Non-deductive Argumentation in Early Chinese Philosophy

PAUL R. GOLDIN

The strong interest in anecdotes as a mode of philosophical discourse from the Warring States Period (453-221 BCE) onwards can be understood as a by-product of the non-deductive nature of most early Chinese philosophical reasoning. One longstanding criticism of Chinese thought is that it is not truly "philosophical" because it lacks viable protocols of argumentation. Thus it qualifies at best as "wisdom." Confucius, for example, might provide valuable guidance, or thoughtful epigrams to savour, but nothing in the way of formal reasoning that would permit his audience to reconstruct and reconsider his arguments in any connectible context. As Hu Shih 彭（1891-1962）put it, "China has greatly suffered for lack of an adequate logical method."

Such hand-wringing bespeaks the prejudice that satisfactory argumentation must be deductive. I have no special definition of "deduction" in mind; it suffices to use that of Aristotle: "a discourse in which, certain things being stated, something other than what is stated follows of necessity from their being so." This is often called "syllogism" in older translations, because Aristotle thought that all deductive inference must be syllogistic—a notion rejected by modern logicians. Aristotle went on to give some examples of syllogisms, which the medieval tradition organized into types according to their "mood," that is, the nature of their premises and conclusion. The mood AAA (sometimes called "Barbara syllogism"), for instance, holds that if all A are B, and all B are C, then all A must be C.
All elephants are mammals.
All mammals are animals.
∴ All elephants are animals.

Such reasoning allows inferences that must be valid for every conceivable elephant, regardless of how many discrete elephants one happens to have seen in one's lifetime. Aristotle seems to have believed that such powers of inference were unique to human beings. 40

As Andrew Seth Meyer notes in his contribution to this volume, China took a different tack. 41 Many of the most famous Chinese philosophical statements are patently non-syllogistic. For example:

"If Wench acted only after thinking three times. The Master heard of it, and said, "Twice would have been acceptable."

子思之思而後行。子臘之。曰：「可，斯可矣。」

This could be construed as useful practical advice. The dangers of acting too rashly and too slowly are the subjects of contradictory aphorisms (for example, in our culture. "Look before you leap" and "He who hesitates is lost"). Here, the Master, i.e., Confucius 引子 (551-479 BCE), recommends a prudent middle course. Think twice before acting; not once, but not three times, either. Clearly this is not a matter of deductive inference—nor is the statement applicable in every conceivable situation. One should not think twice about whether to avoid an oncoming car. It is left to us to explore the range of plausible applications, but presumably Confucius is talking about weightier moral decisions; these deserve careful consideration and reconsideration, but as soon as one has made up one's mind, further deliberation only leads to inaction. Here is another example from the Lümi 論語 (Analects):

The Master said, "Only after the year has grown cold does one know that the pine and cypress are the last to wither."

子曰："歲寒，然後知松柏之後榮也。"

I have discussed this passage elsewhere, 42 and the details need not be rehearsed here, but one observation is crucial: the statement begs to be taken metaphorically, because no one would have bothered to record and preserve this line if it were really just a remark about pines and cypresses.

(The Lampa is not a manual of forester) And metaphors have no place in deductive reasoning. When we say that all elephants are mammals, we are not speaking metaphorically; we cannot be speaking metaphorically, or else the very inference would be called into question. (Speakers of English sometimes refer to an obvious problem that no one wishes to address as "the elephant in the room," but that kind of elephant is not a mammal.) Thus Confucius's utterance, however we choose to interpret it (ordinarily it is understood as a comment on the value of friends who remain true in all seasons), cannot be deductive.

Three general types of non-deductive argumentation in early Chinese philosophy merit extended discussion: paradox, analogy, and appeal to example (this last type includes anecdotes). 43

Paradox 44

Many of the paradoxes of the so-called "disputers" (biante 哲理) can be made to seem veridical, 45 or at least veridical in spirit, if interpreted sympathetically. For example, among the ten paradoxes ascribed to Hui Shi 惠施 (4th c. BCE), one finds "the South has no limit but has a limit" 46 which is a paradoxical statement. 47 We do not know how Hui Shi himself defended this paradox, but there are interpretations that would render this paradox veridical: the quadrant called "South" contains an infinite number of points, but it does not include the entire world; it is distinct, naturally, from the quadrants called "North," "East," and "West." Thus it is both limited and limited at the same time. 48 Another (possible) example of veridical paradox is "eggs have hair" 49 (mao 蛋毛) if this is taken to mean "inside an egg, there is hair"—that is, the down of the unborn chick inside—then it is an unexempted true statement. (The Chinese word mao 蛋毛 denotes body hair, such as the pelts of an animal, and could have been stretched to refer to the down of a chick.) One paradox that should have attracted more attention from modern linguists is "dogs can be sheep" 50 which is veridical if it means "dogs may be called sheep" the word "dog" is arbitrary and has nothing to do with the nature of the dog itself.

Many of the disputers' paradoxes rely on the technique of exploiting a vulnerable keyword, either by using it in a sense different from what the audience expects, or by using it in one sense in one part of the paradox, and in a different sense in another. 51 (This is similar to the fallacy of equivocation in Western philosophy.) Thus "inversions are longer than strides" 德長 is
As moral philosophy, this passage conveys a certain mindset rather than formulating a definite argument (and as an argument it is obviously not deductive). Just as a gourmet is prepared to sacrifice fish for the sake of a delicacy like bear’s paw, a moral contemplator is prepared to sacrifice his or her life for the sake of righteousness. Naturally, the analogy does not prove that righteousness is worth dying for; it merely illustrates Mencius’s zeal.

Many such analogies refer to natural phenomena with the unstated supposition that patterns observable in nature cannot be wrong. This conviction underlies arguments that are not always well-received today. For example, early in the famous debate between Mencius and Gaozi (Master Gao), the latter presents the view that human nature (xing) is lacking any inherent moral orientation; like a torrent of water, it will rush in whichever direction is laid open for it. Mencius responds by assailing the analogy: water does have an inherent orientation after all, because it always flows downwards. Thus human nature is inherently good in the same way that water naturally flows downwards. This argument has been harshly criticized in modern times; its power must have been greater in a culture like that of ancient China, where reasoning by analogy was deeply respected. 

It must also be acknowledged that appeals to natural phenomena were often used to keep women in their place. In a canonical text called “Mushi...
because appealing to the sages was the first of the "ThreeGenres" (see "Three Standards") that he held to be indicative of valid propositions:

This being the case, how does one judge their propositions? Master Mozi said: One must set up a gauge. Speaking without such a gauge would be like determining sunrise and sunset on the basis of a spinning potter's wheel. One could never come to know clearly the difference between right and wrong, benefit and harm. Thus one must speak in accordance with the Three Genres. What is meant by the "Three Genres"? Master Mozi said: There is "verifying the root," "verifying the origin," and "verifying the utility." How does one "verify the root"? One "verifies the root" in the affairs of the sage kings of old. How does one "verify the origin"? One "verifies the origin" by investigating the things that the Hundred Surnames hear and see. How does one "verify the utility"? Observe the benefit that [the proposition] would bring to the state, its people, the Hundred Surnames, and the populace if it were disseminated by being made into law. This is what is meant by speaking in accordance with the Three Genres.

然則明此之說將奈何矣？子墨子曰：必立言，言而得者，警德遺之所善而立信者也。是不言於時，不可得而明知也。故言必有三表：非謂三表也，非謂三表也，非謂三表也。子墨子曰：有本之者，有原之者，有盡之者，非謂三表也，非謂三表也，非謂三表也。子墨子曰：非謂三表也，非謂三表也，非謂三表也。非謂三表也，非謂三表也，非謂三表也。故言必有三表也。

For example, the Mohists’ argument against fatalism (swen 瘋), which they attributed to Confucius and his followers, runs essentially like this: the sage kings did not believe that all things were foreordained; ordinary people do not normally act on such a belief either; and fatalism is dangerous because it would lead to moral apathy if people were to put their faith in it. Thus fatalism is false. The Mohists also dilates similarly on the sage kings Yao 荒、Shun 禹、Yu 禹、Tang 涼、and Kings Wen 文 and Wu 武, when Heaven established itself as Sons of Heaven, in contrast to the deposed tyrants Fu 福, Zhou 督, You 炎, and Li 立, whose downfall Heaven likewise superintended.

Appeal to Example

Appeals to example are rarely ubiquitous in ancient Chinese philosophy (the most prominent text not to resort to them is Laozi), and it seems fruitful to divide the technique into a number of subtypes. Appeal to history has been regarded as so typical of Chinese philosophy that Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) derided it as the "Chinese argument." Rarely did Chinese predecessors fail to refer to examples from the past that supposedly bolstered their case—nor did they always feel obliged to recite details accurately.

A more specific category is appeal to the sages of yore and the canonical texts attributed to them. Though it is usually taken to be typical of Confucian argumentation, Mohists, i.e., followers of the philosophy of Mozi 孟軻 (Master Mo, B. lane 5th c. BCE), pioneered the use of this device,

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The commonplace of appealing to the example of the sages prompted a backlash in texts such as Han Fei (Masser Han Fei). Teaching people how to build nests in trees or drill flint in order to make fire were crucial advances in prehistoric times, but in later eras they would have been laughable:

If there were someone who built nests or drilled flint in the Xia dynasty, he would surely be ridiculed by Guo and Ya [i.e., the legendary father and son who tried to tame catastrophic floods and went on to found the Xia dynasty]. If there were someone who cleared water channels in the age of Yin and Zhou dynasties, he would surely be ridiculed by Tang and Wu [i.e., the sage founders of those dynasties]. Yet today there are those who praise the ways of Yao, Tang, Wu, and Yu as though they were appropriate for today's age, surely they are too be ridiculed by new sages.

今有穀木鑄鍛於夏后氏之世者，必為嗤。 aujourd'hui, 耿笑矣。有築築於殷、周之世者，必為嗤。今學矣。然則今有美務，興、湯、武，禹之處於當今之世者，必為嘲而笑矣。

What may have been laughable actions by sages of the past are not necessarily appropriate to the very different society of today.

Another productive subtype is appeal to proverbs, such as the one about hens announcing the morning, mentioned above. In a later example, Jia Yi (201–169 BCE) wrote: “A rustic proverb says: ‘Those who do not forget affairs of the past are teachers of the future’” 旧谚曰：‘前事不忘，後事之師’.” This is both an appeal to a proverb and an appeal to history at the same time, though Jia Yi goes on to emphasize that methods of the past might have to be adjusted to suit present circumstances. He probably did not make up this proverb, because it appears verbatim in an unrelated item in Zhangqiao 賈逵 (Strategies of the Warring States), a text that has preserved many other maxims as well (such as “Three people make a tiger” 三人成虎, everyone will believe there is a tiger if three people independently claim to have seen it). Modern readers are seldom impressed by these subtypes of appeal to example. Appeals to history are sometimes deemed persuasive, but not if the circumstances are incommensurate (and certainly not if the examples are distorted), while appeals to canonical texts and proverbs fare even worse, usually being dismissed as *argumentum ad veracendum*, an argument from authority. But one subtype of appeal to example is not necessarily fallacious: appeal to exemplary conduct, both good and bad. This discourse is characteristic of the Lunyu:

The Master said, “When I am walking [with others] in a threesome, there must be a teacher to me among them. I select what is good in them and follow in what is not good in them, I correct.”

子曰: ‘三人行，必有我師焉。擇其善者而從之，其不善者而改之。’

Like Mencius’s comment about fish and bear’s paw, this is more of a declaration of a certain attitude than a formal argument; it merely asserts the principle that there is always something to learn, whether positive or negative, from the example of others. The idea that we can learn by emulating other people’s strengths and reforming their weaknesses has been central to Chinese philosophy for centuries, and has fostered the associated conviction that we must judge people’s actions fairly—including our own.

Appeal to example, finally, brings us to anecdotes, the subject of the present volume. Since other chapters focus on specific cases, I shall confine myself here to some basic observations. The appeal to an anecdote is a subtype of appeal to example because the argumentative mode and purpose are the same: the anecdote is intended to furnish an instructive example highlighting the particular philosophical issue under debate. The inferences gleaned from it are never deductive.

Take the example in Han Fei’s of a lucky farmer who caught a rabbit that happened to kill itself by careering into a stamp:

Among the men of Song there was one who tilled his fields; in his fields there was a stamp. A rabbit ran by, caught headfirst against the stamp, broke its neck, and died. Thereupon [the man] set aside his plow and kept watch by the stamp, hoping to get another rabbit, but no other rabbit was to be gotten, and he became the laughingstock of Song. Now those who wish to use the governance of the former Kings to bring order to the people of our time are all of the same type as the stamp-watcher.

宋人有耕者，田中有兔，免走，觸株而死。因釋其耒而守株，冀復得兔，兔不可得，而身為宋罵。今欲以先王之政，治當世之民，皆守株之類也。
The argument is explicit; using "the governance of the former Kings to bring order to the people of our time" is as foolish as waiting for a second rabbit (because it is equally unlikely that virtuous individuals will present themselves in government pro bono).

Such anecdotes are fungible in the sense that they can be adapted to serve different arguments, and thus their ability to convey a priori truths is limited, if not nil. The example of the stump-watcher is effectively applied in Han Fei's political philosophy, but it could also be used, say, to argue against wagering one's life savings at the roulette table after winning one spin. (Essentially, its purpose is to emphasize the folly of betting one's plans for the future on the hope that a welcome but extremely rare event might happen again.) In Han Fei's, anecdotes are so fungible that one can occasionally find the same one marshaled in support of diametrically opposed positions. In "Shigu" (Ten Milesteps), Duke Huan of Qi (485–463 BCE) is criticized for rejecting Guan Zhong's advice (d. 645 BCE) to deathbed advice to purge three self-interested ministers, while in "Na, yi" (Critiques, No. 1), Guan Zhong's deathbed advice is itself criticized, because a lord needs to know how to extract service from self-interested ministers. For if Han Fei teaches us anything, it is that ministers are self-interested yet indispensable.

Han Fei does not worry about whether Guan Zhong really said what was attributed to him (what stenographer would have been present at his bedside, after all); the point is that arguments about how to deal with self-interested ministers could be persuasively praised or criticized, depending on one's perspective. This is why so many appeals to historical events, as noted above, contain uncorrected factual errors. Their veracity was less of a concern than their illustrative power.

It would be unproductive, therefore, to distinguish rigidly between "anecdotes" like that of Guan Zhong's deathbed advice in Han Fei's and the unmistakably fictitious stories of Zhuangzi (Master Zhuang), which are more commonly characterized as "parables." (None of these English terms, as mentioned in the Introduction to this volume, can be mapped neatly onto Chinese vocabulary.) Consider the famous parable that draws the "Inner Chapters" (内篇 内篇) of Zhuangzi to a close.

The Emperor of the Southern Sea was named Zig; the Emperor of the Northern Sea was named Zag; the Emperor of the Center was named Dumpling. Zig and Zag often met each other in Dumpling's territory, and Dumpling received them very well.

Zig and Zag planned to repay Dumpling for his kindness, saying: "All men have seven holes for seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing. [Dumpling] is the only one who does not have them. Let us try drilling them for him!" Each day they drilled another hole, and on the seventh day Dumpling died.

No rational reader would object to this anecdote (parable) on the grounds that Zig, Zag, and Dumpling are not real people. We are invited to ruminate on the story, knowing full well that it must be fictitious, for the philosophical insights that it obliquely conveys—an exercise that remains fruitful to this day with our urgent new concern for maintaining the integrity of the environment. Thus appeals to history, anecdotes, and parables lie on a continuum of historicity ranging from the generally unexceptionable historical examples offered by nearly every ancient persuader at court to more questionable historical examples, such as Guan Zhong's deathbed advice in Han Fei's, to parables with no pretense of factuality, such as the tale of Zig, Zag, and Dumpling in Zhuangzi. But fundamentally they are of the same species: devices that aim to clarify a philosophical problem by focusing on a cognate example.

**Deductive Reasoning**

The foregoing should not be misconstrued as a denial that Chinese philosophers ever engaged in deductive reasoning. There are several important early Chinese arguments that can be restated in terms of propositional logic—for instance, the Mohist defense of impartial care (兼愛):

If one were to investigate where these various harms arise from, where do these things arise from? Do these things arise from caring for others and benefiting others? One would have to say that this is not the case; one would have to say that they arise from despising and despoothing others. If one were to categorize things in the world by means of names, would those who have
others and despise others [be considered] impartial or partial? One would have to say partial. Thus is it not the case that engaging [others] with partiality gives rise to the great harms in the world? For this reason, partiality is wrong.⁴⁰

想善此謂無私之為私，此謂生？此謂生利生義否？即是時又兩者也。此謂德人善乘人生，分亨其天地，善人何故名，是故名？即是時人名，善義？即是時也，然生天下之大害者則是故名也。⁴¹

I take this as an early attempt at a deductive argument (essentially a composite Barbara syllogism):

\[ p \rightarrow q \]
\[ q \rightarrow r \]
\[ (\text{if one is partial, one hates and despises others.}) \]
\[ (\text{if one hates and despises others, one causes harm.}) \]
\[ r \rightarrow s \]
\[ (\text{if one causes harm, one is wrong.}) \]
\[ \therefore p \rightarrow s \]
\[ (\text{if one is partial, one is wrong.}) \]

More complex deductive arguments can be found in later texts. Xunzi’s elaborate argument against abolition, which he tries to rule out as a method of transferring sovereignty in all possible situations,⁴² contains an instance of disjunctive elimination.

It is said, “When the king is dying, he should cede to someone else.” This is also not so... If the sage kings have already fallen, and there is no sage in the world, then there is certainly no one adequate to cede the world to. If there is a sage king in the world, and he is among the [the current King’s] sons or descendants, the dynasty does not change; the state does not alter its regulations. The world will be satisfied with this; there will be no respect in which this differs from [the situation] prior. If a Yao succeeds a Yao, what change would there be? If the sage is not among his sons or descendants, but among the Three Chief Ministers, then the world will come home to him as though he were restoring and sustaining it. The world will be satisfied with this; there will be no respect in which this differs from [the situation] prior. If a Yao succeeds a Yao, again, what change would there be?⁴³

曰：“死而繼之，是又不然。在王已没，天下無君。則無而足以繼天下矣。天下有君，有在後子者，則天下不棄。棄不棄，則無足矣。天下無君，無則無以異上；以民用起用，夫又何變之有？棄不在後子而在三公，則天下如故，猶得而或之矣。夫又何變之有？”⁴⁴

This too is deductive in structure:

\[ \neg p \lor (q \lor r) \]
\[ (\text{Either there is no sage or there is a sage among the King’s descendants or the Three Chief Ministers.)} \]
\[ \neg p \rightarrow \neg q \]
\[ (\text{If there is no sage, there is no reason for abdication.)} \]
\[ q \rightarrow s \]
\[ (\text{If there is a sage among the King’s descendants, there is no reason for abdication.)} \]
\[ r \rightarrow \neg s \]
\[ (\text{If there is a sage among the Three Chief Ministers, there is no reason for abdication.)} \]
\[ \therefore \neg s \]
\[ (\text{There is no reason for abdication.)} \]

The opening premise is questionable, however: Xunzi does not seem to have envisioned a situation in which there is a sage in the world who is neither one of the King’s descendants nor one of the Three Chief Ministers; nor is it entirely clear why succession by one of the Three Chief Ministers did not, in his mind, constitute the establishment of a new dynasty. (Consider the example of Yu, the sage who succeeded Shun, thereby initiating the dynasty known as Xia.) But otherwise, the reasoning is sound.

In early China audiences were so familiar with disjunctive elimination that even others could use it in texts intended more for entertainment than edification:

Queen Dowager Xuan of Qin [d. 265 BCE] loved Wei Choufu.⁴⁵

When the Queen Dowager fell ill and was about to die, she...
issued an order, saying, "When I am buried, Master Wei must accompany me in death."

Master Wei was horrified by this. Yong Rui persuaded the Queen Dowager in Master Wei’s behalf, saying, "Do you consider the dead to have consciousness?"

The Queen Dowager said, "They have no consciousness."

Yong Rui said, "If your Majesty’s godlike numen is clearly aware that the dead have no consciousness, why would you vainly take the person you loved in life, and bury him with the dead, who lack consciousness? And if the dead do have consciousness, the former king has been accumulating his wrath for many days. Your Majesty, you will scarcely have the means to make amends for your transgressions—how would you have leisure for assignations with Wei Choufu?"

勢厚太后愛魏微夫，太后崩，謂其子曰：「為我報，必以魏子為後。」魏子患之，遂為女於齊之太后曰：「以死者為賢知乎？」太后曰：「賢知乎。」曰：「若太後之神靈，明如時者之有知否，何為不以生所愛，苟於無知之死人耶？若死者有知，先主憤怒之日久矣，太后教遺不聽，何補於魏微微夫？」

Restated in propositional form, this yields:

\[ \neg p \lor \neg r \]

(Either the dead have consciousness or the dead do not have consciousness.)

\[ \neg p \rightarrow \neg r \]

(If the dead have consciousness, having your lover buried with you is a waste.)

\[ \neg r \rightarrow \neg p \]

(If the dead do not have consciousness, having your lover buried with you is a waste.)

\[ \vdash \neg p \]

(Having your lover buried with you is a waste.)

And this is a valid inference.

These few but memorable examples leave no doubt that audiences were aware of principles of deduction, and thus suggest that Chinese philosophers crafted non-deductive arguments as a deliberate choice. Argumentation that rely wholly on deductive inference, like Xunzi’s case against abdication, are not easy to find; one can only assume that they were not preferred.

One consequence is that Chinese philosophy tends to demand a high level of interpretive participation from its audience. Perhaps this is what Confucius meant when he said, "I begin with one corner; and if [a student] cannot return with the other three corners, I do not repent myself." When we compare our language and philosophy to 19th-century or earlier English literature, one notes a remarkable difference. As one example, Confucius repeatedly tells us of the goal of the perfect ruler, but the ideal ruler is not given in the texts. Rather, we are given examples of what not to do. This approach is typical of Chinese literature, and it is this that is useful for our purposes.

Notes

1. I am grateful for helpful comments by participants and audience members at the venues where I delivered earlier versions of this piece.

2. The academic debate over the legitimacy of Chinese philosophy has occasioned numerous recent publications. For representative overview, see the Introduction to this volume.

University Press, 2003), 492 (No. 18), though his translation of ji as “honorable” reflects a different understanding of the term.

20. Shao Jun Yang (1868-1908) in Moci jiaxue 11.45.639h.6-64.

22. See Goldin, Confucianism, 92f.


32. “Moczi zai”《五·卷》50, a poem in the Guei, states this principle so clearly as to claim any philosophical sense, “Heaven dispersed the many people; there are creatures; there are patterns” 天有散人，有物有则, Natural patterns are inescapable because they derive from Heaven.

33. Moci 6A.2.

34. Perhaps the strongest voice has been that of Arthur Waley (1889-1966), Three Ways of Thought in Ancient China (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1939), 194.


38. See, more generally, Paul R. Goldin, The Culture of Sex in Ancient China (Hongkong: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), 44ff.


43. The wordy phrases “verifying the origin” verifying the fact that lex, xue, jue, and yong are verbs.


The Frontier between Chen and Cai

Anecdote, Narrative, and Philosophical Argumentation in Early China

ANDREW SETH MEYER

In his groundbreaking study of early Chinese historiography, David Schaberg described the centrality of the anecdote to the historiographic enterprise. Anecdotes did not function simply as vectors for the transmission of facts about the past; their formal structure provided the intrinsic mechanism by which the past become meaningful. The medium was the message: "the morphology and thematic of the anecdote were "specially adapted to substantiate certain kinds of judgments," making the "world and its history a laboratory." Schaberg acknowledges that this blurs the line between historiography and philosophy, noting the frequent similarity between anecdotal material anthologized in "historical" works such as the Zanhuai 漢晉春秋 (Zuo Commentary) and "philosophical" works such as the Xiuyi 許氏春秋 (Master Xiu's chronicle) or Han Fei 孟子 (Master Han Fei).1

This raises a question that (understandably, given the scope of his project) Schaberg initially left unexplored: were anecdotes in early China instrumental to philosophy as they were to historiography? There are two ways to conceptualize this question that respect the integrity of early Chinese texts and the categories native to early Chinese discourse. The first is in terms of genre. Did or could anecdotes perform the same determinatively instrumental role in the writings directly conveying the teachings of the "Masters," the early Chinese analogues of the ancient Mediterranean's "philosophers," as Schaberg has shown for "anecdotes" or "records" such as...