

5.5 Western vs. Chinese conceptions of knowing

To understand Laozi's position we'll need to distinguish clearly between the Classical Chinese and the Western conceptions of knowing.

The Western model of knowledge

The dominant Western conception of knowing is linked to the belief-desire psychology that we talked about in lectures 3.6 to 3.8. The Western field of epistemology fits into that model of thought. It is structured around concepts of **reasoning**, **belief & desire premises** and **argument**. We now call it "knowing-that."

Standard Western account of knowledge

You know that **p** if:

- (1) **p** is true.
- (2) You believe **p**.
- (3) You have **good reason** for believing **p**.

Example

You know that **Jones is rich** if:

- (1) It's **true** that Jones is rich.
- (2) You **believe** that Jones is rich.
- (3) You have **good reason** for believing Jones is rich (e.g., you saw his bank balance).

The Chinese model of knowledge



As we've seen, the Chinese conception of psychology is different from the Western one. It's not built around beliefs and desires and reasoning, but about **making distinctions** (辨) correctly between **this** (是) and **not that** (非) in choosing or following a path (道). So knowing is about guiding your behaviour by finding, choosing and following a path. At the core of this guiding knowledge is assigning **names** to things. The names that we assign allow us to signpost things in marking a path for others. We assign things to **categories**, that give them **a role in our social dao**, our shared way of talking that helps us coordinate our concerted social behavior.



wéi
(to treat)

So the Chinese conception is more **sociological** than **psychological**. It starts with **Knowing** the shared social standards for using words in our **language** community in our shared rituals. The central concept is not **belief** but 為 **wéi**, to treat, or to regard, a thing as belonging to a category which is relevant to guiding my behaviour using a common social 道 **dào** (path).



wěi
(artificial)



zhēn
(real)

The word 為 **wéi** is linked to the word 偽 **wěi**, with a "person" radical on the left, marking the word as having to do with some human or social artifact. 偽 **wěi** is typically translated as *artificial* or *false*, in contrast with the term 真 **zhēn**, which typically translates as *real*, *authentic*, *natural* or *true* as opposed to man-made.

Knowing is linked to **wéi-ing** not to truth. This is why rather than being **skeptical** that knowing is possible, primitivists thought it typical, but a mistake, to know.

In classical China, **knowing** is more like knowing-how or knowing-to follow **social guidance**. This is the conception of knowing that Laozi and Shen Dao are rejecting when they say "know to not know."

Knowing involves absorbing social forms of behavior that are encultured in us by the very process of learning **language**. Learning to use a name is learning to follow a social dao of making that **distinction**; you mark one thing as 是 **shì** (this) and the other things as 非 **fēi** (not that) by every name (word). Thus we share a way of **signposting** behavior that is permissible and not. You can know to follow one 道 **dào** and not another. **Laozi wants to free us from this artificial social process, to prevent it from dominating our perception, attitudes and behavior so we conform to the dominant social dào.**