conduct should be made “constant,” or regularly repeated and promulgated.

Semantic Theory

The later Mohist dialectical writings help to fill in the theoretical picture of what is involved in checking speech against standards. According to the “Dialectics,” in speech (*yán* 言) we use names (*míng* 名) to mention (*jǔ* 舉) objects (*shí* 實) (Fraser 2020: A31–32). Mentioning objects is explained as, in effect, using names as models for them (A31). In speech, we express the features of things, as if drawing a picture of them (A32). This modeling relation between names and objects gives a rudimentary explanation of how we can use language to communicate. Objects that take the same name do so by virtue of being “the same” in some way. The paradigmatic case is what the Mohists call names of “kinds” (*lèi* 類), such as “horse,” which are general terms that refer to all things inherently similar to each other in some feature. Kind names

are established by dubbing some group of things that share the same intrinsic feature or features with a name (A78, A86). By doing so, we commit to applying the same name to all similar objects—in the case of horses, all objects that share the same horsey shape and visual appearance (*Mz* 44/33–36). Other general terms apply to things on the basis of extrinsic similarities, which the Mohists consider “sameness in being united together” in some way (Fraser 2020: A86). For example, items could count as the same in being located in the same place (A86), as the residents of a city are all located in that city, or in performing the same function, as hammers might have a variety of shapes while all being used for striking (B58).

To understand a name, then, is to be familiar with the features that are “the same” among all objects that take that name. Given this familiarity, a speaker’s use of the name to “mention” an object tells us what the object is “the same as” and so informs us about it—that is, we learn it is “the same” as other objects denoted by that name. Hence using names is a process of “using what people understand to correct what they don’t know...like using a ruler to measure an unknown length” (Fraser 2020: B70). We can use a ruler to measure length because we know the length of the marks on the ruler and we see that the thing measured is the same length as one of the marks. Analogously, by using names, we draw on what listeners are familiar with—other objects associated with a name—to inform them about what they do not know—a further object we refer to using the name. Using a name of an object thus amounts to giving a measurement of it or “emulating” it (A31). When we refer to something as a “horse,” we are in effect presenting the name “horse” as a model, indicating that what we are referring to is the same kind of object as exemplars of horses with which listeners are familiar (A78). Accordingly, the Mohists hold, just as we can point to an object to show others something, we can also use a name to “show” them something (B53).

The correct use of names thus rests on correct judgments of what objects are or are not relevantly similar or the same. How do we determine which objects count as the same? For kind names, or names for objects the Mohists consider intrinsically similar in some feature, the answer is that we compare the object to a standard (*fǎ* 法) for that kind to see whether they are indeed similar (Fraser 2020: A70). For example, to judge whether an object takes the name “round,” we could compare it to a concrete exemplar of a round object, check it with a compass, or compare it to a round object that we remember or imagine (A70). If its features are similar to one of these standards, it takes the name “round” (A71) and counts as “this” (*shì* 是), or the kind of object in question. If the object is dissimilar, it is “not” (*fēi* 非). In the case of names based on function, location, or other extrinsic features of things, whether the name applies will rest on agreement among the speech community as to what features will count as “the same.” In cases of disagreement about whether a name applies, interlocutors will need to propose and agree on an appropriate standard and may need to discuss which features of the standard are relevant.

The Mohists offer no deeper explanation of the relevant sameness relations than that human interlocutors agree they obtain. They seem to treat kind relations as resting on inherent similarities between intrinsic features of objects they consider the same kind (A86–87). Other sameness relations, such as “sameness in being in the same place” (A86–87) or in having the same function (B58), seem determined pragmatically, by conventions based on how we interact with objects. But Mohist writings do not give much detail to explain why things are divided into kinds in just the way they are or what the grounds are for picking out features by which to distinguish kinds correctly.

Xúnzǐ offers a more thorough explanation of how the sameness relations that underwrite the use of names are determined. Like the Mohists, he holds that names are analogous to “tallies”

or “measures” of the objects they refer to, and he sees name-object reference relations as based on judgments of “sameness” settled through social practices (*Xz* 22/8). On Xúnzǐ’s view, nature in itself does not fix the patterns of sameness and difference that underlie the use of names, but nor are these patterns arbitrary social constructs. The “grounds for deeming things the same or different” are the sense organs, he holds, because the sense organs of creatures of the same species detect things in a similar way and so different people tend to converge in how they perceive sameness and difference. Given this convergence, communities can reach consensus on naming conventions by which to communicate with one another (22/15–21). The specific conventions a speech community adopts depend on the leadership of sagely rulers, who select conventions that interact effectively with natural conditions in ways that further the community’s social and political interests. The distinctions between similar and different objects that fix norms for the use of names are thus a product partly of human convention, as regulated by wise rulers, and partly of how human-independent features of the natural world causally affect our sense organs and constrain the success of our practical endeavours.

On the Mohist and Xunzian approaches, then, when a question arises as to whether some piece of speech is correct, the underlying issue to resolve is whether a speaker has used names correctly, as determined by whether the names have been used of objects that are indeed “the same” as paradigmatic referents of those names. To resolve this point, interlocutors will cite or propose standards or exemplars for the use of the relevant names and offer grounds for distinguishing whether the objects in question indeed “match” or are “the same as” the standards. Both the Mohist dialectical writings and Xúnzǐ address this process of carrying out what they call a “distinction-drawing dispute” (*biàn* 辯) by appeal to standards. (See Fraser 2020: A70–74 and A93–B2, for example, and *Xz* 18/102.)

Suppose a speaker and listener share the same understanding of the reference of the names they use. They agree about what similar features are shared by objects that take those names. When speakers jointly understand the reference of names in this way, according to the Mohists, they are able to communicate thoughts (*yì* 意, Fraser 2020: B41). Equivalently, in Xúnzǐ's terminology, they are able to convey to others their intent (*zhì* 志, here a synonym for *yì* 意, Xz 22/15). In this context, “thought” or “intent” refers to a speaker’s aim or purpose—what the speaker seeks to inform listeners about or prompt them to do, for example. Unlike in some familiar traditional Western theories about language, “thoughts” here are not contents or meanings that explain why names have the reference or function they do. Listeners do not understand names by virtue of grasping the thought associated with them. Rather, they grasp a speaker’s thought by virtue of understanding the reference of the names used (Fraser 2020: B41). Indeed, the Mohists indicate that it is possible to understand a name, such as “hammer,” without knowing the associated thought (B58). “Communicating thoughts” or “conveying intents” is the aim or result of successful communication rather than an explanation of how we understand names.

Given the theoretical framework described here, a widely shared view in early Chinese discourse was that for speech to guide action and to “convey intents” effectively, members of the speech community must reliably distinguish objects as “the same” or “different” in the same way. The need for coordination in how speakers and listeners recognize the relations of sameness and difference underlying the use of names provides the motivation for discussions of correct names. To use names “correctly” is to use them according to unified, orthodox norms for distinguishing what objects are or are not relevantly similar and thus do or do not take the same name.

Correcting Names

The most well-known source on correcting names is a passage in the Confucian *Analects* in which Confucius is asked what task he would address first if recruited to administer the government of Wèi. His response is that “surely it would be to correct names”:

If names are not correct, speech does not conform [to things]. If speech does not conform [to things], affairs are not accomplished. If affairs are not accomplished, ceremonial propriety and music do not flourish. If ceremonial propriety and music do not flourish, punishments and penalties are not on the mark. If punishments and penalties are not on the mark, the people have no place to put hand or foot. So the names the gentleman uses are surely appropriate to speak and his speech is surely appropriate to carry out. In his speech, the gentleman is simply nowhere careless. (*Analects* 13:3)

The passage illustrates several features of discourse about names and speech touched on above. The use of names is treated as a social practice crucial to effective governance and thus a priority for high-ranking government officials. The most prominent function of names and speech is to guide action. Speech (*yán*) is something to be “carried out” or “put into practice” (*xíng*), presumably alluding to its use in commands, instructions, and laws. The correct use of names is crucial for accomplishing practical affairs, sustaining community ethical cultivation, and administering the legal system appropriately. If the community cannot use speech to coordinate work, the passage claims, collective social and ethical cultivation through ceremonial propriety and ritual music will fail, because community observance of ritualized norms depends on a common understanding of how names specify different social roles and associated patterns of conduct. Accordingly, people may misunderstand norms of conduct and unintentionally break the law, while officials may apply laws unpredictably, punishing the wrong persons and leaving

people paralyzed for fear of inadvertently incurring penalties. Mindful of these implications of improper use of names, the gentleman is meticulous in his speech, using only names that fit the context and making only utterances that can indeed be carried out. The emphasis is thus on the role of names and speech in sustaining social order. Rather than foregrounding the fact-reporting use of speech to express true statements, the passage is concerned with names being “correct” (*zhèng* 正) and “appropriate” (*kě* 可) and with speech “conforming” (*shùn* 順)—perhaps to the patterns of things, perhaps to *dào*—and being “appropriate” to act on.

How exactly are names to be “corrected”? Likely examples in the *Analects* of correcting names include passages in which Confucius explains what conduct qualifies to take names such as “benevolent” (*Analects* 6:30), “filially devoted” (1:11), and “scholar-officer” (13:20). Correcting names thus appears to be an activity in which an authority provides guidance as to how to pick out the proper referents of action-guiding terms such as the names of virtues or ideal role figures.

Correcting Names and “Parts”

Several early Chinese sources pair the issue of correcting names with that of clarifying or settling “parts,” “portions,” or “roles” (*fèn* 分、份), a term that refers broadly to whatever referents are correctly associated with a name. In some contexts, “name” refers to terms for objects of any sort, while “parts” refers to the portion of all the objects in the world normally designated by some name. In other contexts, “name” refers to social ranks, titles, or roles, while “parts” refers to the duties, responsibilities, norms, or allotments associated with a name.

A passage in *Guānzǐ* illustrates how the relation between names and parts connects to the issue of correct names and to the practice of *dào*.

If names are correct and parts are clear, the people will not be confused about *dào*. The

dào is that by which the sovereign guides the people. Thus *dào* and virtue issue from the ruler. His regulations and commands are passed to the ministers, tasks are assigned to officials, and the strength of the common people is put into action on his commands. Thus for the prince nothing is as valuable as his speech; for his subjects, nothing is as dear as their strength. (*Gz* 79/3)

The ruler uses names and corresponding parts—here probably roles, jobs, or duties—to direct people to follow *dào*. Accordingly, his speech is of the highest importance, “speech” here understood mainly as commands that direct the actions of those below him. In this context, “names” may refer narrowly to the titles of different social roles and “parts” to the responsibilities specified for each role. *Dào* is clarified through correct names and clear parts because those following the prince’s commands must understand job titles the same way and grasp the roles and responsibilities associated with each title. The connection between names and parts renders names inherently prescriptive, since they are associated with norms and duties to perform. To assign a person a certain name—in effect a job title—is at the same time to impose on them certain expectations for conduct, their part or role. How names are used and parts are distinguished thus both embodies and guides the practice of *dào*.

Correcting Names and Social Order

Two essays in *Lǚ’s Annals* reiterate the importance of correcting names in governance, presenting it as a prerequisite for social order. These discussions clarify the significance of the action-guiding functions of language and help to illustrate the relation between names and “parts.”

One issue driving the interest in correcting names is that values and norms—and thus *dào*—are expressed through evaluative “names” such as “worthy,” “good,” and “appropriate.”

(As these examples show, “names” include adjectives as well as nouns.) If these value-laden names are not applied correctly, their normative force will be misdirected, leading to disorder and disruption rather than order and stability. An *Annals* essay entitled “Correct Names” states:

If names are correct, there is order; if names are misplaced, there is disorder. . . . All disorder is a matter of objects and names not matching up properly. Though a ruler may be unworthy, he may resemble someone who employs the worthy, heeds what is good, and does what is acceptable. The problem is that what he calls worthy tracks the unworthy, what he calls good tracks the depraved, and what he calls acceptable tracks the contrary. This is names being different from how things are in fact, words referring to something different from their objects. When the unworthy are taken to be worthy, the depraved good, and the contrary acceptable, how can the state be free of disorder and the ruler escape danger? (*Lscq* 16.8)

The text contends that names are used incorrectly because of “corrupt explanations,” or distorted accounts of what they refer to. “If explanations are corrupt, the unacceptable is deemed acceptable and the not-so is deemed so, the not-right is deemed right and the not-wrong is deemed wrong” (*Lscq* 16.8). So the gentleman must offer “explanations” that “state the facts about the worthy and unworthy,” “convey what runs contrary to good order and produces disorder,” and allow us “to know the facts about things and how to sustain people’s lives.” Here the fact-reporting functions of speech are invoked to help clarify the distinctions between what is or is not morally worthy, contributes to social order, and fosters human life. Reliable explanations of these distinctions help to sustain the correct use of action-guiding terms by clarifying what objects they properly refer to.

The other essay, “Examining Parts,” proposes that to maintain good order, a ruler must

carefully examine whether “parts” or duties properly correspond in practice to the names or titles used of them. “Correcting names and examining parts” are crucial methods of effective governance by which the ruler examines and supervises his subordinates’ performance.

The famous horseman Wáng Liáng managed horses by tying them tightly to control their reins, such that of the four horses, none dared spare any effort. A ruler who follows *dào* also has reins by which to manage the various ministers. What are the reins? Correcting names and examining parts, these are the reins of governing. So examine names according to the actual objects to seek the facts; listen to speech and investigate the kinds invoked without allowing anything contrary [to the proper kind relations]. Many names do not match up with their objects, while many tasks do not match up with their intended function. So the ruler cannot fail to examine names and parts. (*Lscq* 17.1)

The discussion emphasizes the issue of clearly delineating the duties associated with job titles, but this point is combined with the more general issue of ensuring that members of the community use the same names of the same objects—such as “ox” for oxen, “horse” for horses—so that all understand instructions in the same way.

Suppose there were a man who when he sought oxen used the name “horse” and when he sought horses used the name “ox.” He would surely not get what he sought. And if because of this he resorted to threats and anger, his stewards would surely complain, while oxen and horses would surely be in disorder. The hundred officials are a multitude of stewards, the myriad things a herd of oxen and horses. Not correcting their names or dividing up their job duties, yet frequently employing punishments and penalties—no disorder is greater than this. (*Lscq* 17.1)

The oxen and horses analogy again indicates that the core concern is with the use of names and speech to direct action through commands, instructions, or guidelines. Subordinates can conform to their superiors' commands only when both pick out the referents of names—and the duties associated with job titles—in a consistent manner. Hence, the text contends, correcting names is a prerequisite for social and political order.

Xúnzǐ on Correct Names

The driving concern of the *Xúnzǐ* essay on “Correct Names” is explicitly political and authoritarian: a proper king “regulates names,” says Xúnzǐ, to ensure that “names are fixed and objects are distinguished,” so that “the *dao* is carried out and intents are communicated,” thereby facilitating the king’s efforts to “lead the people to unity” (*Xz* 22/6–7). When conventions governing the use of names are carefully maintained, people can jointly conduct themselves conscientiously by the proper standards (*fǎ*) and follow the king’s orders, thus reaching “the height of good order” (22/10). A threat to such orderly regulation of language is people who engage in the “great depravity” of “splitting phrases and recklessly inventing names in order to disrupt correct names,” a crime comparable to tampering with tallies and measures, which produces widespread confusion, not to mention arguments and litigation (22/7). A judicious ruler will control the use of names to ensure that everyone understands commands and standards in the same way, thereby minimizing disputes, promoting social unity, and ensuring that people’s actions conform to the ruler’s intentions.

For Xúnzǐ, the purpose of names is to express “intents” so as to accomplish work. If the relations between names and objects are obscure or twisted, such that different speakers connect them differently, different social ranks will be unclear and objects that should count as being of the same kind, taking the same name, will not be distinguished properly.

Thus the wise for this reason separately regulated names to refer to objects, above using them to clarify high and low ranks, below using them to distinguish the same kind of thing from the different. High and low ranks being clarified, the same and the different separated, in this way there will be no problem of failing to communicate intents and no troubles with difficulty or failure in work. (*Xz* 22/14)

The purpose of names, then, is to convey aims or ends of action and thus enable the community to work together in carrying out tasks. This purpose is fulfilled by enforcing regulations fixing the referents of names so as to clearly distinguish different social roles and different kinds of things. *Xúnzǐ* thus explicitly draws together the two dimensions of the conception of “parts” introduced above: different social roles and different kinds of objects. To follow instructions and accomplish tasks in line with their superiors’ expectations, members of the speech community need to distinguish different roles or jobs and different sorts of objects in a unified, consistent way.

Xúnzǐ claims that misuse of names arises when people “split expressions” (use names extracted from commonly used phrases without regard for their normal context), recklessly initiate new uses of names, or advocate “deviant expressions”—that is, bizarre, unorthodox claims. Misuse of names thus arises not simply from confusion or ignorance but from thinkers and activists who deliberately disrupt the right use of names by making unorthodox statements. One example of such “deviant expressions” is *Sòng Xíng*’s doctrine that to be insulted is not disgraceful (*Xz* 22/30). *Xúnzǐ*’s stance seems to be that, by the standard use of the words “insult” and “disgrace,” to be insulted is indeed disgraceful. To deny this is to employ names in an unorthodox way, thus “using names to disorder names.” *Xúnzǐ* contends that the sage-kings themselves set a standard for using these names by which there are two kinds of disgrace, social

disgrace and moral disgrace (18/104). Since being insulted is indeed socially disgraceful, according to Xúnzǐ, Sòng's "deviant" claim to the contrary is a misuse of the name "disgrace." In effect, Xúnzǐ claims that rivals who propose doctrines he rejects are not simply mistaken but are using names improperly. He sees the doctrine of correct names as a means of prohibiting expression of philosophical theses he opposes.

Critical Responses in Daoist Texts

The views examined above share the premise that instructions, teachings, and guidelines expressed in speech can be used to guide the performance of *dào*. Using names correctly is important because how we use names is part of the practice and promulgation of *dào*. The patterns of sameness and difference by which we distinguish whether things are "this" (*shì*) or "not" (*fěi*) with respect to various names are among the patterns we respond to in following the *dào*. "Fixing" which "parts" go with which names is a key step in signposting the path to follow.

This outlook on speech and *dào* was by no means universally accepted, however. Rival views contended that *dào* cannot be pinned down through names and speech. To proponents of these views, the proposal that we follow *dào* by "fixing" the "parts" of the world picked out by various normatively significant names is misconceived. The *Dàodéjīng*, for example, holds that *dào* cannot be articulated in explicit, named distinctions. Artificially imposing action-guiding distinctions on things only interferes with our following *dào*. These points are among the import of the text's famous opening lines, which repudiate the idea that by regulating the use of names one can provide guidance by which to follow a "constant" *dào*: "*Dào* can be *dào*-ed [explicitly taken and presented as a guide] but it is not constant *dào*; names can be named but are not constant names" (*DDJ* 1). The implication is that no guidance for following *dào* that is explicitly formulated in speech, using names, can be made "constant," as the *Mòzǐ* had advocated.

Controlling the use of names in order to ensure constancy—that is, reliability and consistency—in following *dào* is among the aims of “correcting names.” For the *Dàodéjīng*, by contrast, *dào* is simply not a set of fixed norms that can be explicitly delineated in this way. *Dào* is a mysterious, cosmic source-flow that is faint and indistinct, dark and obscure. It is “constantly nameless” (*DDJ* 32), and accordingly, even if names arise, they should be kept to a minimum and not relied on to guide us toward it (32). Indeed, even the name “*dào*” is not its actual name but only a “style” name, a convenient designation that merely suggests some of its features (25). Taking any deliberate action to follow *dào* is likely to fail, as any intentional undertaking on our part interferes with its subtle operations. Instead, just as *dào* itself “takes no action” (*wú wéi* 無為), we conform to it by “taking no action” (37). Deliberately rectifying the use of names to distinguish objects for the purpose of guiding action is the epitome of “taking action” (*wéi* 為). Rejecting this approach, the text contends that by leaving things alone and “taking no action,” “nothing will be out of order” (3). The sage allows everything to “transform of itself,” applying “nameless simplicity” to maintain stillness and allow the world to “settle of itself” (37). In texts such as *Xúnzǐ* and *Guǎnzǐ*, the wise ruler corrects names in order to clarify the *dào* and impose good order on his subjects. In the *Dàodéjīng*, on the other hand, the sage is described as “undertaking the business of non-action and carrying out an unspoken teaching” (2), such that his subjects regard themselves as acting “so-in-themselves,” without explicit political guidance (17). Freed of interference, people and things will follow the course of *dào* in and of themselves, without being commanded, much as water flows through streams and valleys to rivers and seas (32).

According to an equally prominent but quite different set of views in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, another collection of early Daoist writings, regulating language or imposing rigid norms on

speech and conduct is likely to interfere with following the most suitable *dào*, which may vary for different agents and in different circumstances. *Dào* is variable and open-ended, and so the appropriate use of names is likely to shift with context. One passage contends that “*dào* has never had borders; speech has never been constant” (*Zz* 2/55). Only because we dogmatically hold objects to be “this” or “not” are there fixed boundaries. Any *dào* we follow is formed through our practices, and objects take the names they do because, in the course of practice, we dub them so (2/33). Any speech that is actually used in practice is in some respect “permissible,” or applicable for some purpose. According to the *Zhuāngzǐ*, there are grounds to prefer leaving the *dào* we follow fluid and open-ended. Any path we pursue in practice develops certain ways of interacting with things while neglecting others. Every path is thus “complete” in some respects but “deficient” in others (2/35). Correcting names according to some fixed set of standards binds us to a single, limited *dào* of language use at the cost of relinquishing other potentially fruitful ones. A thorough program of controlling name use might even hamper communication, by curbing creativity and improvisation.

Proponents of correcting names might respond that if names for things are not fixed, people will be unable to understand each other. One *Zhuāngzǐ* passage questions precisely this point, suggesting that fixing reference is not a precondition for communication.

Speech is not blowing air. In speech, there is something spoken. It’s just that what is spoken hasn’t been fixed. So in the end is there speech? Or has there never been speech? (*Zz* 2/23)

The text observes that speech is not just blowing breath; in speaking, we do say something. Yet, contrary to the aim of correcting names, the reference of the terms we use has never been “fixed.” Reference is to at least some degree indeterminate and fluid. So if we accept the premise

that the reference of names must be “fixed” for us to succeed in saying something, it seems that, since in fact it is not fixed, there is actually no speech. But this implication is absurd, since clearly we do communicate in speech. So, the text implies, communication does not require that names be fixed after all. Indeed, a Zhuangist critic could push this point even further. Since the ability to communicate with others is a prerequisite for correcting their use of names, correcting names cannot be necessary for communication.

In contrast to correcting names, then, on a Zhuangist approach, speakers would probably use names in whatever ways seem useful in different contexts, for different ends, and then, if miscommunication occurs, simply explain themselves. When others diverge from our use of names, perhaps—contrary to Xúnzǐ’s stance—they are not using names incorrectly but simply expressing different opinions or following different *dào*, in intelligible and perhaps justifiable ways.

Word count: 5855

Related Topics

Knowledge and Argumentation

Language and Anti-Language

References

Analects. References to the Confucian *Analects* give book and section numbers in the traditional text.

Dàodéjīng. References to the *Dàodéjīng* 道德經, abbreviated “DDJ,” give section numbers in the traditional text.

Fraser, C., tr. (2020) *The Essential Mòzǐ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). References to the Mohist canons give canon numbers as used in this edition.

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Further Reading

For helpful overviews of philosophy of language in early Chinese thought accompanied by extensive bibliographies, see M. Willman (2016) “Logic and Language in Early Chinese Philosophy,” in E. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/chinese-logic-language/>>; C. Fraser (2005)

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<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/mohist-canons/>>; and

C. Fraser (2005) “School of Names,” in E. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/school-names/>>. Chapter six of C. Fraser, *Late Classical Chinese Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), provides more detail on many of the issues surveyed here. C. Fraser, “Language and Logic in the *Xunzi*,” in E. Hutton (ed.) *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Xunzi* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2016), is a thorough discussion of Xunzi’s philosophy of language. Many of the articles in Y. Fung (ed.), *Dao Companion to Chinese Philosophy of Logic* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2020) give informative interpretations of approaches to language and logic in Chinese philosophy. Also well worth consulting are a pair of insightful recent books by J. Geaney, *Language as Bodily Practice in Early China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018) and *The Emergence of Word-Meaning in Early China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2022).

Biographical Note

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