

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

A rapid growth of interest in Chinese philosophy has accompanied the rise of China on the world stage. This interest, though, has generally focused on ethical and political theories, ranging from connections between virtue ethics and Confucianism, to applications of Daoism in environmental ethics, to debates on the implications of Confucian political thought for democracy. In comparison, Chinese metaphysics – here understood primarily as theories regarding the nature, components, and operating principles of reality – has been far less researched and recognized. This book is an effort to remedy this situation, aiming to provide a concentrated study of Chinese metaphysics that reflects the state of the art in the field.

1

Producing a book on Chinese metaphysics implies that the Chinese have metaphysics. That claim itself invites a host of questions. Do the Chinese really have metaphysics? If so, what is it? Is Chinese metaphysics fundamentally different from Western metaphysics? If there are fundamental differences, what are they and what are their implications for the study of metaphysics in general? Questions such as these have been debated for decades, but there is little consensus on the answers. Most of these debates, of course, hinge on one question: what is metaphysics?

The word “metaphysics” was originally associated with a branch of Aristotle’s philosophy. It is derived from a collective title given by his students to the fourteen books by Aristotle that we currently think of as making up Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (Van Inwagen 2007). The word literally means “after the *Physics*,” probably indicating the place of the topics covered in these books in Aristotle’s philosophical curriculum. It suggests that one should study this part after studying the *Physics*, which deals with nature. Because “meta-” also means “beyond,” “metaphysics” may also be interpreted as “the science of what is beyond the physical,” but that “beyond” is open to several interpretations. Metaphysics could be the

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins*

study of what is beyond the reach of the natural sciences, or beyond the whole of nature (studying the “supernatural”), or beyond the changing world of appearances and perception. Aristotle himself did not use the term “metaphysics.” He defines this part of philosophy in terms of “first philosophy,” which is the science that studies “being as being,” (*Metaphysics*: 1003a21–22) or “the first causes and the principles of things” (*Metaphysics*: 981b29–30).¹ In the fourteen books of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle covers a wide range of subjects, including existence in general (being), the constitution of reality (matter, form, universals), individual entities (substance, souls), identity (essence, definition), and change (actuality, potentiality, material cause, formal cause, efficient cause, final cause). If we use these topics from Aristotle to designate a general domain of concern or inquiry, we could call “metaphysics” the study of reality in its general form. More specifically, metaphysics typically deals with questions of two related types: what is the nature of reality? And what is the cause, or what are the causes, of variations in reality?

If we use “metaphysics” in the sense indicated in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, it is obvious that Chinese thought has metaphysics, traceable most clearly back to such texts as the *Yijing*, the *Daodejing*, and the *Huainanzi*. As the chapters in this volume show, Chinese philosophers have, since antiquity, debated existence and non-existence in terms of *you* 有 and *wu* 無; they developed a conception of the constitution of things in terms of patterns of *qi* 氣 (vital energy) (see the chapter below by JeeLoo Liu); and they understood the world overwhelmingly as in a perpetual state of change (*yi* 易). Many thinkers labeled the ultimate reality as the *dao* 道 (the “way”) and took the fundamental operating principle of the world as the polarity of *yinyang* 陰陽 (see the chapter below by Robin R. Wang). While there was no Chinese term corresponding precisely to the Western term “metaphysics,” the phrase commonly used to translate “metaphysics” into Chinese was taken from the *Yijing*. The *Yijing* classifies two forms of existence as “what is without (specific) forms” (*xing er shang zhe* 形而上者) and “what is with (specific) forms” (*xing er xia zhe* 形而下者) (Gao 1998: 407), or literally “what are above forms” and “what are below forms.” Being above something implies transcending it or not being confined by it. “What is above forms,” therefore, means what is not confined by any forms. These can also be seen as two realms of study, with the latter roughly corresponding to the tangible physical realm and the former the “realm beyond the tangible” or “the metaphysical.” These indigenous metaphysical views were greatly enriched by the absorption of Buddhist metaphysics (see the chapters by Hans-Rudolf Kantor and

¹ Translations of Aristotle are from Hope 1952.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Vincent Shen in this volume), which eventually led to new forms of Confucian metaphysics (see the chapters below by Brook Ziporyn, John Berthrong, and John Makeham).

Given that Chinese philosophers obviously discussed the ultimate nature of reality, why would anyone claim that the Chinese do not have metaphysics? To understand this question, it is helpful to distinguish a general domain of concern or inquiry from the specific questions asked in any given tradition, which then must also be distinguished from the theories meant to answer those questions. These layers are difficult to discern without a cross-cultural view. That is, from a view restricted to one culture, it is easy to think that the questions in that tradition are the only questions, and if certain answers to the questions are dominant enough, one might take them as the only possible answers. In this way, the answers that emerge come to be seen as definitive of the domain of inquiry itself. In relation to metaphysics in the Western tradition, there are two such answers that are often presented as defining metaphysics: that metaphysics is the study of things that do not change, and that metaphysics concerns only what is super-sensible or transcendent.

As noted above, two of the most central questions of metaphysics are: what is ultimately real? And what is the ultimate cause for what exists? In the Western tradition, the dominant answer to both questions (before the twentieth century) has been what is eternal and unchanging. The most extreme proponent of this view was Parmenides, who denied that change is even possible. He held that there is only Being and that non-being does not exist. Without non-being, Being itself cannot change. Therefore becoming is impossible (Graham 2010: 215–19). While this denial of change was an exception rather than the norm, the most influential Greek philosophers did privilege the eternal in their metaphysics. This is most obvious in Plato's philosophy, where the forms that ground reality and our understanding of it are all eternal and unchanging. Even Aristotle, who took change much more seriously, held the ultimate driving force of the universe to be an "unmoved mover." All things are put into motion through emulation of this eternal unchanging being, which serves as the ultimate final cause for all that exists (*Metaphysics* 1072a27–28). With the Christianization of Western philosophy, a perfect and eternal God took the place of this ultimate reality, a position that remained dominant into the nineteenth century.

If we take metaphysics as the study of the ultimate and take the ultimate as the unchanging, then it follows that metaphysics is the study of "things that do not change." On this definition, there would be no (or little) Chinese metaphysics. The Chinese viewed "what is without (specific) forms" as the *dao*, but the *dao* is not fixed. Its nature – if we can even say it

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins*

has one – is change. To put it another way, the only thing that does not change is change. The “constant *dao*” is the constantly changing *dao*. If metaphysics is understood only as a study of what is unchanging, then Chinese thought did not have metaphysics; or, as Roger T. Ames says in Chapter 5, it had an *ametaphysic* metaphysics. In other words, Chinese metaphysics generally rejects the fundamental assumption of an unchanging reality; thus it goes against the prevalent trend in the history of European philosophy.

The definition of metaphysics as the study of what is unchanging naturally leads into another common definition, that metaphysics studies what is beyond the sensible world of appearances. It is obvious that the world around us changes; we never experience anything that is truly unchanging. If the ultimate reality is unchanging, then, it must be radically different from the world that appears around us. This view leads to a transcendent realm, in terms of “forms,” “God,” or the “noumenal.” This separation of metaphysics from experience is clearest in Kant, who said of the source of metaphysical cognition, “it already lies in the concept of metaphysics that they cannot be empirical . . . for the cognition is supposed to be not physical but metaphysical, i.e., lying beyond experience” (Kant 1997: 15).

Once again, if we take this view as defining metaphysics, then there would be no Chinese metaphysics. Just as Chinese thinkers did not posit an unchanging ultimate reality, they did not take the ultimate as radically transcending the world. This contrast was pointed out nicely by the renowned twentieth-century Chinese philosopher Tang Junyi 唐君毅, who described the Western mind as follows:

Starting with pursuing substance beyond phenomena, the Western mind regards all phenomena as attributes of things instead of reality itself. Consequently, it always attempts to put aside phenomena in order to explore the real and unchanging substance underlying the cosmos. (Tang 1988: 9–10)

In contrast, “the cosmos in the Chinese mind is only a flow, a dynamism; all things in the cosmos can only be in process, beyond which there is no fixed reality as substratum” (Tang 1988: 9–10). Chinese thinkers did make a distinction between the realm of “what is with (specific) forms” and that of “what is without (specific) forms,” as we have seen. A thing with a form is an instrument (*qi* 器), which can be perceived and specifically described. That which is without forms cannot be perceived or specifically described. In this limited sense, there is something like a reality–appearance distinction (see the chapter by Jiyuan Yu below). But there is no transcendental distinction between the two realms. It is perhaps in this sense that we should understand Roger T. Ames when he writes,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

There is little evidence that early Chinese thinkers were interested in the search for and the articulation of an ontological ground for phenomena – some Being behind the beings, some One behind the many, some ideal world behind the world of change. (Ames 2011: 216)

For the ancient Chinese, change occurs at the levels of both “what is with (specific) forms” and “what is without (specific) forms.” They are contrasted in terms not of “being” versus “becoming” but rather of “form” and “formless.” Furthermore, the realm of “what is without (specific) forms” is not like a “God” who is fundamentally distinct from the physical world. “What is with (specific) forms” is a manifestation of “what is without (specific) forms,” just as the *qi* 氣 solidified in tangible entities is the same stuff as the *qi* dispersed (see the chapters by JeeLoo Liu and Brook Ziporyn below). These two “realms” are better seen as two conceptions of the same existence, because without “what is with (specific) forms” there is no “what is without (specific) forms.” Since Chinese thinkers did not believe in a transcendent realm, they could not have had a “science” to study it. If metaphysics is to be defined as the science that studies solely what transcends appearance, then we would again have to say that ancient Chinese thinkers did not have metaphysics.

In both of these cases, though, one mistakenly identifies metaphysics with particular answers to metaphysical questions. There are a host of problems with such an identification. Most obviously, it excludes many Western philosophers who are uncontroversially identified as doing metaphysics. While it is true *in general* that Western philosophers (before the twentieth century) have taken the ultimate reality and the ultimate cause of reality to be eternal and transcendent, it is simply untrue that all Western metaphysicians uniformly presuppose an unchanging reality as the object of their study. In the *Theatetus*, Socrates tells us “a secret” doctrine of the early Greeks:

There is no single thing or quality, but out of motion and change and admixture all things are becoming relatively to one another, which “becoming” is by us incorrectly called being, but is really becoming, for nothing ever is, but all things are becoming. (Edman 1936: 474)

Socrates affirms that this was not a minority view:

Summon all philosophers – Protagoras, Heraclitus, Empedocles, and the rest of them, one after another, and with the exception of Parmenides they will agree with you in this. Summon the great masters of either kind of poetry – Epicharmus, the prince of Comedy, and Homer of Tragedy; when the latter sings of “Ocean whence sprang the gods, and mother Tethys,” does he not mean that all things are the offspring of flux and motion? (Edman 1936: 474–5)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins*

Similarly, in Book IV of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle speaks of how earlier Greek philosophers' view of an ever-changing reality affected their view of what is knowable:

Because they saw that all this world of nature is in movement and that about that which changes no true statement can be made, they said that of course, regarding that which everywhere in every respect is changing, nothing could truly be affirmed. It was this belief that blossomed into the most extreme of the views above mentioned, that of the professed Heracliteans. (*Metaphysics* 1010a6–11)

Aristotle here refers to thinkers like Cratylus, who allegedly did not think he could say anything meaningful because things were in constant change, and so he only gestured by moving his finger. Cratylus criticized Heraclitus for saying that it is impossible to step twice into the same river; he thought one could not step into the same river even once. While the Christianization of Western philosophy made such views nearly impossible to express, process-oriented views emerged again in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with Hegel and Nietzsche, and it is safe to say they became dominant among philosophers of the twentieth century.

The claim that metaphysics exclusively studies a transcendent realm also is a generalization with many exceptions. In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle evidently covers this-worldly objects in his study. The “four causes” are not transcendental in character. Contra Plato, Aristotle places them in the same realm as ordinary objects. Bricks are the material cause of a house; parents are the efficient cause of a child. Moving forward in the tradition, no one would deny that Spinoza was a metaphysician, but his whole philosophy was directed toward a rejection of transcendence. The same can be said for Hegel and for most twentieth-century philosophers. Moreover, even those who enter into metaphysical disputes primarily by attacking metaphysics can be seen as working within the domain of metaphysics. Jean-Paul Sartre once said, “I do not think myself any less a metaphysician in denying the existence of God than Leibniz was in affirming it” (Sartre 1949: 139).

In short, if Western thinkers with a view of the world characterized as becoming rather than being, or who base their views on immanence rather than transcendence, are considered to be doing metaphysics, one cannot say that the Chinese lack metaphysics just because their worldview is predominantly one of change and immanence.

Some contemporary thinkers do not deny that the Chinese have metaphysics. They insist, however, that Chinese metaphysics is fundamentally different from Western metaphysics. One common view is that metaphysics in the two traditions emerges from fundamentally different orientations. For example, some have argued that Western metaphysics is

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

a “metaphysics of nature,” as it pursues truth in the transcendent realm, whereas Chinese metaphysics is a “metaphysics of ethics,” in the pursuit of the good life (see Yu, Xu, and Zhang 2009). This echoes a famous claim by A. C. Graham, that while Western philosophers have primarily searched for being or truth, the central question of Chinese philosophy has been, what is the proper way? (Graham 1989: 222). There is a grain of truth to this contrast. Ancient Greek philosophy began with a strong curiosity about the nature of reality, seen in such thinkers as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Xenophanes, Parmenides, Zeno, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Pythagoras. The majority of ancient Chinese thinkers focused on socio-ethical issues, and they ventured into metaphysics because of these ethical concerns. As Chris Fraser argues in Chapter 4, the Mohists were most concerned with *tian* 天 (heaven) as a guide for action. This orientation set the direction for later metaphysical debates. For example, Mengzi apparently developed his thought about *xing* 性 (human nature or characteristic tendencies) or *tiandao* 天道 (Heavenly Way) for the sake of his theory of inborn virtues, which itself was developed through concerns about self-cultivation. Michael Puett, in Chapter 7 below, even argues for a metaphysics that emerges from theorizing ritual practices. This contrast between Chinese and Western philosophies, however, should not be exaggerated. The characterization is modeled on the division between fact and value, but the “fact-versus-value” divide did not become an issue in the West until David Hume problematized their association. Aristotle, we should remember, used “facts” about human functions as the basis for his argument for the ethical goal of *eudemonia*; one of the “four causes” investigated in the *Metaphysics* is the final cause, which determines the proper function of humanity and its virtuosity. Furthermore, an important branch of Kant’s philosophy is “moral metaphysics,” which makes a place for the notion of a rational will. The rational will for Kant is a free will, which is a key concern within modern metaphysics. Meanwhile, as Jiyuan Yu argues in Chapter 6 below, the development of Chinese metaphysics makes it hard to believe that Chinese philosophers were not also motivated by a desire to understand reality better. Thus it is more accurate to say that the difference between Chinese and Western metaphysics is a matter of degrees and emphasis rather than a radical distinction in kind. Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that in the Chinese tradition, the metaphysical and the moral are always intertwined, as the status of values, the nature of the self, and conceptions of order all have metaphysical implications, if not foundations. The aim of this book is not to isolate Chinese metaphysical views from other areas of philosophy, but rather to focus on the metaphysical aspect of the philosophical continuum while showing how

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins*

metaphysical conceptions connect to other areas of concern. For example, *wuwei* 無為, the Daoist guiding principle for the good life, is at the same time a metaphysical concept. *Xing* 性, a key idea in Mengzi's moral philosophy, also defines the nature of human existence. *Dao*, a core notion in both Confucianism and Daoism, is at once ethical and metaphysical. *Yin* and *yang* are metaphysical forces as well as social/moral principles. The same holds true for the conceptions of *he* 和 (harmony), *li* 理 (coherence or reasonable order), and *tian* 天 (heaven). In view of this connection, studying Chinese ethical theories without examining their metaphysical presuppositions risks misrepresenting these moral perspectives. With the advancement of the study of, and deepening research on, Chinese philosophy in our age, confining our study to Chinese political, social, and ethical theories is no longer acceptable.

Even if we allow that metaphysics was pursued both in the West and in China, one might still claim that the issues they considered and the theories they produced have no commonality. After all, there are almost no key metaphysical terms in Chinese that translate easily into English, and vice versa. In that case, the overlap between Chinese metaphysics and Western metaphysics would be merely nominal, not substantial. Some differences must be acknowledged. Given that the mainstream metaphysical views in China differed significantly from those that dominated Europe, the two traditions naturally came to focus on different problems. For example, the relationship between free will and natural causality was never an issue in Chinese philosophy, nor was the division between mind and body. Since most Chinese philosophers rejected teleology and design, one of their central concerns was spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) and how beings and order can emerge of themselves. Given that Chinese philosophers generally held a less anthropocentric view of nature than did their European counterparts, they were centrally concerned with how human values and social structures relate to the patterns of nature. These issues have been less central in Western philosophy, at least before the twentieth century. At the same time, the two traditions do share many common concerns, such as the origin and constitution of the world we experience. Placing metaphysical questions in a comparative context helps us to broaden the formulation of our questions. It not only enables us to find new insights into the standard questions of Western metaphysics, but also helps us to see how those questions might be more provincial than they initially appear to be. For example, while Chinese philosophers did not discuss free will, they were concerned with the relationship between human motivation and the forces of nature, conceived primarily as the relationship between human *xing* (nature, characteristic tendencies) and *tian* (heaven). Chinese philosophers did not discuss the nature of substance, but they did discuss individuation,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

as shown in Chapter 3 below by Franklin Perkins. While we should not deny the differences between metaphysical thinking in the Chinese and Western traditions, both traditions have contributed to the discipline of metaphysics and should be studied as such. For these reasons and others, Chinese metaphysics deserves careful and in-depth study no less than Western metaphysics.

2

The above generalizations should not obscure the diversity within Chinese philosophy or the wide range of metaphysical positions that have appeared. Chinese philosophy developed over time, expressing internal forces, changes in political and economic contexts, and interactions with other cultures, most of all the absorption of Buddhism from India. In any given period, there were opposing schools and metaphysical disputes. This volume covers all major periods of Chinese philosophy, from pre-Qin to the twentieth century; all major schools, from Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism to Neo-Confucianism and New Confucianism; and many of the key thinkers and texts in Chinese philosophy. While the chapters that follow convey the diversity of Chinese philosophy, they are linked by a persistent set of concerns: how does the multiplicity and diversity of the world link to a common source or basis? What are the basic elements of the cosmos? What is the relationship between emptiness/voidness and our concrete experience of the world? How is harmony related on the levels of society, nature, and the cosmos? How are values grounded in the world? Moreover, while Chinese philosophy took on radically different forms over time, many terms continued to be used while being reinterpreted to serve in new ways. Thus concepts like *dao* 道 (path or way), *qi* 氣 (vital energy), *he* 和 (harmony), and *li* 理 (coherence or reasonable order) provide another link between the chapters and the different time periods discussed. Taken together, the chapters also address broader questions: what metaphysical issues emerge within a worldview that emphasizes interconnection, immanence, and change? Are there alternative ways of doing metaphysics in the Chinese tradition? How do we make sense of them in the light of contemporary philosophical discourse? What is the relationship between metaphysics and other subjects in philosophy?

This book begins with essays by Robin R. Wang and JeeLoo Liu, respectively, analyzing two of the most important concepts in Chinese philosophy: *yinyang* and *qi*. Wang's chapter concentrates on the importance of *yinyang*. She makes a distinction between metaphysical thinking and the kind of metaphysics that divides reality into two separate realms.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-09350-8 - Chinese Metaphysics and Its Problems

Edited by Chenyang Li and Franklin Perkins

Excerpt

[More information](#)

In the Chinese context, *yinyang* thinking is metaphysical thinking, which rests on a vision of reality as a single self-generating, self-differentiating, and self-organizing whole. She starts with an analysis of the classical Chinese phrase most often used to translate “metaphysics,” *xing er shang xue* 形而上學 (“the study of what is without forms”), which is contrasted with the phrase *xing er xia* (形而下) (“what is with forms”). Wang argues that the notion of *xing* 形 (physical forms, things) in these phrases mediates between what might be called the worlds of physics and metaphysics; the realm of forms should be considered as a *yinyang* field of reality containing both what is within and what is without it. She then articulates six specific forms of the *yinyang* relationship, analyzing the multiplicity of *yinyang* descriptions. Finally, Wang explores the metaphor of *huanliu* 環流 (circular flowing) as a way to show how the complexity of *yinyang* interactions leads to a ceaseless process of generation and emergence.

Qi, like *yinyang*, is another core notion in Chinese metaphysics. In the next chapter, JeeLoo Liu identifies a naturalistic conception of *qi* as the consistent theme across a range of philosophical texts and argues that Chinese *qi* metaphysics is a form of humanistic naturalism distinct from scientific naturalism. According to her interpretation, in the view of Chinese humanistic naturalism, the world consists of nothing but entities of the natural world, with human beings as part of it. Liu traces the main issues in *qi*-cosmology throughout the history of Chinese philosophy, beginning with texts such as the *Yijing*, the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Huainanzi*, moving into the theories of Neo-Confucians such as Zhang Zai and Wang Fuzhi, and concluding in the twentieth century, with Xiong Shili’s efforts to reconcile *qi* with modern science. An important feature of Liu’s chapter is that it situates the discussion of *qi* in contemporary discourses on metaphysics, making ancient ideas relevant to our times. By analyzing related issues in naturalistic terms, Liu demystifies the notion of *qi* and renders Chinese cosmology a plausible alternative in contemporary philosophical discourse.

Metaphysics studies forms of existence, and one key question is the nature of individual entities. How did Chinese philosophers understand individual entities? How does *qi* manifest itself as entities in the world? In Chapter 3, Franklin Perkins examines the problem of individuation and, along with it, some of the most fundamental metaphysical issues. Perkins shows that while Chinese philosophers gave ontological priority to interconnected processes and change, holding a type of “process metaphysics,” they did not deny the existence of individual things. This chapter examines approaches to individuation in various philosophies from the Warring States period, concentrating on the concept of *wu* 物, “thing.” Perkins investigates various accounts of the status and origins of “things”