RECOGNIZING 'TRUTH' IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT: The debate about truth in Chinese philosophy raises the methodological question How to recognize 'truth' in some non-Western tradition of thought? In case of Chinese philosophy it is commonly assumed that the dispute concerns a single question, but a distinction needs to be made between the property of *truth*, the concept of TRUTH, and the word ·truth·. The property of *truth* is what makes something true; the concept of TRUTH is our understanding of *truth*; and ·truth· is the word we use to express that understanding. Almost all human beings over the age of 2 have the concept of TRUTH, and therefore, the question whether some tradition has the concept of TRUTH is moot, but that doesn't imply that every language has a (single) word for ·truth·. Furthermore, recognizing ·truth· is complicated by the conceptual neighbors of TRUTH. What distinguishes ·truth· from its neighbors is disquotationality. Theories of *truth* similarly need to be distinguished from theories about adjacent notions. If a theory is more plausibly interpreted as a theory of *justification*, then it is not a theory of *truth*.

KEYWORDS: Chinese philosophy, comparative philosophy, concept of truth, theory of truth, truth

Introduction

Ever since Chad Hansen argued that (pre-Buddhist) "Chinese philosophy has no concept of truth,"[1] the role and nature of truth in ancient Chinese philosophy has been a hotly debate topic.[2] Much of this debate is plagued, however, by a confusion of terms, concepts, and theories of truth. Some of this confusion may be caused by Hansen's peculiar claim that "a concept is a role in a theory."[3] By that standard almost no one has a concept of truth, because – aside from a few philosophers – almost no one has a theory of truth. By that standard one may even doubt that Aristotle (and Plato) had a concept of truth as Aristotle's often quoted

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[1] Chad Hansen, "Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and 'Truth'," *Journal of Asian Studies* 44, 3 (1985): 492.

[2] For an introduction to and an overview of this debate, see: Alexus McLeod, *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), chapter 2. Alternatively, an easy way to get a list of contributions to this debate is to search for publications that refer to Hansen, "Chinese Language."

[3] Hansen, "Chinese Language," 504.

remark that "to say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true" hardly qualifies as a *theory* of truth.[4]

The debate about concepts and theories of truth in ancient Chinese philosophy raises a methodological question: How does one recognize a concept and/or theory of truth in a tradition of thought other than Western philosophy? In the aforementioned debate, this question is rarely addressed, and it has received even less attention from scholars working on/with other traditions of (philosophical) thought. It is this question that this paper aims to answer.

In the introduction of his book on primitivism about truth, Jamin Asay points out that it is "absolutely vital" to distinguish the property of *truth*, the concept of TRUTH, and the word 'truth.' The first is "that feature (if it exists) that all truths share and all falsities lack;" the second is "our mental understanding of that notion that we use the word 'truth' to pick out;" and the third is, of course, 'truth' itself, but also 'true,' "is true," and so forth.[5] To keep the three apart, Asay writes the property as *truth*, the concept as TRUTH, and the word as 'truth,' and I will adopt this convention, with one minor adaptation, to be explained shortly.

The distinction is not specific to Western thought about truth, but applies to ancient Chinese philosophy as much as it does to any philosophy of truth. Insufficient attention to the distinction is not typical of the debate on Chinese philosophy either: many Western 'theories of truth' are about both property and concept, often confusing the two, and Anna Wierzbicka and associates' research on semantic primitives (see next section), for example, is about both concepts and words. Plural 'words' in the latter case, as Wierzbicka's research is about many other languages than English, languages that do not have the word 'truth,' but that have other words with the same functional role in those languages. Similarly, in case of other languages (than English), such as classical Chinese, we are not interested in the question whether it had the word 'truth' (because the answer to that question would obviously be "No"), but – borrowing Wilfrid Sellars's notational device of *dot quotation* – in whether that language included ·truth·.[6] A word or expression is ·truth· (or ·true·) in some language if it is playing the role in that language that is played by 'truth' (or 'true') in English.

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[4] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1011b25. Plato made similar remarks in *Cratylus* 385b2 and *Sophist* 263b. See also section 3.

[5] Jamin Asay, *The Primitivist Theory of Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14.

[6] Wilfrid Sellars, "Abstract Entities," in *In the Space of Reasons*, ed. Kevin Scharp and Robert B. Brandom (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 163-205.

By implication of the foregoing, the following three questions are different questions that need to be kept apart and answered separately:

1)Does *x* have a theory about the property of *truth*?

2)Does *x* have the concept of TRUTH?

3)Does *x*'s language include ·truth·?

In which *x* stands for 'ancient Chinese philosophy' or 'Polynesian philosophy' or any other non-Western tradition of (philosophical) thought that is the object of attention.

Nevertheless, these questions are not independent from each other. Arguably, one cannot have ·truth· without TRUTH (but there is no reason why the reverse would be impossible), and neither can one have a theory about the property of *truth* without TRUTH and ·truth·. Hence, of these three questions, the second is the most fundamental. For that reason, I will discuss how to answer that question first, before turning to the third and first (in that order). It needs to be emphasized, however, that the goal of this paper is methodological – that is, it aims to discuss *how* to answer these questions, not what the answers could be for some particular tradition. The case of ancient Chinese philosophy is used here to illustrate these methodological considerations, and any apparent answers to the three questions in the following should be regarded as illustrations (and even if one would consider them as answers, then they are provisional answers at most).

1. The Concept of TRUTH

The concept of TRUTH (or TRUE, but that is the same concept) is our understanding of the notion that we refer to with the word 'truth,' and *having* the concept of TRUTH is *having* a mental understanding of that notion. By implication, whether someone (or some group) has or had this concept is a psychological question, but unlike many other psychological questions, it can be answered without empirical research on the people involved if there is good reason to belief that the concept of TRUTH is universal. According to Anna Wierzbicka and Cliff Goddard it is,[7] but there are other reasons to believe that TRUTH is universal as well.

Anna Wierzbicka and associates have been attempting to identify *semantic primes* in a research program called *Natural Semantics Metalanguage* (NSM) that

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[7] Cliff Goddard, "The Search for the Shared Semantic Sore of All Languages," in *Meaning and Universal Grammar: Theory and Empirical Findings*, ed. Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka, Volume 1 (John Benjamins, 2002), 5-40.

spans over three decades.[8] Semantic primes are both primitive and universal (and universally primitive), meaning that they cannot be analyzed or paraphrased in any simpler terms, and that they have lexical equivalents (either one or multiple) in all languages (but such lexical equivalents can be polysemous, and there are other complications; see next section). TRUE is one of the semantic primes identified.[9] This means, that according to NSM, not just the concept TRUE or TRUTH is universal (and universally primitive), but also that ·truth· is universal.

There are reasons, however, not to take NSM for granted. For any candidate prime, showing that it cannot be analyzed or paraphrased in any simpler terms in any language – the first criterion of prime-ness – and that it has lexical equivalents in any language – the second criterion – would require a book length study at least, but typically, in the NSM literature, primes are posited and defended within the space of pages.[10] These positings and defenses *seem* to be based on extensive knowledge of language, but remain extremely opaque, and often evoke the suspicion of armchair speculation (or even of being driven by the theory they are supposed to support more than by available data). Furthermore, even if more extensive research would show that TRUE/TRUTH is universal *now*, that does not imply that it always has been. The concept may have become universal fairly recently under the influence of Western cultural dominance, for example.

What we need to know to answer the question whether the ancient Chinese, for example, had the concept of TRUTH is not just whether that concept is *contingently* universal now, but whether it is *necessarily* universal. To answer *that* question, we need to better understand what it means to have the concept of TRUTH first. According to Donald Davidson, TRUTH

> is as fundamental a concept as any we have, for without it we would have no concepts at all. The reasoning is simple: to have a concept is to judge that certain things fall under it, and others don't. To judge that something is, say, lavender, is to hold it to be true that that thing is lavender. To have any propositional attitude requires knowing what it would be for the proposition entertained to be true. Our conviction that there is a way things are however we may think they

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[8] See for example: Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantic Primitives* (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1972); Anna Wierzbicka, *Semantics: Primes and Universals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Goddard, "Search;" Cliff Goddard, "The Natural Semantic Metalanguage Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Analysis*, ed. Bernd Heine and Heiko Narrog (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 459-484.

[9] Goddard, "Search."

[10] See, for example, Wierzbicka, *Semantics.*

are depends on our having the concept of truth, and this is the same as having the concept of an objective reality.[11]

And by implication, "without a grasp of the concept of truth, not only language, but thought itself, is impossible."[12]

Much of Davidson's writing about the concept of TRUTH is related to his controversial theory that having beliefs requires having the concept of BELIEF, which in turn requires having the concept of TRUTH.[13] What is (relatively, at least) uncontroversial, however, is Davidson's insight that having the concept of TRUTH is understanding that there is a difference between what is the case and what is not, and that having the concept of TRUTH is inseparable from having a rather large number of related concepts including both neighbors such as OBJECTIVITY and JUSTIFICATION and contra(dicto)ry concepts such as FALSEHOOD, ERROR, and MISTAKE.[14]

According to John Flavell, children learn to distinguish appearance from reality between the ages of 3 and 4 or 5.[15] The research he reports on depends on linguistic interaction with children, however, which may set the bar too high. More language-independent, observational research has shown that virtually all children start pretend play before the age of 2, and that they are perfectly capable of separating pretense from truth.[16] The ability to distinguish pretense from truth is the ability to distinguish what is (really) the case from what is not, and that ability requires the concept of TRUTH. Therefore, virtually all children develop the concept of TRUTH before the age of 2. Of course, that doesn't imply that 2-year-olds have a *word* for TRUTH (or something similar); that would be confusing TRUTH and ·truth·. Again, one can have a concept without having a word for it. A concept is psychological; it is an ability to make (and understand) a distinction, and the relevant distinction in case of TRUTH is learned at a very early age, well

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[11] Donald Davidson, "Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 65-66.

[12] Donald Davidson, "Truth Rehabilitated," in *Truth, Language, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16.

[13] Donald Davidson, "Rational Animals," in *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 95-105.

[14] Whether JUSTIFICATION really is a neighbor of TRUTH is debatable, but even if it is not, it is sufficiently close to cause confusion of the two concepts. See section 3.

[15] John Flavel, "The Development of Children's Understanding of False Belief and the Appearance-Reality Distinction," *International Journal of Psychology* 28.5 (1993): 595-604.

[16] Angeline Lillard, Ashley Pinkham, and Eric Smith, "Pretend Play and Cognitive Development," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Handbook of Childhood Cognitive Development*, ed. Usha Goswami (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 285-311.

before children develop the linguistic tools necessary to reflect on that distinction or even to name it.

The claim that some people or tradition of thought did or does not have the concept of TRUTH is the claim that they did not understand the notions of falsehood, error and mistake; it implies that they did not understand the difference between appearance and reality, or between what is the case and what is not. Aside from the utter implausibility of this claim for *any* people/tradition, there is abundant textual evidence in the case of ancient Chinese philosophy showing that they understood the difference between what is the case and what is not, and thus had the concept of TRUTH. Consider, for example, the following fragment from the *Han Fei Zi* 韓非子:

> 言之為物也以多信，不然之物，十人云疑，百人然乎，千人不可解也。
> Sayings/words are things that are believed because many endorse them. Concerning something that is not *ran* (true?), if ten people say it there is still doubt, if a hundred people say it is considered *ran*, if a thousand people say it it cannot be rejected.[17]

Regardless of whether 然 *ran* is to be translated (here) as 'true' or as one of its neighbors such as 'objective,' 'justified,' or 'the case,' this sentence could not have been written – or even thought – by someone who did not have the concept of TRUTH.

2. Words for ·Truth·

As mentioned in the previous section, according to Natural Semantics Metalanguage (NSM), ·truth· or ·true· is universal: all languages have one or more words, morphemes, or expressions that express TRUTH. Some of these may be polysemous, however, meaning that they only express TRUTH in certain contexts, and recognizing and identifying ·truth· is further complicated by language change, by terminological differences between schools and philosophers, and by opaque compounds and expressions. (The latter kind of complication also occurs in English. For example, 'true' can also mean something like 'genuine,' in which case 'true' is not ·true·.)

W.V.O. Quine called the common idea that there are one-to-one semantic relations between words in different languages the 'myth of the museum.'[18] The

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[17] §48:11. All references to Chinese texts (and the paragraph numbers in those references) in this paper are references to the Chinese Text Project edition(s) available at http://ctext.org/. All translations are my own.

[18] W.V.O. Quine, "Ontological Relativity," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 26-68. Bryan van Norden used the term 'lexical fallacy'

myth may *seem* to be true in the case of ·truth· in Indo-European languages, but it is a myth nevertheless: a language can include ·truth· without having a *single* word for TRUTH, and without having a word that means TRUTH in *all* contexts. At least hypothetically, it is even possible that a language has no word for ·truth· at all (if NSM is wrong). Keeping these complications in mind, how do we recognize and identify ·truth·?

The most obvious identification criterion for ·truth· is: "A word or expression in some language is ·truth· iff it expresses the concept of TRUTH". However, as mentioned above, one cannot have the concept of TRUTH without having a number of related and adjacent concepts including, for example, OBJECTIVITY, and these interconnected concepts cannot be easily separated from each other. If we know that "*ruuv teeh*" means "fire is hot" in some alien language, and that '*tche*' means *something like* 'true,' then that doesn't settle the correct translation of "*ruuv teeh tche.*" That sentence could mean "it is true that fire is hot" or "it is objective (-ly the case) that fire is hot" (among other options), and these alternative translations are not equivalent (the second expresses independence from perspective or point of view, for example). And lacking evidence for which TRUTH-like concept exactly '*tche*' expresses, one is not justified to identify it as ·truth·. Hence, we need some additional criterion or criteria to distinguish ·truth· from its neighbors.

Firstly, ·truth· is attributed to sentences, propositions, beliefs or something very similar, taking relevant grammatical differences between languages into account. The sentences (*etc.*) that are judged to be true or not can be fairly simple as in the case of predicate-subject sentences, or very complex as in the long, compound propositions that are needed to represent theories. In case of some languages such as classical Chinese predicate-subject sentences can be expressed by means of a single word or character, which may be a source of confusion. For example, if context specifies the subject *x* of predication, then the one-character sentence '白' *bai* has the propositional content 'white (*x*).' Because of this feature of classical Chinese, a two-character sentence 「厶白」, in which the character 厶 (a semantic variant of 某, which means 'some') is a placeholder for a candidate character for ·true·, is ambiguous if 厶 can also be interpreted as an adverb. The sentence 「厶白」 would then be interpretable either as "It is true that *x* is white" or as "*x* is truly white." In the latter case (*i.e.* in its adverbial use) 厶 is not

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to refer to the related mistake of assuming that some tradition doesn't have a concept of *x* or views about *x* because it doesn't have a single word for *x*. See: Bryan Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

attributed to a sentence, and therefore, is not ·true· (but is more similar to the use of 'truly' in English to mean 'genuinely' or 'really'), but that doesn't mean that ⅄ is not ·true· either in its other use (*i.e.* as a sentence-level operator or a property of a proposition).

Secondly, ·truth· is *disquotational,* but its neighbors are not. According to (a variant of) Tarski's famous T-schema:

> **TS**   it is true that $p \leftrightarrow p$

TS holds for ·true·, but not for its conceptual neighbors. If it is the case that p, then it is the case that p is true, and the other way around – that is what TS means. However, p may be objective or justified without it being the case that p, and/or the other way around. Consequently, contrary to ·true·, these conceptual neighbors are not disquotational. (Note that in the above example, ⅄ in its adverbial use is not disquotational, which is another reason why it is not ·true·.)

It must be emphasized that the notion of disquotation should not be confused with theories of truth that claim that disquotation defines truth or that disquotation is all there is to say about truth (*i.e.* deflationism or minimalism about truth; see next section). There may or may not be much more to say about the property of *truth*, but that is not the issue here. Rather, I'm merely making the much more uncontroversial claim that ·truth· (or ·true·) can be recognized by its satisfaction of TS (taking the symbol '↔' to represent nothing but material equivalence). That this is an uncontroversial claim follows from the fact that nearly all contemporary theories of truth accept some form of TS.

With these two additions, the following identification criterion for ·truth·/·true· can be formulated:

> A word or expression in some language is ·truth·/·true· in some (kind of) use and context iff,
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> in that (kind of) use and context
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> a) it is most plausibly interpreted as expressing the concept of TRUTH,
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> b) it is attributed to a sentence, proposition, belief, or something very similar,
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> and
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> c) it is disquotational.

This criterion is admittedly imprecise. It takes the ability to recognize whether a word expresses TRUTH for granted, for example. And it leaves open many questions with regards to 'use and context.' How often (between once and always) should a word satisfy this criterion to be considered ·truth·? What specifies the *kind* of use or context? And so forth. None of this is problematic,

however. It would be if the criterion would misidentify some words as ·true·, but I have been unable to find such misidentifications for English. Most likely candidates would be the English expressions "it is the case that" and "it is a fact that," which satisfy (b) and (c), and possibly also (a). If they do also satisfy (a) – and I believe they do, but will not defend that belief here – then indeed they are examples of ·true·, but I doubt that this identification as such would (or should, at least) be controversial. (On the other hand, "there is a fact that" does not satisfy (c) as it involves an ontological commitment to facts that is absent in "it is true that.")

In case of ancient Chinese philosophy, several candidates for ·truth· have been suggested in the literature. Most prominent are 真 *zhen*, 實 *shi,* 是 *shi*, 然 *ran*, 當 *dang,* and perhaps 可 *ke.* The last is used in various texts as an apparent property of sentences. For example, the opening sentences of Gong Sun Long's 公孫龍 *Bai Ma Lun* 白馬論 are:

> 「白馬非馬」，可乎？曰：可。 Is "a white horse is not a horse" admissible (*ke*)? It is (*ke*).

Here 可*ke*, which (following Hansen)[19] I translated as 'admissible' appears to be a property of the sentence 「白馬非馬」. It *can* be interpreted as meaning TRUE in this context, and in that case, it would probably be disquotational, but it is doubtful whether that interpretation is correct. It depends on whether the reply 「可」 should be taken to imply an affirmation of 「白馬非馬」 rather than just of its admissibility and it is by no means certain that it is intended as such.

Most of the other characters mentioned are more likely candidates for truth. Chris Fraser makes a case for 當 *dang* in the context of Mohism;[20] Alexus McLeod argues for 實 *shi,* 是 *shi*, and 然 *ran* in the writings of Wang Chong 王充;[21] and Wai Chun Leong argues for 然 *ran*.[22] Textual ambiguities make it very difficult to judge whether these indeed satisfy the above identification criterion. They can all be defended as expressions of TRUTH, but as argued above, TRUTH is not easily separated from its neighbors such as OBJECTIVITY, and all of them can be just as easily interpreted as expressing some adjacent concept.

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[19] Hansen, "Chinese Language."

[20] Chris Fraser, "Truth in Moist Dialectics," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 39.3 (2012): 351-368.

[21] Alexus McLeod, "Pluralism about Truth in Early Chinese Philosophy: a Reflection on Wang Chong's Approach," *Comparative Philosophy* 2.1 (2011): 38-60. For an opposing point of view, see: Lajos Brons, "Wang Chong, Truth, and Quasi-pluralism," *Comparative Philosophy* 6.1 (2015): 129-148.

[22] Wai Chun Leong, "The Semantic Concept in Truth in Pre-Han Chinese Philosophy," *Dao* 14.1 (2015): 55-74.

In practice, only the third sub-criterion – that of disquotationality – can tell us whether a candidate word/character is ·truth·, but as Leong points out, there is very little (if any) textual evidence for disquotationality. A word/character �厶 is disquotational if asserting that '*p*' is �厶 is asserting (that) *p* and *vice versa* (ignoring the fact that there may be a pragmatic difference between '*p*' and "'*p*' is �厶"), but nothing resembling this pattern occurs. The closest Leong could find is Mencius' 孟子 reply 「然」 to a factual question in Gao Zi II 告子下 §22, but a better example of this kind of use is the following fragment from the chapter Gong Sun Chou II 公孫丑下 §18:

> 曰：「使管叔監殷，管叔以殷畔也，有諸？」曰：「然。」 Is it the case that [the duke of Zhou] sent Guan Shu to supervise [the state of] Yin but that Guan Shu with Yin rebelled? It is (*ran*).

Here 然 *ran* is used in reference to the factual description (*i.e.* a proposition) in the question. Mencius' reply seems to be short for "it is *ran* that the duke of Zhou sent Guan Shu to supervise Yin but that Guan Shu with Yin rebelled," and if that analysis is correct, this would probably be the best example of *ran* as a disquotational property of propositions or sentences, and therefore, as ·truth·/·true·. However, this is not the only possible analysis. Similar occurrences of *ran* can be found throughout *the Analects* and the *Meng Zi*,[23] and in most cases it can be translated as an affirmation comparable to "Yes" in English. If *ran* (in this kind of use) merely affirms, it is not a property of a proposition, and thus not ·truth·/·true·. The interpretation of *ran* as "Yes" rather than ·true· runs into trouble, however, in case of Mencius' reply (to another question) 「否，不然」 ("No, not *ran*") in *Wan Zhang* 萬章 I:§9. It is hard to make sense of this reply otherwise than as "No, not true" (or as "No, not the case," but as argued above, the English expression "is the case" is a form of ·true·).

That 然 *ran* almost certainly is ·truth·/·true· in some (con)texts does not imply that the other words/characters mentioned above are not (in other (con)texts), but as the case of ancient Chinese philosophy is mere illustration here, it suffices to show that there is at least one word/character for ·truth·/·true· in classical Chinese.

3. The Property of *Truth*, and Theories of *Truth*

The property of *truth* is the feature or collection of features (if that or those exist) that all true sentences/propositions/beliefs share and that all false ones lack. Most

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[23] See, for example, in *the Analects*: Wei Ling Gong 衛靈公 §42, Yang Huo 陽貨 §7, Wei Zi 微子 §6; in *Meng Zi*: Teng Wen Gong I 滕文公上 §2 and 4; Gao Zi I 告子上 §3.

theories of truth try to define TRUTH in such a way that the definition captures the property of *truth*. This property is what *makes* some sentence or proposition true, or *by virtue of which* a sentence or proposition is true. Deflationists and primitivists about truth deny that there is such a property, while correspondentists, coherentists, and other substantivists claim there is. Correspondentism and deflationism (or 'minimalism') are the two dominant positions in the contemporary debate.

According to most correspondentists, '*p*' is true if and only if it corresponds with a fact that *p*. This view needs to be distinguished from the more general idea that a sentence or proposition is true if it corresponds with the way things are. 'Corresponding with the way things are' is not a property of *truth*, but is just another way of expressing TRUTH: "the way things are is such that *p*" is synonymous with "it is true that *p*," "it is the case that *p*," and a number of further equivalent expressions. 'Correspondence with a fact that *p*,' on the other hand, means that there is a fact that *p*, and that this fact makes '*p*' true (and thus involves an ontological commitment to facts). Another way to bring out the difference is to focus on the correspondence relation. For correspondentism, this is a relation between discrete truthmakers (such as facts) and truthbearers (sentences or propositions), such that one specific truthmaker makes one specific truthbearer true. The correspondence relation in 'corresponding with the way things are,' 'corresponding with the world,' or Aristotle's "to say of what is that it is" is of an entirely different nature because it does not pick out specific truthmakers, and thus does not specify what makes individual true sentences or propositions true. All it does, is attempt to express what we mean with ·truth·. It is for this reason, that Aristotle's remark "hardly qualifies as a theory of truth" (as I stated in the first paragraph of the introduction).

Substantive theories of truth claim that there is a property of *truth* in virtue of which true sentences/propositions/beliefs are true or that makes them true. A theory about what makes some statement true is deceptively similar, however, to a theory about what justifies one to believe that statement, or about what makes that statement reliable.[24] Therefore, to judge whether some particular theory is a

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[24] This problem (like most of the problems discussed in this paper) is not typical of Chinese philosophy: in Western philosophy TRUTH is also often confused with its neighbors. Much of this confusion seems to stem from the common idea that truth is a norm, but as Davidson pointed out, "we do not aim at truth but at honest justification." When we say that we want our statements or beliefs to be true, what we want is overwhelming evidence or an irrefutable argument, but that is justification, not truth. And according to Davidson, we *cannot* ask for more than that; "it makes no sense to ask for more." (The two quotes are from: Donald

theory about the property of *truth*, we need to establish with sufficient certainty that that theory is about what makes some statement(s) true rather than justified, reliable, objective, and so forth.

In case of ancient Chinese philosophy, a few theories have been suggested as possible theories of truth, but none of the suggestions that I am aware of is convincing. For example, Chris Fraser suggests Mo zi's 墨子 three standards (*Fei Ming Shang* 非命上 §2) as a theory of truth,[25] but this is not the most plausible interpretation. The three standards – *basis* (本: based on the deed of the ancient sage-kings), *source* (原: hearing and sight of common people), and *use* (用: beneficial to the state and the people) – may make some statement justified, assertable, reliable, plausible, acceptable, believable, appropriate, and so forth, but it is hard to believe that Mo zi claimed that they *make* a statement true. The context of Mo zi's argument and similar arguments in, for example, *Han Fei Zi* 韓非子§30*ff* is pragmatic. What matters is that the actions and policies of the state are based on reliable information. Moreover, even in the strongest interpretation, Mo zi's three standards or Han Fei's seven techniques 七術, are more plausibly interpreted as being about justification than about truth. In Mo zi's view, the three standards may very well justify believing that some statement is true, or accepting it as true, but 'justification to believe that true' or 'justification to accept as true' is justification, not truth, and certainly not synonymous with 'true.'

To attribute a theory of *truth* to the ancient Chinese (or to some ancient Chinese philosopher), we would need to find an account of what makes some statement true that cannot be interpreted more plausibly as being about what makes it justified, acceptable, reliable, or some other neighbor of TRUTH. I'm not aware of any such account, and I doubt that there is one. This then, would mean that the ancient Chinese didn't have a theory (or theories) of *truth* (but they did have theories of justification, and thus epistemology). The same may very well be the case for many other non-Western traditions of thought.

This conclusion should not be reason for surprise, however. It has taken Western philosophers some time to reflect on their obsession with TRUTH and *truth*, but nowadays deflationism (which denies that there is a substantive property of *truth*) is one of two mainstream accounts of truth (correspondentism is the other). *If* deflationists (and primitivists, which agree with deflationists on this point) are right, then the Chinese lack of a theory (or theories) of truth is less

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Davidson, "Reply to Pascal Engel," in *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 461.)

[25] Fraser, "Truth."

strange than the existence of such theories in Western philosophy; then Chinese philosophy avoided a dead end from which Western philosophy is now finally, reluctantly returning. But even if they are wrong, the fact that deflationism and primitivism are defensible accounts of truth shows that it is not a defect of some philosophical tradition not to attempt to define TRUTH or to theorize about *truth*.

What must be emphasized, however, is that the apparent lack of theories about *truth* or definitions of TRUTH in Chinese philosophy does not imply an (even implicit) adherence to a variety of deflationism or primitivism. What defines the latter is that they claim that TRUTH cannot be defined and/or that there is no substantive property of *truth*, and either claim can only be made in the context of explicit theorizing about *truth*. In other words, even though deflationism and primitivism deny that there is a property of *truth*, that denial itself is a theory of *truth*, and consequently, not having a theory of *truth* does not suffice for the classification as deflationist or primitivist.

Conclusion: Recognizing 'Truth'

The debate about truth in ancient Chinese philosophy is based on the assumption that it concerns a single question, thus confusing terms, concepts, and theories of truth. It is essential, however, to distinguish the property of *truth* (the shared feature of true statements that makes them true), the concept of TRUTH (our mental understanding of truth), and ·truth· (words used to express TRUTH; *i.e.* equivalents of the English word 'truth'). When this distinction is made, the question about truth in Chinese philosophy no longer is one question, but three questions. These three questions are the same for any non-Western tradition of (philosophical) thought:

> 1) Does that tradition have a theory about the property of *truth*?
>
> 2) Does that tradition have the concept of TRUTH?
>
> 3) Does that tradition's language include ·truth·?

This paper did not intend to give (definitive) answers to these questions for the case of ancient Chinese philosophy, but to reflect on *how* such questions should be answered for any tradition. Hence, the concern of this paper is methodological rather than topical.

Because in all likelihood all (normal) human beings over the age of 2 have the concept of TRUTH, the answer to question (2) is always "Yes," regardless of the tradition investigated. Having a concept does not necessarily imply having a single word to express it, however, and identifying words for ·truth· or ·true· is complicated by neighboring concepts: if a word in some language can equally

plausibly interpreted as 'objective' or 'justified' then the interpreter is not justified to just assume it means 'true.' ·Truth· can be distinguished from its neighbors, however, because it has a characteristic its neighbors lack: disquotationality. If it is the case that p is true, then it is the case that p, and the other way around. Armed with this criterion, ·truth·/·true· can be distinguished from its neighbors. In the case of ancient Chinese 然 *ran* is ·truth·/·true· in at least certain uses and possibly there are other words/characters for ·truth· as well.

A theory of truth is a theory about the property of *truth*. It either specifies the nature of that property – thus giving criteria something must satisfy to be true – or it denies that there is such a property. It is essential to distinguish theories of *truth* from theories of *justification* (and theories of *objectivity*, and so forth). TRUTH and JUSTIFICATION are adjacent concepts, but they are not identical, and a statement may be justified without being true and/or the other way around. Consequently, to determine whether some particular theory is a theory of *truth* it needs to be made sufficiently plausible that it isn't better understood as a theory of *justification* (or other conceptual neighbor). There appear to be no such theories in ancient Chinese philosophy, and it may very well be the case that the same is true for many (if not most) other non-Western traditions. If deflationists and primitivists are right that there is no property of *truth* then this is hardly surprising, however. Then Western theorizing about *truth* is more peculiar than the absence thereof elsewhere.