

A MINIMALIST APPROACH TO TRUTH AND CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

Jamin Asay and Frank Saunders Jr.

Purdue University and Hong Kong Chu Hai College

© 2025, Jamin Asay and Frank Saunders Jr.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 License

doi.org/10.3998/phimp.5005

Introduction

One of the most fascinating discussions in contemporary comparative philosophy concerns truth and Chinese philosophy, with major debates having arisen over whether the concept of truth plays a theoretical role in ancient Chinese philosophy and whether ancient China even had a concept of truth at all.¹ However, the major players in those debates have tended to bring divergent conceptions of truth to the table, such that their various disagreements often end up telling us more about their own theories of truth than they do about the role (if any) of truth in ancient Chinese thought. In this paper, we explore the relationship between truth and ancient Chinese philosophy by utilizing a *minimalist characterization* rather than a partisan theory of truth, thereby avoiding the problems faced by previous discussions. This novel methodology enables us to give an account of alethic phenomena—that is, phenomena in the neighborhood of truth—that can be found in ancient Chinese philosophy. In so doing, we hope to push the debate beyond its current stage that queries whether or not ancient Chinese philosophers had a concept or theory of truth and instead identify the wide range of truth-related phenomena therein. Importantly, our methodology allows us to discover not just *where* the notion of truth is to be found in ancient Chinese texts, but also *why* it is found there. The results from our methodological approach can then serve as a foundation for further investigation into the role that alethic notions play in other philosophical traditions as well.

We begin by articulating our methodology. This involves distinguish-

-
1. Chad Hansen (1985, 1992) was the first to explicitly argue that early Chinese thinkers had no concept of truth, though other scholars such as A. C. Graham (1989) and Don Munro (1969) had also noticed a conspicuous absence of truth-related concerns in early Chinese philosophy. The discussion has progressed significantly since Hansen's contribution, with Alexis McLeod (2016) and Bo Mou (2018) dedicating their monographs to reconstructing theories of truth in early Chinese texts, and Christoph Harbsmeier (1989), Chris Fraser (2012, 2020, 2023), Leong Wai Chun (2015), and Lajos Brons (2016) contributing several important articles. For a fuller discussion of this dialectic see Saunders 2022: 3-9.

ing, at a minimum, between the property of truth, concept of truth, and words like ‘truth’. It also proposes a minimal characterization of truth—a thin account of the various forms of alethic phenomena that are accepted by all major theoretical perspectives on truth. Equipped with this minimal characterization, we can locate the alethic phenomena that are found in ancient Chinese texts in an illuminating yet theoretically neutral manner. Then we turn to the metaphysical and conceptual consequences of those linguistic discoveries. After completing our positive account of the alethic phenomena to be found in ancient Chinese philosophy, we consider its dialectical significance, showing what implications it has on other views that have been offered on the question of truth in ancient Chinese philosophy.

1. A minimal methodology

The methodology we adopt includes two major components. First, contemporary research in the theory of truth respects an important tripartite distinction between properties, concepts, and words, and we follow suit.² Theorists insensitive to this distinction risk conflating metaphysical, conceptual, and linguistic matters. Theorizing about the property of truth (hereafter ‘*truth*’) involves the question of whether there is a substantive account of what it is that truths share in virtue of being true (in terms of correspondence or coherence, say), or whether there is nothing more to say about the property than that it is the property that a truth-bearer $\langle p \rangle$ has if and only if p .³ The concept of truth (hereafter ‘*TRUTH*’) is (at least depending on one’s background view of concepts) that which enables those of us who can think and talk about truth as such to do so. Theorists divide as to whether this concept can be further analyzed (e.g., Rasmussen 2014) or is conceptual bedrock (e.g., Asay 2013). Either way, it is the concept that is expressed by *words* like ‘true’,

2. As does Brons (2016). See Lynch 2009 and Asay 2013 for discussion of the three-way distinction.

3. Nothing in our paper rests on a partisan view about what sorts of objects (sentences or propositions, for example) are truth-bearers. ‘ $\langle p \rangle$ ’ designates any truth-bearer that means that p .

‘*wahr*’, and ‘*verdad*’. Much of the work on truth in the last century has concerned the logical and linguistic role that such words play in natural language.

Second, in order to determine—in a theoretically neutral way—whether alethic phenomena are to be found in ancient Chinese texts, we deploy the idea of a *minimal characterization*. Greenough introduces this notion with respect to vagueness, in the hopes of producing a theory which “endeavours to set forth some a priori, basic, and platitudinous principles which provide an uncontroversial definition of vagueness, a definition which isolates the constitution of vagueness from a perspective which is as neutral as possible on matters logical and philosophical” (2003: 237). When offering a minimal characterization of indeterminacy, Taylor presents the project as offering “the sort of thing that, ideally, you and I, no matter our differences in opinion regarding the nature and logic of indeterminacy, could both agree applies in exactly the cases that we think exhibit the phenomenon whose nature and logic is at issue” (2018: 2). Following their lead, we begin by presenting a minimal characterization of truth, one to which we hope all our interlocutors concerning the question of truth in ancient Chinese philosophy can agree.

Note that a minimal characterization of truth is importantly distinct from the *minimalist theory* of truth, as defended most prominently by Horwich (1998). Minimalists (alongside other *deflationists*) maintain that a full theory of truth can be offered by way of the truth schema: ‘ $\langle p \rangle$ is true if and only if p ’. There is no need to give any metaphysical analysis of the property of truth and no need to put any explanatory weight on the concept. We are not presupposing such a theory here. However, the minimal characterization largely overlaps with it. What tends to separate deflationary and substantive views is that the latter generally agree with the positive claims that deflationists make but deny that those minimal claims are sufficient for fully understanding the nature of truth. So a deflationist might agree to our minimal characterization and then add that there’s nothing more to be said. We maintain our neutrality by *not* making that extra assertion. The idea is that the phe-

nomena that constitute the minimal characterization can be adopted by both substantivists (of any stripe) and deflationists, and that we may remain neutral on the controversies between them.

To formulate the minimal characterization, we look to how alethic language functions in natural language settings where theoretical disputes are not likely to surface. Since we are theorizing in English, we attend to the common and prevalent linguistic roles that words like ‘true’ and ‘truth’ perform; having identified such roles, we can turn to what linguistic devices (if any) play such roles in ancient Chinese texts.⁴ Basically, we are looking at the communicative functions that are accomplished when we use alethic language in English in order to see if those same functions are performed in ancient Chinese texts. We identify four such roles and features, with the help of some non-academic texts: Lewis Carroll’s Alice stories. This choice to use popular, non-academic texts is deliberate: we are interested in how alethic language appears “in the wild”, where philosophical questions about the nature of truth are not at issue. Our goal first and foremost is to identify how alethic language is *used* in ordinary discourse, not how it is theorized about.

1.1 *Anaphora*

Truth regularly plays an *anaphoric* role: like pronouns, ‘true’ can be employed as a way of avoiding repetition of language already used. Chatting with her kitten Dinah on a snowy winter day, Alice imagines the trees outside coming to life in the summer, dressing themselves in green and dancing in the wind. She then says:

“I do so *wish* it was true!” (Carroll 1965b: 7)

Here, ‘it was true’ repeats the content of her previously stated imaginings: she wishes that the trees would come to life in the summer, dressing themselves in green and dancing in the wind. Had she not used ‘true’ anaphorically, she would have had to resort to uttering all the same sen-

tences once again.⁵

1.2 *Semantic endorsement*

It’s commonly observed that ‘true’ is a device of semantic endorsement. That is to say, one can endorse a thought or agree with what it says by means of ‘true’. Semantic endorsement is a specific (and incredibly common) application of truth’s previously considered anaphoric role. Consider this exchange between Alice and the Duchess:

“He might bite,” Alice cautiously replied, not feeling at all anxious to have the experiment tried.

“Very true,” said the Duchess. (Carroll 1965a: 106)

The Duchess here endorses what Alice said. She could have simply repeated after Alice: ‘He might bite’. She could have said ‘Yes indeed’. She could have nodded, or given a thumbs up. All of these actions would have been means for agreeing with Alice’s claim. Because of the anaphoric role of ‘true’, it can be used as a means for endorsement, as predicating it amounts to reasserting what Alice previously asserted.

In another case, the narrator responds to Alice’s thoughts as she falls down the rabbit hole:

“Well!” thought Alice to herself, “after such a fall as this, I shall think nothing of tumbling down-stairs! How brave they’ll all think me at home! Why, I wouldn’t say anything about it, even if I fell off the top of the house!” (Which was very likely true.) (Carroll 1965a: 5)⁶

The narrator here is communicating that they believe that it’s very likely that Alice wouldn’t grumble about falling off the top of her house now, were she to do so. The narrator is assessing what Alice said, and the

4. One can also use them to identify other cases of alethic language in English, such as ‘the case’, ‘fact’, ‘corresponds to the world’, etc.

5. In another case, Alice queries Dinah: “Now, Dinah, tell me the truth: did you ever eat a bat?” (Carroll 1965a: 7). In asking for the *truth*, Alice is still just asking Dinah about whether or not she has ever eaten a bat.

6. See also the appearance of ‘We know it to be true’ in the letter presented at the Knave’s trial (Carroll 1965a: 143).

combination of ‘which’ and ‘true’ allows the narrator to refer to and then assess the content of Alice’s thoughts without explicitly expressing them all over again.

1.3 Generalization

Another frequently noted feature of ‘true’ is its generalizing ability. For example: all tautologies are true. In asserting that all tautologies are true, we are expressing a commitment to the endorsement of each individual tautology, and without having to individually express each one of them. Consider this admonition from the Red Queen to Alice:

“Always speak the truth—think before you speak—and write it down afterwards.” (Carroll 1965b: 141).

The Red Queen is effectively advising Alice that for any p , she should assert that p only if p .⁷ She is deploying ‘true’ in a way that lets her generalize over all propositional contents.

1.4 Semantic ascent/descent

If snow is white, then ‘Snow is white’ is true. Hence we can use ‘true’ to say things about the world by saying things about language. By the same token, when ‘true’ is applied to a piece of language, we can “descend” and infer something about the world. If I come to believe that the sentence on the board is true, and the sentence is ‘Tigers tickle terribly’, then I may infer that tigers tickle terribly. Semantic ascent is closely related to truth’s role in producing anaphora and generalizations; in effect, because of the equivalence between $\langle p \rangle$ and $\langle \langle p \rangle \text{ is true} \rangle$, such communicative features are possible. For example, the Duchess is effectively semantically ascending when she replies “Very true”; she is predicating truth of the previously spoken content.

7. See also the narrator’s appraisal of Alice as “a very truthful child” (Carroll 1965a: 60), though this may be a case that emphasizes Alice’s sincerity rather than her accuracy.

1.5 Implications

These four dimensions of truth form our minimal characterization. Truth is a notion we employ in generating anaphora, engaging in semantic ascent and descent, and generalizing over propositional contents, all of which then allow it to serve as a means for semantic endorsement (and rejection). None of this is news to anyone invested in the philosophy of truth, of course. That is the point of offering a minimal characterization: by articulating what is held in common by all partisan theorists, we latch onto the shared phenomenon that concerns them all. We can then use that characterization to see if that phenomenon was of concern to ancient Chinese philosophy.

Furthermore, anyone who deploys terms that accomplish these four tasks has the concept *TRUTH*, since that is the concept that gives those terms their meaning. Whatever else they are, concepts play a role in cognition that enables understanding and communication. Which ideas you can understand and express to others is, in part, a function of which concepts you possess. So competence with alethic language is indicative of the possession of the concepts underlying that language. Note that we are offering only a *sufficient* condition for possessing *TRUTH*: cognitive competence with the sorts of expressive abilities for which alethic language is distinctively used. In line with the neutrality driving our minimal characterization, this sufficient condition is accepted by those who think possession of alethic language is necessary for *TRUTH* possession (e.g., Horwich 1998), and those who think it isn’t (e.g., Asay 2013 and Brons 2016).

None of these claims wades into controversial territory as to what it is for something to *be* true, or what constitutes the nature of the property *truth*, or the analysis of the concept *TRUTH*. Instead, the minimal characterization speaks to what people implicitly understand about truth when they encounter and use alethic language in ordinary settings.⁸

8. It’s worth noting that *all* appearances of ‘true’ and ‘truth’ in the Alice stories are cited here, and are fully accounted for by the elements of our minimal characterization. That is some evidence that nothing more than the minimal characterization is needed to understand how ‘true’ works in ordinary texts.

Bear in mind that the minimal characterization is not a theory or definition of what it is to be a truth predicate.⁹ A truth predicate, for instance, may just be any predicate whose extension includes all and only truths.¹⁰ But that definition won't be helpful for identifying truth predicates out in the wild of natural language. The minimal characterization focuses on the fact that when we use alethic language, we are *doing* things like generalizing, semantically ascending, and semantically endorsing. These doings are the key to detecting alethic phenomena in other languages—if speakers and writers are doing those same things, then the language they are using to do so constitute that language's alethic resources.

By focusing on the role of alethic language, our minimal characterization is less theory-laden than has been the norm with our interlocutors. They, too, begin by laying out what they're looking for when they look for alethic phenomena in the ancient Chinese tradition (see Saunders 2022: 3-8). But their touchstones for truth are far less theoretically modest than ours, and often are committed to various interpretive perspectives about ancient Chinese philosophy. As will soon be clear, our methodology detects alethic phenomena in many of the same places that other theorists have found them. This is unsurprising, since those theorists obviously have a decent handle (however implicit) on how to detect the concept of truth within the languages they understand. A major virtue of our minimalist approach is that it offers a strong rationale for *why* it is correct to find alethic phenomena there. Other theorists have gestured toward various principles underlying their alethic identifications, but these have been, at best, incomplete and insufficiently neutral. Fraser (2012: 360) highlights the anaphoric dimension of truth, but at the cost of committing to Brandom's (1994) version of prosentential-

ism. Leong (2015: 69) lists some common features of truth, but mixes together semantic, epistemological, and conceptual matters. Harbsmeier (1989) nods towards Tarski's (1956) work on truth and its connection to semantic ascent, but it's left unclear how to then apply Tarski's framework to the task at hand. Furthermore, Harbsmeier relies on a confusing distinction between "semantic" and "abstract" concepts of truth. To make his case that the notion of truth is alive and well in ancient Chinese philosophy, Harbsmeier provides a number of translations of texts that deploy 'true' when translating the Chinese. As he notes, these translations may "all be taken to beg the question" (1989: 141). Indeed, that a term is translated using 'true' only pushes the question back a step: is it appropriate in that context to translate using 'true', and why? The minimal characterization of truth provides the correct answer: if the authors of the texts are *doing* the same things we are doing when we use 'true', then it is appropriate to use 'true' to translate the words that perform those same actions.

2. Alethic phenomena in early China

We now offer an exploration of terms that satisfy to the greatest extent possible the conditions outlined above. We refer to these terms as *minimalist truth predicates*, or MTPs. Of course, we will not be able to offer a complete catalogue of all MTPs—much less all alethic phenomena—in early China. Instead, we will highlight several representative terms and their uses that meet the criteria outlined above. We will primarily focus on *ran* 然 ("so" or "the case"), *ke* 可 ("acceptable"), and *shi* 是 ("this" or "right"), but we will also offer the related terms *you zhi* 有之 ("it happened"), *dang* 當 ("fitting" or "hits the mark"), and *cheng* 誠 ("sincere") as additional terms that our methodology can shed light on.

2.1 *Ran* 然 ("the case", "so")

In general, *ran* 然 expresses some event or state of affairs as "so" or "being the case." For example, the early Chinese word for "spontaneity", an important term in Daoist philosophy, is *ziran* 自然, meaning, "so of

9. This is one way that our project differs from that of Brons 2016, which shares the general spirit of our account. For Brons, a piece of language counts as a truth predicate just in case it (a) plausibly expresses the concept TRUTH, (b) is attributable to truth-bearers, and (c) is disquotational. Our minimal characterization offers an answer as to what it is to satisfy (a).

10. Thanks to Casey McCoy for suggesting this point.

itself" or "being the case on its own". *Ran* also occasionally functions as an affirmative response to a question, as in the *Analects* when someone named Jie Ni asks Zilu if he is a student of Kongzi (Confucius), to which the latter responds "*ran*" or "yes". However, *ran* is also deployed in semantic contexts to affirm or reject an utterance, in turn functioning as an MTP, and we discuss a handful of representative cases in this section. Before continuing, however, we should say that scholars have already noticed *ran*'s affinities with truth in semantic contexts. Leong Wai Chun, for example, offers a detailed discussion of *ran* and truth, highlighting four features that it exhibits in alethic contexts: its application to linguistic units, its accordance with Tarski's "Convention T", its role in making generalizations, and how it enables speakers to justify, endorse, or reject doctrines (2015: 69). Other discussions of truth and Chinese philosophy also treat *ran* as perhaps the closest approximation of truth the Chinese tradition has to offer (Van Norden 2007: 372-373; Fraser 2020: 121-123). And even prior to philosophical scrutiny, some sinologists readily helped themselves to translating *ran* as "true" in a diverse array of early Chinese literary contexts (Harbsmeier 1998: 193-209; Roetz 1993).

While we agree with these scholars regarding *ran*'s proximity to truth, we also note that they form their conclusions without employing either the tripartite distinction or the minimalist characterization. For example, Leong claims that "[i]n English, the concept of truth has" four features (Leong 2015: 69), but the features he lists conflate linguistic behavior with logical and epistemological features of truth. (Nor is the *concept* of truth something that belongs to English.) This leads him to ascribe a substantive concept of truth to early Chinese thinkers, whereas we believe that these features only serve to identify truth predicates within ancient Chinese texts.¹¹ Similarly, Van Norden's approach to *ran* relies on a "logical" conception of truth according to which one has a

thin conception of truth "just in case they have a concept that adequately corresponds to 'true' in the following schema: 'S' is true if and only if S" (2007: 372). Again, this characterization seems to conflate truth predicates with truth concepts, and we are interested here in identifying the former rather than in offering accounts of the latter. In the remainder of the section, we will survey some distinctively alethic uses of *ran* in terms of the four criteria above from sections 1.1-1.4 in order to arrive at a characterization of *ran* that acknowledges its utility in alethic contexts without relying on theory-laden ascriptions to early Chinese thinkers.

In an illustrative example from the *Analects*, Kongzi uses *ran* to make an anaphoric, semantic endorsement of the words of one of his students, referred to simply as Yong. At the outset, Kongzi claims that someone named Zisan Bozi has a number of qualities that make him suitable for holding office. Yong replies with a modest suggestion and corrective to Kongzi's appraisal, to which the latter simply responds, "Yong's words are *ran*" (*Analects* 6:2).¹² In doing so, Kongzi anaphorically restates and semantically endorses Yong's words (*yan* 言) by means of the predicate *ran*, which addresses two of our four criteria. Furthermore, although he does not do so here, Kongzi *could* use this same formulation to express a general commitment to Yong's words, whatever they may be: that Yong's words are *ran* implies that for any $\langle p \rangle$ Yong expresses, p . Here, the scope of "Yong's words" is limited to the conversation in the passage, but with a broad enough interpretation of Yong's words, (e.g., those over the course of his adult life) the formulation would suffice as an example of generalization.

The *Mozi*, a text vehemently and self-consciously at odds with Confucianism, contains similar uses of *ran* where it is most naturally interpreted as a truth predicate enabling anaphoric, semantic endorsement of statements. However, in most examples of this usage Mozi is complaining that others consider his own statements to be untrue rather

11. More specifically, while we agree with Leong about some of the criteria he mentions, we make no claims about truth's justificatory or evaluative roles and have a different understanding of generalization than he does. See Leong 2015: 69.

12. References to the *Analects* follow the standard Chapter:Verse numbering. All translations in this paper are by the authors unless otherwise noted.

than utilizing *ran* to anaphorically endorse the claims of others.¹³ For example, upon claiming that society falls into disarray when political officials are not diligent in their duties, Mozi complains that “the gentlemen of the world consider my words to be not *ran*” (MZ 32/33-34).¹⁴ The “words” (*yan* 言) in question generalize over all of Mozi’s factual claims about the way the world is, which in turn offer reasons for his own preferred political reforms. Similarly, we find Mozi complaining that these same hypothetical opponents doubt his descriptions of ghosts, spirits, and ancient kings, leading off his rebuttal with, “If they consider it to be not *ran*...” (*ruo yi wei bu ran*), where “it” refers back to the description just given (MZ 63/11, 31/83, 31/77). In all such cases, *ran* identifies semantic evaluations by Mozi’s interlocutors, thereby engaging in anaphora, semantic endorsement (*qua* rejection), and generalization, three of the four features above.

Additional relevant uses appear in the *Mengzi* where interlocutors ask Mengzi to endorse or reject claims about a variety of topics, wherein Mengzi often responds that what was just said either is or is not *ran*. One notable example uses *ran* to not only anaphorically endorse a statement but also engage in semantic ascent. Jiao of Cao asks Mengzi: “Everybody is able to become a Yao or a Shun (i.e., a sage)—*you zhu* (is it so/true/the case)?” (6B/2).¹⁵ Mengzi replies, “*ran*”, thereby endorsing the claim that Jiao offers up for assessment without repeating it. What’s most interesting about this case is that “Everybody is able to become a Yao or a Shun”¹⁶ was a well-known Confucian slogan by this time,

and while there aren’t any quotation marks in the original text, the use of *you zhu* at the end indicates that the slogan in question is semantically isolated and therefore being offered up for semantic evaluation. By claiming that the slogan is *ran*, Mengzi commits himself to its content, namely, that anyone can become a Yao or a Shun, in turn semantically descending from a claim about language to a claim about the world. Jiao could easily have asked “Can everybody become a Yao or a Shun?”, to which the answer would be either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Instead, he asks Mengzi to semantically evaluate the slogan itself, and the proper response is therefore a semantic appraisal by means of *ran*.

The *Xunzi* also contains prominent usage of *ran* as a tool for rejecting statements in question by utilizing the construction, *shi bu ran* 是不然, or “This is not so”. This construction appears nowhere else in the early Chinese corpus (to our knowledge) but is well-suited to the context given the *Xunzi*’s unique style as a philosophical text, wherein Xunzi frequently attributes positions to opponents to which he then responds.¹⁷ In this way, Xunzi’s usage of *ran* resembles Mozi’s more than it does Mengzi’s, being employed as a tool to dispute claims by opponents. Perhaps the most famous of these examples occurs within the context of his disagreement with Mengzi over the goodness of human nature:

Mengzi says, “People who study—their nature is good”.

I respond, “This is not *ran*. This does not arrive at knowledge of human nature, nor does it appreciate the difference between human nature and artifice.” (XZ 23/10-11)¹⁸

In this example, the demonstrative “this” is used to refer back to Mengzi’s claim, which Xunzi deems to be not *ran* (Fraser 2020: 121, footnote 15). Xunzi then explains why Mengzi’s claim is false, owing to his failure to distinguish between human nature and artifice.

13. No doubt this is due largely to the different nature of the *Mozi* as a text compared to the *Analects*. While the latter trades in short dialogues and sayings from Kongzi, the former trades in extended argumentative essays often fielding challenges from “the gentlemen of the world”, the stand-in for the political elites whom Mozi believes to be responsible for society’s ills.

14. References to the *Mozi* follow the Harvard-Yenching concordance Book/Line numbers.

15. We briefly discuss treating *you zhu* as an MTP in section 2.5. Citations to the *Mengzi* follow the standard BookVersion/Chapter numbering system.

16. Yao and Shun were two legendary sage kings in early Chinese history that represented the apex of virtue. The slogan expresses the egalitarian view that everyone can become a sage.

17. A similar construction is found in the Han dynasty text *Lunheng* that treats a claim made by a hypothetical interlocutor as *bu ran*, though it uses the demonstrative *ci* instead of *shi*, both of which can mean “this”.

18. References to the *Xunzi* follow the Harvard-Yenching concordance Book/Line numbers.

Another use of *ran* as an MTP occurs in the ancient Chinese logical connective *ran ze*, which can be understood as “if so, then...”, “in that case...”, or simply “then...” In other words, it could be understood as “if that’s true, then...”. Early Chinese authors and speakers use this connective to facilitate inferences both in and out of dialogue contexts to identify and conditionally semantically endorse a prior claim as the antecedent of a conditional. Consider this usage in the *Mengzi*:

[Mengzi asked King Xuan of Qi,] “If the people of Zou were to go to war with the people of Chu, who do you believe would be victorious?”

Xuan said, “The people of Chu would be victorious.”

Mengzi said, “If that’s true (*ran ze*), then the small surely cannot conquer the large, the weak surely cannot conquer the strong...”

(1A/7)

Mengzi is here essentially supposing that what Xuan said is true—that Chu would win in a war, being the larger of the two states in this hypothetical conflict—and then inferring a general principle about the strength of a state and its performance in a war based on the hypothetical truth of Xuan’s assessment.

The construction also helpfully occurs outside of dialogues, where the anaphora appears within the context of expressing a complex thought by a single thinker rather than in the context of a discussion. Consider two examples, the first from the *Liji*, an ancient manual on ritual conduct:

Regarding the ritual interactions between driver and rider [of a carriage], the driver must hand the strap (to the person mounting the carriage). If the driver’s rank is lower than the rider’s, then the rider receives it. If not (*bu ran ze*), then he should not do so. If the driver is of the lower rank, the rider should [still] lay his own hand on the driver’s [as if to stop him]. If not (*bu ran ze*), [and the driver will insist on handing it to the rider], the other should take hold of the strap below [the driver’s hand]. (*Liji* “Qu Li,” Section

76)

In this example, *ran* is used anaphorically in two separate instances as part of the antecedent of a conditional prescription about the ritual interaction between a carriage driver and rider. It functions here as an expressive device used in lieu of repeating the antecedent of the previous conditional before negating it, facilitating word economy in the text. The authors very well could have repeated the antecedent again before negating it (e.g., “If the driver’s rank is *not* lower than the rider’s...”) but instead, the authors use *ran* to refer to the original statement anaphorically before then negating it. Modern readers may not be all that interested in the particulars of this ritual, but they should nevertheless be able to see what *ran* is doing here as an alethic expressive device.

All these examples and many more demonstrate *ran*’s ability to facilitate alethic phenomena as an MTP. Furthermore, we need not posit any comprehensive theory of early Chinese language, philosophy, or psychology in order to see it, nor must we rely on strong assumptions about the fundamentality of truth to intellectual projects. Rather, we have instead identified a core set of alethic roles *ran* plays that can serve as grounds for further theorizing.

2.2 Ke 可 (“acceptable”, “possible”)

Ke 可 is a modal term most often translated as “acceptable” or “possible.” Its modality ranges from the sense of permission or pragmatic acceptability all the way to metaphysical possibility, logical consistency, and indeed semantic endorsement. However, most often the sense of endorsement expressed by *ke* is not semantic. For example, to the question “Is it acceptable (*ke*) for a minister to kill his ruler?” (*Mengzi* 2B/8) the appropriate response would be *ke* or *bu-ke*—it’s acceptable or isn’t it—where *ke* offers a normative endorsement of the act in question (regicide). Similarly, a famous line from the *Analects* tells us that “One who does not depart from their father’s Way for three years [after his death] can be (*ke*) called filial,” (*Analects* 1:11) where *ke* signals the appropriateness—in whatever sense of ‘appropriate’—of applying the

term “filial” to someone who fits that description. In such cases, *ke* is used to question, reject, or endorse the acts, events, labels, or persons in question, but it does not seem to be functioning in the alethic sense that our methodology tracks.

In some cases, however, *ke* is used in alethic contexts to anaphorically, semantically endorse statements. Consider the following exchange between Kongzi and Laozi from the *Zhuangzi* anthology:

Kongzi did not come out of his house for three months before returning to see Laozi. He then said, “I’ve got it! Birds and magpies grow from eggs, fish from suds, wasps from chrysalises. When a younger brother is born, the elder brother weeps. For how long have I failed to go along with the transformation of things! And if I do not go along with the transformation of things, how could I expect to transform (i.e., morally reform) others!” Laozi said, “*Ke*. You’ve got it”. (ZZ 14/80-82)¹⁹

Here, Laozi uses *ke* to endorse all of Kongzi’s statements anaphorically. Laozi may have nodded in assent, given Kongzi a thumbs-up, or simply said “True!” or “*ran!*” but instead used *ke* to accomplish the very same thing.

In another fascinating example, *ke* also enables Mengzi to engage in semantic ascent and descent. In the following paragraph, Mengzi considers two claims quoted from a rival thinker, Gaozi. Mengzi claims that one claim is *ke* while the other is not:

[Mengzi says:] “Gaozi says, ‘What cannot be ascertained in words, do not seek in the mind. What cannot be ascertained by the mind, do not seek in your *qi*.’ ‘What cannot be ascertained by the mind, do not seek in your *qi*’ is *ke*. ‘What cannot be ascertained in words, do not seek in the mind’ is not *ke*...”. (MC 2A/2)

In the passage, Mengzi is discussing the relationship between the heart-

19. References to the *Zhuangzi* follow the Harvard-Yenching concordance Book/Line numbers.

mind (*xin* 心) and the *qi* 氣 or “vital force” of a person. To the uninitiated, Mengzi’s claim and subsequent explanation is a bit mysterious, but this is no obstacle to our understanding of *ke* as an MTP. Mengzi clearly endorses one statement and rejects the other, and he uses *ke* to do so. Further, by reproducing each statement and appraising them directly, Mengzi invites us to engage in semantic descent: If “What cannot be ascertained by the mind, do not seek in your *qi*” is *ke*, then we shouldn’t seek in our *qi* what cannot be ascertained by the mind.

One final alethic use of *ke* appears in the Later Mohist *Canons* from the *Mozi*. Here, the Mohists are explaining their response to the sophism “All language is perverse (*bei* 諄)”, which they claim is itself perverse. They argue as follows:

What’s perverse is not *ke*. If his words [that all language is perverse] are *ke* and this is not perverse, then he deems that some language is *ke*. If what he says is not *ke*, then to deem it fitting (*dang* 當) is surely unscrupulous. (MZ B71; Graham 2003: 445)

Here, the Mohists present those who believe that all language is perverse with a dilemma. On the one hand, someone who deems “all language is perverse” to be *ke* is committed to that statement not being perverse, since whatever is perverse is not *ke*, as the Mohists stipulate. On the other hand, if they consider “all language is perverse” to be not *ke*, then they are not really committed to it being a “fitting” (*dang* 當) statement. We will say more about *dang* below, but the point here is just that in spite of their terseness, the Mohists are clearly using *ke* to express anaphoric, semantic endorsement and rejection. As this and the preceding examples show, *ke* indeed has the capacity to function as an MTP at least on a part-time basis within the context of early Chinese linguistic evaluations.

2.3 Shi 是 (“right”) and fei 非 (“wrong”)

It would be remiss of us to fail to mention one of the most ubiquitous evaluative terms in ancient Chinese philosophy of language in this discussion: *shi* 是, “this” or “right”. In early Chinese philosophical writings,

shi and its opposite, *fei* 非 (“not-this” or “wrong”), serve as fundamental evaluative attitudes by which early Chinese thinkers distinguish things from one another and establish kind membership, with *shi* 是 being an attitude of endorsement and *fei* 非 being an attitude of rejection.²⁰ To *shi* something, or to deem it *shi*, is to accept it as a member of a kind (*lei* 類), being most generally rendered as “this” or “like this.” For example, Mengzi says, “The sage is the teacher of a hundred generations. Bo Yi and Hui of Liu Xia are like this (是 *shi*),” where *shi* here indicates membership of Bo Yi and Hui of Liu Xia among the sages (7B/15). Additionally, there is a more general, normative sense of *shi* as conduct or speech being right in an ethical sense, such as in the *Mengzi* where Mengzi has his conduct questioned regarding various gifts he was offered. The student, Chen Zhen, poses a dilemma to Mengzi, that if his conduct was ethically right (*shi*) in one case, then it must have been wrong (*fei*) in the other case, or vice versa (2B/3). Furthermore, the *Mozi* writes of Mozi rejecting (*fei*) the doctrine that “fate exists” (*you ming* 有命), on the grounds that those who believe that fate exists do great harm to all under Heaven.

Much ink has been spilled over this last example, and to a lesser extent the first and others like it, regarding the precise sense of “rejection” and “endorsement”, respectively. Why not just write for the first example, as James Legge did in his translation, that sages being teachers of a hundred generations “is true of Bo Yi and Hui of Liu Xia”? Similarly, why not just say that Mozi believes that “Fate exists” is false? This way of approaching the issue, that is, by analyzing the properties of *shi* and *fei* and identifying the sense of endorsement implied therein, has shaped the discussion between scholars such as Hansen, Van Norden, Fraser, and McLeod, about the precise sense of endorsement implied by *shi* and

fei, specifically in the context of Mohist epistemology.²¹ Our chief worry with this method is that it puts the cart before the horse in terms of truth. These approaches focus on analyzing the properties of *shi* and *fei* in theoretical contexts in order to determine if that property overlaps with some contemporary conception of the *property* of truth, without due consideration to whether or not *shi* and *fei* ever function as truth predicates. We propose the reverse approach: first, look to everyday uses of *shi* and *fei* to see if the terms function as MTPs. Then, we can offer fuller analyses of the metaphysical or conceptual implications of those terms. This approach neither presupposes nor commits early Chinese thinkers to a substantive truth property via *shi* and *fei*. Rather, it identifies *shi* and *fei* as MTPs, and then looks to the broader use of *shi* and *fei* to help us to understand *why* these terms might have eventually functioned as MTPs.

As it turns out, decisive uses of *shi* and *fei* that meet the MTP criteria are uncommon but not entirely absent in the corpus. Perhaps the clearest use of *shi* as an MTP appears in the *Analects*, where yet again a student attempts to correct Kongzi, or at least question how what he just said squares with something else he said previously, to which Kongzi responds, “My disciples, Yan’s words are *shi*. My previous words were in jest” (*Analects* 17:4). This example clearly meets the standard of anaphoric, semantic endorsement. Another excellent example featuring *fei* also comes from the *Analects*, where it is featured alongside *ran*:

The Master Said, “Ci, you consider me to be one who studies many things and thereby understands them?” The response was, “Indeed (*ran*). Is it *fei*?” Kongzi said, “It is *fei*. A single thread goes through it all”. (*Analects* 15:3)

20. The characterization here largely follows the work of Fraser (especially 2011: 133).

21. Hansen argues that the sense of endorsement throughout all early Chinese thought is thoroughly pragmatic rather than semantic, including in uses of *shi* and *fei*. By contrast, Van Norden, (2007: 159-161) and McLeod (2016, chapter 3) regard the Mohists’ Three Standards, which are the grounds for making *shi* and *fei* assessments of doctrines, as indicators of truth. Conversely, Fraser argues that “The correctness of *yán*—its status as *shì* (right) or *fěi* (wrong)—thus rests as much or more on successful consequences in guiding action as on factual accuracy. Accuracy of representation is at most only a partial criterion for correctness” (2021: 61).

Here, the use of *fei* is clearly semantic because it refers to Ci's belief, not the fact that Ci *has* the belief. When Ci says *ran*, he expresses agreement with Kongzi's impression of his belief, saying in effect, "Yes, indeed, I do believe that." But the *fei* he follows up with refers to the content of the belief, in effect asking, "is it not the case?" or "is my belief false?", where "it" is the *content* of the belief. Kongzi then confirms that the content of his belief is indeed false by repeating *fei* and clarifying his approach to learning.

Thus, we can bypass much of the debate over whether or not all of the (perhaps several) concepts and properties associated with *shi* and *fei* overlap with contemporary notions of truth. What matters for our purposes is that because we find *shi* and *fei* at least sometimes used to express semantic, anaphoric endorsement, they sometimes function as MTPs, and so sometimes express TRUTH. It is therefore unsurprising that other properties of *shi* and *fei* may include elements we would expect to find when talking about truth properties. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that these uses of *shi* and *fei* as MTPs are rare, as they are not typically applied to truth-bearers and the sense of rejection is not often exclusively semantic.

2.4 Honorable mention: You zhi/you zhu 有之/有諸 ("to be"/"exist")

The compound term *you zhi* 有之 also appears in alethic contexts and appears to function as an MTP, though its usage is quite limited. The word *you* means in such contexts "to be" or "to exist," while *zhi* is a pronoun. Combined, they typically mean something like "it happened" or "it exists," but in a number of cases—such as in that of wondering if everybody can be a Yao or a Shun above—the most natural reading is as asking for the endorsement or rejection of the semantically isolated statement in question. In effect, it is asking: true or false? When it appears in questions like those mentioned above in the *Mengzi*, to which *ran* or *bu ran*²² was the answer, it appears as a contraction of a longer

phrase, *you zhi hu* 有之乎, where *hu* is a question particle added on to *you zhi* (Pulleyblank 1995: 41). There are many examples throughout the early Chinese corpus of *you zhu* functioning in such alethic contexts, and quite often the response to questions containing it is a restatement of *you zhi*. For example, in the *Zhangguo Ce*, a historical text from the Han dynasty, an interlocutor says, "I have heard that your majesty has received jade and horses from the state of Wei—is it so/did it happen/is it true (*you zhu*)?" to which the king replies, "*you zhi*" (*Zhangguo ce*, "Qin Ce", Section 5.8). This is clearly an anaphoric endorsement of the claim that the interlocutor has heard and brought up for endorsement or rejection. The term is not nearly as widely utilized as *ke* or *ran*—in alethic contexts or otherwise—and so there is no guarantee of examples of it being used in ways that fully satisfy all of the four conditions above, but even these limited examples in *Mengzi* and the *Zhangguo Ce* indicate its utility in alethic contexts.

2.5 Honorable mention: Dang 當 ("fitting")

Another term worth mentioning is *dang* 當, or "fitting." This term has interested scholars in the debate over truth in ancient Chinese philosophy primarily because of its fascinating appearance in the Later Mohist *Canons* where it can be plausibly interpreted as referring to a property of correspondence between language and the world. Indeed, outside of the *Canons*, the term is often used to describe the "fittingness" of one's conduct, either in general or in the context of conforming to a particular norm (Fraser 2020: 120-121). In the Mohist *Canons*, however, it is used to refer to the "fittingness" of predications or statements. For example, in the Mohists' explanation of *bian* 辯 ("disputation"), they declare that the winner of a disputation is the one who makes the "fitting" claim.²³ As we saw above, the Mohists suggest that people committed to a statement being *ke* should also be committed to it being *dang*, meaning that

22. Another common antonym for *ran* is *fou* 否, which can be used interchangeably with *bu ran*.

23. There is some ambiguity regarding whether the subject of "fitting" here is a statement, i.e., truth-bearer, that "fits" reality or a name that "fits" an object. See Saunders 2014 and McLeod 2016: 73-74.

to endorse a claim implies a commitment to it being “fitting” in the right sort of way (perhaps “fitting the fact” as Graham (2003: 445) suggests). Additionally, the text refers to “the *dang* of one’s statements” (MZ A14; Fraser 2020: 120), which suggests that *dang* for the Mohists might be a substantive semantic property that could be developed via a theory of truth.

In spite of these fascinating possibilities, MTPs on our understanding first and foremost play expressive roles that enable speakers and writers of a natural language to engage in the alethic activities we identified in section 1. However, in the Mohist *Canons*, *dang* instead seems to be an example of a word that denotes a correspondence property between language and the world, which is precisely why it has been of such interest to scholars in this debate (who have tended to focus on the more *theoretical* aspects of thinking that involves truth). For example, both Fraser and McLeod end up arguing that *dang* does express the concept of truth on the basis of its usage in the later Mohist *Canons*, but neither are able to offer examples of *dang* functioning as a minimalist truth predicate either in the *Canons* or elsewhere in early Chinese writings. In other words, it seems that *dang* may express a candidate truth property without functioning as a truth predicate in the broader context of early Chinese language and thought.²⁴

2.6 Honorable mention: Cheng 誠 (“sincere”, “trustworthy”)

Our final honorable mention is *cheng* (誠), which usually means “sincere” or “trustworthy.” The term is featured prominently in the Confucian classics the *Da Xue* and *Zhong Yong*, where it is treated as an important virtue referring to a correspondence between one’s inner character and outward manifestations of goodness. *Cheng* guarantees that one’s worthy deeds are reflections of good intentions and are not merely used to disguise bad intentions (*Da Xue*, Ch. 3). It also acts as an adverb

24. Similarly, ‘truth’ in English is not an MTP; it’s a noun. One hypothesis here is that when a predicate “morphs” into a subject term, it becomes a more tempting object of study in its own right.

to emphasize authenticity, that something is “indeed”, “genuinely”, or “truly” the case, such as when Yin Shi in the *Mengzi* exclaims of himself that he “indeed (*cheng* 誠) is a petty person” (2B/12).

In some rare instances also, *cheng* serves as a predicate for truth-bearers that satisfies the MTP criteria. One example, noticed by Christoph Harbsmeier, appears in the *Da Dai Li Ji*, where Kongzi claims that a student is not fit for office. The student replies, “That I am not good enough is genuinely so (*cheng ye*)” (Harbsmeier 1989: 134). In the *Analects*, we also find Kongzi making a claim about effective government and then following up with “this saying (*yan*) is indeed *cheng*!” or, as Legge translates it, “True indeed is this saying!” (13:11). We shouldn’t be surprised to find a term that expresses both the virtue of sincerity and an adverb signalling authenticity or genuineness functioning as a truth predicate. What is more surprising is how infrequently it is used as an MTP in comparison to its far more common non-alethic uses.

3. Analysis and dialectical significance

This survey of MTPs leads us to at least the following four conclusions of interest:

1. There are at least three MTPs operating in ancient Chinese texts: *ran*, *ke*, and *you zhi/you zhu*.
2. None of these MTPs functions exclusively as an MTP; rather, they do so on a part-time basis such that other uses of them are not capturing any alethic phenomena.
3. There is one term, *dang*, which might be used to express the notion of truth while *not* ever functioning as an MTP.
4. Conceptual analyses and theories of MTPs are, at best, rare.

In this section, we turn to the implications that these findings about MTPs in ancient Chinese texts have for the concept and property of truth, as well as their relevance to the ongoing dialectic over the role of truth in ancient Chinese philosophy.

First, our study has found that early Chinese writers indeed had the

concept TRUTH.²⁵ According to the minimal characterization of truth, a sufficient condition for possessing TRUTH is to have the cognitive capacities for referring to, generalizing over, and endorsing or rejecting semantic contents. One manifests their possession of the concept by engaging in these sorts of cognitive activities. To have the concept, of course, is not to hold a theory *about* the concept, or to take a stand on the nature of the phenomena associated with it. Hence, because early Chinese language writers utilized MTPs, it is appropriate to attribute possession of TRUTH to the thinkers of the ancient Chinese philosophical tradition. In fact, we have seen that there are *multiple* MTPs in ancient Chinese writings. Ancient Chinese is, therefore, similar to contemporary English in this respect.²⁶ Expressions such as ‘is the case’, ‘is so’, and ‘right’ can, like ‘is true’, serve as MTPs. If you tell someone it’s raining outside, they can express agreement with you not only by saying ‘That’s true’, but also by saying ‘That is the case’ or ‘That’s so’. It is perhaps unsurprising that a natural language would have multiple MTPs, given how basic and useful the functions are that MTPs enable. Similarly, *ran*, *ke*, *you zhi*, and perhaps others play similar roles and, thereby, express TRUTH.

We should not, however, infer from ancient Chinese philosophy’s multiple MTPs that ancient Chinese thinkers were operating with multiple *concepts* of truth.²⁷ Similarly, we need not multiply “truth concepts” in our own minds simply because English has multiple MTPs. Regardless of whether we express our agreement with what has just been said

by saying ‘That’s true’ or ‘That’s so’, we are deploying TRUTH. Of course, in this paper *we* are using ‘TRUTH’ to refer to that concept rather than ‘so’, but this is simply a linguistic choice that reflects the fact that philosophical discussion of that concept—the concept that allows us to refer to, generalize over, and endorse or reject semantic contents—refers to it with ‘TRUTH’. Thus, we conclude that each of *ran*, *ke*, and *you zhi/you zhu* can be used to express TRUTH, but that this multiplicity offers no reason to believe in a multiplicity of truth concepts in ancient Chinese thinking.²⁸

It should also come as no surprise that the early Chinese MTPs we have identified are extensively utilized in non-alethic contexts, since contemporary English MTPs exhibit similar polysemy. Even ‘true’ is a part-time MTP, as when we use it as a synonym for ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ (e.g., “Sunny Jim was a true friend when he found that certified true copy of my birth certificate for me”). So ‘true’, like *ran*, *ke*, and *you zhi/you zhu*, sometimes expresses TRUTH and sometimes expresses something else.²⁹ Whether the range of concepts that we can use ‘true’ to express matches the range of concepts that *ran*, *ke*, and *you zhi/you zhu* can express is a further question worth exploring.

Our study reveals that the most basic alethic phenomena—the practice of referring to, generalizing over, and endorsing or rejecting semantic contents—were alive and well in early Chinese thought. But do other

25. Note that this conclusion is arrived at via our minimal characterization, and not by way of the premise that Brons uses, that TRUTH possession is nothing above “understanding that there is a difference between what is the case and what is not” (2016: 277).

26. And, for that matter, contemporary Chinese, with phrases like “*shi de*” 是的 and “*dui*” 對 often serving as “right” and “correct” interchangeably in semantic evaluations.

27. See Wyatt 2018 on the empirical issues involved with conceptual pluralism about truth. McLeod (2011) argues that what we have identified as MTPs express multiple *properties* in different contexts in ancient Chinese texts. We think that words express concepts rather than properties (though they may *refer* to the latter), so we are unclear whether McLeod is committed to conceptual pluralism about truth for ancient Chinese philosophy.

28. To clarify, we’re not arguing that *ran* expresses RAN, *ke* expresses KE, and *you zhi/you zhu* expresses YOU ZHI/YOU ZHI, and then concluding that there are three different “truth concepts” in ancient Chinese philosophy. We are theorizing in English, and so are not using the terms ‘RAN’, ‘KE’, and ‘YOU ZHI’/‘YOU ZHI’ at all. Nor are we assuming any sort of one-one correspondence between words and concepts; quite to the contrary.

29. One might object: why does ‘true’ express TRUTH when it functions, say, as a device for endorsement, but not when we call a friend or a bicycle wheel true? The answer is that ‘TRUTH’ is a label for picking out a particular concept that has long been of interest to philosophers, and our interlocutors in particular. *That concept* and the phenomena associated with it is what the whole debate is about, irrespective of how we label it. If philosophers concerned with the nature of the straightness of bicycle wheels claim that they are the ones really concerned with “the concept of truth”, then they are merely fighting over a word.

alethic phenomena emerge in ancient Chinese texts? Do we find any investigation into the conceptual or metaphysical phenomena of truth? The presence of *dang* appearing as a substantive indicates the possible existence of further alethic phenomena, namely, concern for the property of truth as such. It's easy to imagine a natural progression from the first set of alethic phenomena to the second. Initially, we refer to others' particular statements that we agree with as being true. Then we reflect: what is it, in general, for something to be true? Now we are interested in the property *truth*, that feature (if any) common to all and only true things. Importantly, we need not use an MTP to refer to that property; the word chosen to refer to it may instead reveal one's theoretical ideas about it. If what makes statements true is their "fittingness", then *dang* is appropriate (just as 'correspondence' might be an appropriate word in English for referring to *truth*).

Despite some interest in *dang*, there does not appear to be much *theorizing* about truth as such in early Chinese philosophy.³⁰ This is the case, even though there is plenty of deployment of *TRUTH*, as revealed by the frequent use of MTPs. Granted, some philosophical projects in ancient China have been interpreted as examples of truth theorizing, most prominently the Mohists' Three Tests and the Confucian doctrine of the "rectification of names" *zheng ming* 正名, but both have invited equally if not more plausible non-alethic interpretations.³¹ If we want to address the question 'What theory of truth were ancient Chinese philosophers

committed to?', as McLeod (2016) and Mou (2018) do, then one answer worth investigating further is that the majority were *implicit* deflationists. This suggestion is raised by Brons (2016: 285). According to the narrative pushed by deflationists about truth, Western philosophy took a wrong turn when it attempted to offer a metaphysical story about the property of truth. For deflationists, the full story about truth is told, in effect, by the MTPs. There's nothing more to something being true (or *ran* or *ke*) than whatever it is that that something says. If so, then ancient Chinese thinkers were correct not to metaphysically theorize about the nature of truth. As Brons notes, that wouldn't establish that ancient Chinese philosophers really were deflationists about truth. Still, if this perspective is correct, deflationists can look to pre-Han Chinese philosophy as an example of a philosophical tradition that, to its credit, managed not to offer an overinflated account of truth.

How, then, do we understand existing scholarship on truth and Chinese philosophy? What do we make of McLeod's and Mou's theories of truth in early China, or Hansen's, or Hall and Ames's (1997) pragmatist reading of the tradition? In short, we hold that these approaches offer warped interpretations of early Chinese thought by ignoring the basic alethic behaviors that early Chinese writings exhibit via MTPs. They focus on areas of Chinese philosophy where philosophers expect to find *theoretical* truth talk—e.g., early Chinese philosophy of language—and derive their conclusions from the ideas therein. (Remember that "truth talk" is ubiquitous in ordinary, non-philosophical language.) For example, Hansen argues that there is no truth in early Chinese philosophy on the grounds that early Chinese thinkers are much more interested in making pragmatic assessments of language and on matching individual names to their corresponding objects rather than on establishing a correspondence relation between truth-bearers like beliefs and propositions and reality as a whole (Hansen 1985: 495-496). Early Chinese thinkers construed the correct use of language as an extension of the Way, and thus as a highly ritualized, normative aspect of life answerable to user-to-user norms rather than to a particular conception of reality. There is indeed much to be said about this interpretation, but we would only

30. Although we have been focusing on Chinese philosophy during the Warring States period, we should mention that Han dynasty astronomer and philosopher Wang Chong (c. 27-97 AD) discussed the concept of *shi* 實 in a way that can be interpreted as theorizing about a truth property. But just as in the case of *dang*, *shi* is not often (if ever) used colloquially as an MTP. See McLeod 2011 for a pluralist interpretation of *shi* in Wang Chong and the critical response by Brons 2015b.

31. For example, regarding the Three Tests, Loy (2008) convincingly argues that they are better interpreted as justification methods rather than as a theory of truth; Brons (2016: 284) arrives at a similar conclusion. In the same vein, while the Confucian doctrine of the rectification of names might invite alethic interpretations (e.g., Ryan 2023), most scholars agree that the overwhelming emphasis of the project is ethical and pragmatic. See Fraser 2023 and Mattice 2010 for instructive examples.

like to point out that none of it precludes early Chinese thinkers from engaging in the basic alethic behaviors via MTPs that we have identified. Hansen's mistake lies in taking a genuine insight about philosophical interests and emphases in early Chinese philosophy and turning it into a psycholinguistic claim about all early Chinese language users. But if we acknowledge the basic alethic phenomena in early China expressed via MTPs, we can both preserve the former insight and rule out the latter error.

Furthermore, ignoring alethic phenomena in early Chinese writings might make us *more* eager to account for truth in early Chinese philosophy, leading in turn to unwieldy interpretations of Chinese philosophers and awkward accounts of what counts as a theory of truth. For example, McLeod acknowledges that the theory of truth he ascribes to Xunzi is "for the most part not explicitly discussed in the *Xunzi*, [but] can be reconstructed here on the basis of a number of connected concepts, arguments, and claims of the text" (2016: 85). And indeed, McLeod discusses several Xunzian themes explored by interpreters regarding the nature of the Way, the role of the sage kings in establishing the names of things, and the regularity of human perceptions in establishing language use in line with mind-independent reality. But none of this commits Xunzi to a particular theory of truth, much less constitutes one. Nevertheless, Xunzi indeed has TRUTH as he regularly utilizes MTPs to engage in alethic behaviors, and we need not frame the projects of early Chinese thinkers in terms of truth in order to see this. Rather, if we acknowledge truth in the tradition where it actually appears via MTPs, we need not insert it into contexts where it doesn't, and we can better appreciate their philosophy of language without worrying about how it relates to truth.

One common theme that has emerged here is how similar ancient Chinese thought and language is to contemporary thought and language with respect to alethic language and alethic phenomena. Like English and contemporary Chinese, ancient Chinese employs a handful of MTPs to engage in basic alethic behaviors. And like most English speakers (except for philosophers), early Chinese language users did not find

these MTPs at all mysterious, nor did they seem especially concerned about offering an account of the properties they might refer to. Our findings, therefore, have the benefit of explaining a substantial difference between early Chinese and contemporary Western philosophy without running the risk of interpreting early Chinese thinkers as homogeneous 'Others' who employ wildly different conceptual schemes than those developed in the West.³² There's no doubt that early Chinese thinkers had different philosophical priorities than those of ancient Greece or modern Europe, and it's entirely possible that they did not care much about truth theorizing in spite of its historical importance in Western philosophical traditions. However, this does not imply that they could not engage in basic alethic functions, nor does it justify a radical rethinking of truth theorizing to accommodate all of early Chinese philosophy of language. Truth *qua* MTPs in early China is largely unmysterious, and this does not at all inhibit us from appreciating their fascinating and diverse theories about the relationships between mind, language, and the world.

Conclusion

Our study has focused on the role of truth in ancient Chinese philosophy, but the methodology we have offered can be applied far more widely. The minimal characterization of truth is a tool that can be deployed across comparative philosophy in order to assess how alethic phenomena arise in other philosophical traditions—past or contemporary. And, of course, there is no reason why minimal characterizations of other notions of philosophical interest couldn't similarly be harnessed for parallel purposes. We thus believe that we have identified a produc-

32. Both Van Norden (2007) and McLeod (2016) have echoed this sort of concern regarding truth-skeptical interpretations of ancient Chinese thought. We have in mind here the "myth of the Other" as a general Western interpretation of Chinese civilization criticized at length in Zhang 1988. (See also Brown 2006 for an excellent discussion of the tension between "Othering" and "psychological unity" in twentieth century anthropology with a focus on Chinese studies.) For a detailed analysis of "Othering" beyond the context of Chinese studies, see Brons 2015a.

tive methodological tool for comparative philosophy in general.

Recently, philosophers have taken an interest in the cross-linguistic study of truth. Witness Wyatt's (2018) remarks on the differences between English and Akan speakers when it comes to their notions of truth, and Mizumoto's (2022) study of the differences between truth predicates in English and Japanese. We see the method of minimal characterization as capable of playing a crucial and necessary role in these investigations. Wyatt, for example, takes Akan speakers' judgments of certain alethic platitudes as evidence of *interlinguistic pluralism*, the thesis that Akan speakers and English speakers possess distinct truth concepts. Likewise, Mizumoto takes the empirical data he has collected as evidence of conceptual pluralism about truth. Whether these are in fact the right conclusions to draw heavily depends upon how alethic phenomena are identified in other languages. Focusing on the minimal characterization of truth enables us to resist the temptation to pack too much content into what it is for the members of a linguistic community to possess an alethic concept. As we have argued, the key to identifying the concept of truth in a linguistic community is fundamentally a matter of identifying a variety of linguistic functions. Crucially, such functions need to be distinguished from the various theoretical views about truth that might come to accompany our thoughts about truth (or not, as the case of much of ancient Chinese philosophy demonstrates). Accordingly, the minimal methodology we have presented here is the perfect tool for offering a sober assessment of where alethic phenomena are found. There are indeed important differences to be found between various philosophical traditions. But there are also crucial similarities, and minimal characterizations are an indispensable tool for identifying them.

References

- Asay, Jamin. 2013. *The Primitivist Theory of Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brandom, Robert B. 1994. *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Brons, Lajos. 2015a. Othering, an analysis. *Transcience: A Journal of Global Studies* 6(1): 69-90.
- . 2015b. Wang Chong, truth, and quasi-pluralism. *Comparative Philosophy* 6(1): 129-148.
- . 2016. Recognizing 'truth' in Chinese philosophy. *Logos and Episteme* 7(3): 273-286.
- Brown, Miranda. 2006. Neither 'primitives' nor 'others,' but somehow not quite like 'us': the fortunes of psychic unity and essentialism in Chinese studies. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 49(2): 219-252.
- Carroll, Lewis. 1965a. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. New York: Random House.
- . 1965b. *Through the Looking-Glass. And What Alice Found There*. New York: Random House.
- Fraser, Chris. 2011. Knowledge and error in early Chinese thought. *Dao* 10(2): 127-148.
- . 2012. Truth in Moist dialectics. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39(3): 351-368.
- . 2020. Truth in Pre-Han thought. In *The Dao Companion to Chinese Philosophy of Logic*, ed. Yiu-ming Fung, 113-128. Cham: Springer.
- . 2021. Representation in early Chinese philosophy of language. *Philosophy East and West* 71(1): 57-78.
- . 2023. Truth and the way in Xúnzǐ. *Asian Journal of Philosophy* 2(1): 1-17.
- Graham, A. C. 1989. *Disputers of the Tao*. Chicago: Open Court.
- . 2003. *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Greenough, Patrick. 2003. Vagueness: a minimal theory. *Mind* 112(446): 235-281.
- Hall, David, and Roger Ames. 1997. *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Hansen, Chad. 1985. Chinese language, Chinese philosophy, and 'truth'. *Journal of Asian Studies* 44(3): 491-519.
- . 1992. *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought: A Philosophical Interpretation*.

- Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Harbsmeier, Christoph. 1989. Marginalia Sino-logica. In *Understanding the Chinese Mind: The Philosophical Roots*, ed. Robert E. Allinson, 125-166. Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- . 1998. *Science and Civilisation in China Volume 7, Part 1, Language and Logic*. Ed. Kenneth Robinson. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Horwich, Paul. 1998. *Truth*. Second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leong, Wai Chun. 2015. The semantic concept of truth in pre-Han Chinese philosophy. *Dao* 14(1): 55-74.
- Loy, Hui-Chieh. 2008. Justification and debate: thoughts on Moist moral epistemology. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35(3): 455-471.
- Lynch, Michael P. 2009. *Truth as One and Many*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Mattice, Sarah. 2010. On 'rectifying' rectification: reconsidering Zhengming in light of Confucian role ethics. *Asian Philosophy* 20(3): 247-260.
- McLeod, Alexus. 2011. Pluralism about truth in early Chinese philosophy: a reflection on Wang Chong's approach. *Comparative Philosophy* 2(1): 38-60.
- . 2016. *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy: A Comparative Approach*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Mizumoto, Masaharu. 2022. A prolegomenon to the empirical cross-linguistic study of truth. *Theoria* 88(6): 1248-1273.
- Mou, Bo. 2018. *Semantic-Truth Approaches in Chinese Philosophy: A Unifying Pluralist Account*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Mozi Yinde (*A Concordance to Mo Tzu*). 1948. Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 21, ed. William Hung. Beijing: Yenching University.
- Munro, Donald J. 1969. *The Concept of Man in Early China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1995. *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*. Vancouver: UBC Press.
- Rasmussen, Joshua. 2014. *Defending the Correspondence Theory of Truth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roetz, Heiner. 1993. Validity in Chou thought: on Chad Hansen and the pragmatic turn in Sinology. In *Epistemological Issues in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, eds. Hans Lenk and Gregor Paul, 69-112. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Ryan, Liam D. 2023. Let the ruler be the ruler: aiming at truth in Xunzi's doctrine of the rectification of names. *Asian Journal of Philosophy* 2(2): 1-19.
- Saunders, Frank, Jr. 2014. Semantics without truth in later Mohist philosophy of language. *Dao* 13(2): 215-229.
- . 2022. Truth and Chinese philosophy: a plea for pluralism. *Dao*. 2(1): 1-18.
- Tarski, Alfred. 1956. The concept of truth in formalized language. In his *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics: Papers From 1923 to 1938*, trans. J. H. Woodger, 152-278. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Taylor, David E. 2018. A minimal characterization of indeterminacy. *Philosophers' Imprint* 18(5): 1-25.
- Van Norden, Bryan. 2007. *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wyatt, Jeremy. 2018. Truth in English and elsewhere: an empirically-informed functionalism. In *Pluralisms in Truth and Logic*, eds. Jeremy Wyatt, Nikolaj J. L. L. Pedersen, and Nathan Kellen, 169-196. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Xunzi zhu zi suo yin (*A Concordance to the Xunzi*). 1996. CUHK ICS The Ancient Chinese Texts Concordance Series, Philosophical works no. 26, eds. D.C. Lau, Ho Che Wah and Chen Fong Ching. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.
- Zhang, Longxi. 1988. The myth of the Other: China in the eyes of the West. *Critical Inquiry* 15(1): 108-131.
- Zhuangzi Yinde (*A Concordance to Chuang Tzu*). 1947. Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 20, ed. William Hung. Beijing: Yenching University.