

5.10 Daoism's anti-language problem

As we've seen with the paradox that arose in Shen Dao and Laozi, there is a fundamental problem with the **anti-language position** that characterizes primitivism. Chinese philosophers of language in the classical period (the Mohists, in particular) addressed this problem. We will compare their analysis of it with the Western analysis of a related puzzle in Western conceptual terms.

Mohist criticism of the anti-language position

The Later Mohists were followers of Mozi and developed his interest in public standards of language use. One of their interesting conclusions bears on the anti-language posture of Laozi's primitive Daoism.

以言為盡諄，諄。說在其言。

To treat all language as impermissible, is impermissible. The explanation is ones own language.

(Mozi: Canon II: Jing Xia: 172)

Why? Because when you say all language is bad, you are using language to do so! And if all language is bad, then your use in saying so must be bad. So the Mohists are posing a interesting, self-condemning challenge to any advocate of an anti-language position.

Western linguistic philosophy: the Liar Paradox

The issue that the Mohists are addressing here is related to an ancient, equally interesting paradox in Western philosophy arising out of the concept of 'truth' rather than 'permissibility'. Consider this claim:

This sentence is false.

Suppose the purple sentence is **true**.
Then it says truly that the sentence is **false**!

Suppose the purple sentence is **false**.
Well, that's what it says, so it's **true**!

So we have a paradox: If it's **true**, then it's **false** and if it's **false** then it's **true**. There is no way assign a classic **truth** value to the purple sentence without contradiction.

Notice that this is **not the same as the Mohists' issue**, because it deals with **sentences** and **truth**, and the Mohists do not use either concept. They deal with 言 **language** and 可 **permissibility**. But there is a relation between the two puzzles. We can see it if we consider a generalized **version** of the the Liar Paradox.

All sentences are false.

Suppose we say that this sentence in red is **true**. Well, then what it says is **false**.

Suppose the sentence in red is **false**.
Is there any problem here? No. It is **false** because other sentences may indeed be true. We'll need to examine other sentences

Notice this difference between, "This sentence is false" and, "All sentences are false".

This sentence is false: A true paradox: we cannot assign either **true** or **false** without contradiction.

All sentences are false: Not a true paradox; merely a self-rejecting claim. It can easily be false. It only cannot be true. Its contradiction, "Some sentence is **true**" is **true**.

The Later Mohists viewed the anti-language position on the same model as we do, "All sentences are false". It is a **self-rejecting claim**. It is impermissible to say *all* language is bad. It is permissible to say *some* language must be acceptable—lets look more carefully! The Mohists' **challenge dooms all the early Chinese versions of quietism. We cannot permissibly condemn all language.**

In the next week's lectures, we're going to see how Zhuangzi deals with the Later Mohist challenge to the anti-language position. He will still be skeptical of social conventions without condemning **all** conventions.