5. Truth in Pre-Han Thought

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1. Introduction

The role of truth in pre-Han thought has been a focus of interest and controversy since Munro first suggested that early Chinese thinkers were concerned primarily with the consequences of a belief or proposition for action, not its truth (Munro 1969: 55). Scholars have defended a range of interpretations of the place of truth in early Chinese thought, from the view that pre-Han philosophy has no concept of semantic truth, for example, to the view that it has several concepts with roles overlapping those of truth, to the view that early Chinese thinkers actually offer theories of truth.[1]

One reason for intense interest in the topic is signaled by Graham's well-known remark that for pre-Han philosophers "the crucial question…is not the Western philosopher's 'What is the truth?' but 'Where is the way?, the way to order the state and conduct personal life" (Graham 1989: 3). How issues related to truth are framed may reflect central features of the theoretical orientation of early Chinese philosophical discourse. For example, if pre-Han inquiries into logic, language, knowledge, and metaphysics focused on accurate description of the structure of reality, they might accordingly devote much attention to explaining the nature of truth and evaluating which descriptions are indeed true. On the other hand, if such inquiries centered on questions concerning the proper *dao* 道 (way) of conduct and how it relates to the course of the natural world, they might instead be concerned primarily with questions regarding the appropriate use of language and the basis for norms of correct use— whether they are purely products of human convention, for example, or are grounded in natural patterns. A clearer grasp of how pre-Han philosophers thought about truth may help us better understand the overall framework and orientation of early Chinese philosophy.

This article first reviews the long-standing debate in the scholarly literature concerning the role of truth in pre-Han philosophy. Next, it considers how we might effectively and informatively frame inquiry into the topic of truth in Chinese thought. It then offers concise interpretations of several concepts in pre-Han texts with conceptual roles overlapping that of truth.

2. Debates on Truth

Discussions of truth in the international literature on Chinese philosophy over the past several decades were sparked by Munro's generalization that in evaluating a belief or proposition, early Chinese thinkers were less interested in its truth or falsity than in its "behavioral implications"—in what consequences adherence to the claim might have for personal and social conduct (Munro 1969: 55). Munro's aim was to underscore the emphasis in Chinese thought on the action-guiding functions of word choices and verbal pronouncements—a theme stressed in both the Confucian *Analects* and the *Mozi*, for instance—and the tight conceptual connection between knowledge and action. In many contexts in Chinese philosophy, knowledge is understood primarily as knowing how to act, not knowing the truth.

Developing Munro's observation, Hansen suggested that in pre-Han thought, language was regarded as having mainly a regulative function, producing and expressing attitudes with implications for action (Hansen 1983: 60). Texts such as the

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[1] For an example of the first of these views, see (Hansen 1985); the second, (Fraser 2012); the third, (McLeod 2015).

[2] For a detailed account, along with an overview of major themes in early Chinese philosophy of

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Xunzi "Correct Names" essay clearly indicate that early theories about words and statements have a predominantly practical orientation, a salient concern being correcting speakers' use of "names" (*ming* 名) so that all speakers use the same names to refer to the same, conventionally designated objects. Once names are corrected, they can be used to direct action effectively, as those issuing and following orders, for example, will interpret them in a unified way.[2] The Mohist doctrine of the "three standards" for evaluating statements or doctrines implies that, as Munro originally suggested, the Mohists' primary interest lies in how statements affect people's behavior. In evaluating statements, the Mohists assign as much or more weight to their practical utility and conformity to precedent as to whether they correspond to what people see and hear.[3] Drawing on such features of pre-Han philosophical discourse, Hansen proposed that "Chinese philosophy has no concept of truth" (Hansen 1985: 492), insofar as, in his view, the concept of truth and theoretical concerns related to truth play effectively no role in early Chinese thought.

Hansen offered three reasons for this audacious claim (Hansen 1985: 492–496, 504–509; Hansen 1992: 44, 116). First, he suggested, early Chinese theories of language had a pragmatic, not semantic, orientation, and thus assigned no role to a concept of truth. Chinese theorists were concerned with the proper use of language and the action-guiding consequences of its use, not with whether descriptive statements about the world were true. Second, pre-Han discussions of language focused on names (*ming*), or words, and devoted little or no attention to the role of sentences or statements, the units of language usually regarded as bearing a truth value. Because of this formal feature of their inquiries, Chinese theorists could not be expected to address questions of truth. Third, pre-Han thinkers' main concern in evaluating utterances was to ask whether they were *ke* 可 ("assertible," "permissible"), a pragmatic rather than a semantic concept. Instead of being concerned with the semantic issue of whether utterances were true, then, they were concerned with the pragmatic issue of whether they were assertible.

Dovetailing with the second and third of these arguments, Hall and Ames contended that since Classical Chinese expresses semantic content through "strings of names," not sentences or propositional utterances, early Chinese thinkers lacked an interest in questions of truth and falsity (Hall and Ames 1987: 298–299). "Words, as names, may be judged appropriate or inappropriate," they suggested, while "only propositions may, in the strict sense, be true or false" (Hall and Ames 1987: 299).

Against these interpretations, Graham maintained that a theoretical focus on *dao* rather than on truth has nothing to do with "everyday questions of fact," regarding which "there is no significant difference" between Chinese thinkers and ourselves (Graham 1989: 395). Classical Chinese must have possessed the expressive resources needed for speakers to "affirm a fact," he argued, for otherwise it would have lacked "the communicative function needed to serve as a language" (Graham 1989: 395). Graham thought it unimportant whether early thinkers had a concept of truth that maps closely onto ours, provided they had words by which to express assent to the announcement "Dinner is on the table" if and only if dinner is in fact on the table (Graham 1989: 395). His underlying point seems to have been the potentially cogent claim that a language cannot be fully adequate for communication unless it allows for semantic evaluation of assertions as true or false. Unfortunately, Graham's discussion at times seems to conflate assenting to an utterance with affirming its truth, leaving open the possibility that, as Hansen or Hall and Ames might rejoin, a listener could assent on grounds of social appropriateness or utility rather than truth.[4]

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[2] For a detailed account, along with an overview of major themes in early Chinese philosophy of language and logic, see (Fraser 2016).

[3] See *Mozi* (Mozi 1948), book 35. For an overview of the Mohist theory, see (Fraser 2015, sect. 4). For further discussion, see (Loy 2008) and (Fraser 2012).

[4] For Graham's full response to Hansen, see (Graham 1989: 395–396). For Hansen's reply, see (Hansen 1992: 392, n. 86).

In the ensuing decades, numerous writers have discussed Hansen's and Hall and Ames's contentions, some offering lists of examples purporting to illustrate—with varying degrees of plausibility—instances of truth-like evaluations of assertions in pre-Han texts.[5] Until relatively recently, however, little research offered detailed, thorough explanations of how evaluations of truth might fit into early Chinese philosophy of language and logic. Several interpretations along these lines have now appeared, including Robins's account of how Later Mohist logic uses *shi* 是 and *ran* 然 as terms of semantic appraisal (Robins 2010: 46), Fraser's treatment of how the roles of *dang* 當, *ran* 然, *shi* 是, and *ke* 可 in Later Mohist thought overlap with truth (Fraser 2012), and Leong's study of *ran* 然 in pre-Han texts (Leong 2015).[6] Complementing these studies, Robins and Saunders have shown that Later Mohist texts themselves appear to implicitly recognize the difference between semantics and pragmatics, insofar as they distinguish between the normal semantic content of a word—to them, its reference in typical contexts—and the content the same word may take on because of pragmatic factors in an unusual context, as when a general term such as "crane" is "borrowed" to refer to dogs or is used as a proper name (Robins 2012; Saunders 2014). The Later Mohists' discussion of such contexts undermines claims that pre-Han thinkers were concerned purely with pragmatics as opposed to semantics.

What of Hansen's original argument, partly shared by Hall and Ames, that the theoretical orientation and structural features of pre-Han discourse directed thinkers away from issues of truth and even from an explicit concept of truth? The points Hansen and Hall and Ames cite indeed reflect signal features of pre-Han thought. Nevertheless, they fall short of supporting the radical conclusion that early Chinese thinkers do not address truth at all. Pre-Han philosophical discourse could indeed have had a fundamentally pragmatic orientation, being concerned mainly with the appropriate use of words and statements to guide conduct, while nevertheless leaving conceptual space for a concept of truth and explanations of what it is for an assertion to be true. Such explanations could be grounded in a conception of correct word use, thus cohering with the Chinese focus on *dao* and norms of appropriate conduct. A concern with pragmatics—with how words are used—need not exclude a concern with semantic issues—such as whether some utterances correctly describe how things stand.

Similarly, a formal focus on names or words, rather than sentences, does not preclude evaluations or explanations of truth. Strictly speaking, the units of discourse that are evaluated as true or false are assertions, not sentences.[7] In English, assertions are typically made by uttering sentences, but an assertion can be expressed using only a term, provided contextual clues make clear what object the term is predicated of. In the context of an ancient Chinese distinction-drawing debate (*bian* 辯), if a Mohist dialectician were to indicate a certain animal and say "*niu* 牛" (ox) or "*fei niu* 非牛" (non-ox), he would be making an assertion functionally analogous to the assertion we might express by saying "That animal is an ox" or "That animal is not an ox."

Regarding Hansen's third point, as the discussion in section 4 will show, *ke* 可 (assertible, permissible) is in fact not the only term pre-Han thinkers used to evaluate utterances. Nor is *ke* purely a pragmatic concept, since appraisal of whether utterances are *ke* rests at least partly on semantic and logical grounds. Pre-Han thought thus could indeed have had a pragmatic, practical orientation, have focused on issues pertaining to

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[5] See, for example, (Roetz 1993: 85–96), (Harbsmeier 1998: 193–209), (Van Norden 2007: 361–380), and, more recently, (McLeod 2015). On Harbsmeier's methodology, see (Robins 2010: 24, n. 45).

[6] These studies follow in the footsteps of Chmielweski's pioneering study in English of the evaluation of assertions in the later Mohist texts. See, e.g., (Chmielweski 1966: 36, 41–46).

[7] For the purposes of this discussion, I will set aside the question of whether it is actually propositions that should be regarded as the bearers of truth values. The point is simply that many sentence types, such as "The cat is on the mat," are not associated with a truth value. Rather, particular tokens of such sentences take on a truth value when asserted in some context.

dao rather than truth, and formally have been concerned with terms rather than sentences, while nonetheless addressing issues of truth and employing a concept of truth.

3. Framing the Inquiry

The foregoing discussion suggests that in considering interpretations of the role of truth in early Chinese thought, it is vital to distinguish two sets of questions. One concerns the extent to which truth was a focus of theoretical attention. Did Chinese thinkers present explicit accounts of truth? Did they take giving true descriptions of the world to be a major aim of inquiry? Did they explain other aspects of their thought by appeal to truth? To answer such questions in the affirmative, we would expect to find explicit, sustained discussions in pre-Han texts addressing the role of one or more concepts best explained as counterparts to truth. The other set of questions concerns whether pre-Han thought "has a concept of truth." Do pre-Han texts employ terms whose function overlaps "…is true"? Do they evaluate assertions as to their truth? Do they have a conception of an assertion being correct according to specifically semantic norms, as opposed to norms of social propriety or practical utility? To answer these questions in the affirmative, we need only identify passages in which assertions are endorsed or rejected using evaluative terminology best explained as invoking semantic rather than other grounds.

Regarding the first set of questions, the principal discussions of language and logic in pre-Han texts[8] are concerned mainly with how the appropriate use of names (*ming* 名) and statements (*yan* 言) to guide action is based on distinctions between similar and dissimilar kinds (*lei* 類) of "stuff" (*shi* 實), or objects and situations.[9] Questions about the correct way to draw such distinctions are answered by reference to models or standards (*fa* 法) of the kinds of things a name typically refers to, which exemplify practical norms for distinguishing things, using words, and making statements. To justify asserting a name of something, speakers cite models of the kind of object or situation the name applies to and propose analogical inferences to support treating the case at hand as similar to the model. Among the models proposed for evaluating statements are precedents set by wise leaders, public observation, and useful practical consequences—criteria that align at best only partly with semantic correctness.[10] Much of the early literature thus emphasizes the action-guiding role of language, the importance of coordinating norms of word use, and appeals to precedent and utility in determining correct use. Given the prevailing focus on such themes, there are strong grounds for accepting the shared underlying insight, articulated in various ways by Munro, Hansen, Hall and Ames, and Graham, that truth is indeed not a central theme of inquiry in early Chinese thought. Instead, early texts emphasize issues related to identifying and practicing the proper *dao*, a concept that incorporates norms for using words and making statements. Responses to such issues were typically not assessed or explained in terms of truth. Indeed, they may not have been conceptualized as truth-bearing entities, such as assertions, but as ways, methods, styles, manners,

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[8] I have in mind here the Mohist "Condemning Fate" essays (*Mozi* books 35–37), the Later Mohist dialectical writings (*Mozi* books 40–45), the *Xunzi* "Correct Names" and "Correct Discourse" essays (*Xunzi* books 21–22), and the major essays on language in *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (see Knoblock and Riegel 2000, sections 16/8, 17/1, 18/4, and 18/5, for example).

[9] Early texts on language treat all words as various kinds of "names" (*ming* 名). "Statements" (*yan* 言) and "expressions" (*ci* 辭) are regarded as combinations of names used to express a single thought or intention. "Explanations" (*shuo* 說) or "expositions" (*yi* 議) are longer pieces of discourse that present the reasons for something. Names refer to "stuff" or "objects" (*shi* 實), which include both physical objects and situations or states of affairs.

[10] The generalizations in this paragraph draw on the extended discussions in (Fraser 2012), (Fraser 2013), (Fraser 2015), and (Fraser 2016).

guidelines, and related notions. Truth as an explicit topic was of at most only peripheral interest.[11]

This answer to the first set of questions of course leaves the second set open, as Graham recognized when he insisted that a philosophical focus on *dao* does not preclude thinkers from having a vocabulary by which to affirm facts (Graham 1989: 395). The absence of an explicit, thematized interest in truth also does not rule out the possibility that early texts on language and logic might offer implicit or indirect explanations of what it is for an assertion to be true. Indeed, as an inductive generalization, one might argue that any language with reasonably complete expressive resources, such as Classical Chinese, will likely include semantic terminology that permits speakers to appraise the status of assertions as true or false. Such terminology is expressively useful, most fundamentally because it allows speakers to express evaluations of others' or their own previous assertions by referring to their content and explicitly endorsing or rejecting it as fact. To borrow Graham's example, having been told that dinner is on the table yet finding it is not, a speaker can remark that "'Dinner is on the table' is not true." Without a concept of truth, speakers cannot explicitly attribute or deny factual correctness to an assertion this way; they can only repeat or negate the assertion in question ("Dinner is not on the table"). Other expressive functions of truth include allowing quantification over endorsed assertions ("Some of what she said is true"), endorsement or rejection of assertions referred to using nominalizations or noun phrases ("What he said is true," "Her claim is not true"), and embedding of such constructions within other assertions, without necessarily endorsing their content ("If everything she said is true, then we should cancel our plans"). A language that provides for such functions is expressively richer than one that does not.

Since the second set of questions remain open, how might we go about investigating them? We need to look for terms in pre-Han texts that are used to evaluate the status of assertions and that perform expressive functions similar to those of "…is true." At the same time, we need to carefully examine the context of such evaluations to determine whether they are best explained as appraising assertions according to specifically semantic norms. Utterances may be evaluated positively or negatively on a variety of non-semantic grounds, such as whether they are useful, polite, or aesthetically pleasing. To count as an appraisal of truth, an evaluation must refer to semantic norms—it must deem an assertion correct specifically on the grounds that its content is correctly applied to the things it is asserted of. If we find terms of evaluation for assertions that are best explained as referring to semantic grounds and that perform functions associated with "…is (not) true," then we have persuasive reasons to conclude that pre-Han philosophers indeed "have a concept of truth." The concepts expressed by such terms could of course diverge in various respects from our concept of truth, but their roles would be similar enough to justify interpreting them as counterparts to truth in certain discursive contexts. The next section surveys several such concepts.

4. Concepts Related to Truth

The terms in pre-Han discourse most frequently considered to have roles similar to that of "true" include *dang* 當 ("fit," "coincide"), *ran* 然 ("so," "like this"), and *shi* 是 ("this, right").[12] A further concept used to evaluate assertions is *ke* 可

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[11] McLeod rejects this characterization, but the strained interpretations he offers as evidence of purported early Chinese theories of truth tend to reinforce it (McLeod 2015).
[12] See Graham (Graham 1989: 395), Harbsmeier (Harbsmeier 1998: 201), Robins (Robins 2010: 46), Fraser (Fraser 2012: 362), and Leong (Leong 2015: 68). Another term used in some contexts to evaluate statements is *xin* 信 ("trustworthy," "sincere," "reliable"). However, as the Mohists explain, in many such contexts, *xin* refers not to the semantic status of an utterance but

("permissible," "acceptable"). A survey of the use of these terms shows that in some contexts, although not all, the first three function as terms of semantic appraisal with roles overlapping that of truth, while the fourth seems to function mainly as a term of logical appraisal. Contexts in which these terms play roles similar to that of truth also hint at pre-Han thinkers' implicit explanation of what it is for an assertion to be true.

Dang 當

Dang can be used to express whether a term asserted of an object correctly fits it. In the Later Mohist canons, for example, asserting a term of a thing, such as by calling it an ox, is a speech act that can be *dang* or not. With respect to a term, such as "ox," if one side in a distinction-drawing debate (*bian* 辯) calls something "ox" and the other calls it "non-ox," exactly one of these two assertions must *dang* (fit, coincide with) the animal in question (Graham 2003: 318, A74). A speaker wins such a debate if the term she asserts of a thing fits (*dang*) it (Graham 2003: 402, B35). *Dang* can also be used of sentential utterances. An example in the canons is "in debates there is no winning" (*bian wu sheng* 辯無勝), which the text contends is not *dang* (Graham 2003: 402, B35). This evaluation implies that *dang* can be used to express endorsement of and not-*dang* disagreement with an assertion that is a subject-predicate sentence. *Yan* 言 (statements) too can be *dang* or not, again indicating that *dang* can be used to evaluate not only term use but longer utterances expressing thoughts. *Dang* can also be used with noun phrases referring back to the content of an antecedent assertion, as in "*qi yan zhi dang* 其言之當" ("the *dang* of his statements" or "that his statements fit") (Graham 2003: 275, A14). It can be used of noun phrases embedded in longer sentences: "If this person's *yan* (statement) is not permissible, then to take it as *dang* is surely injudicious" (Graham 2003: 445, B71).

Referring to an assertion in a debate as *dang* amounts to endorsing it as correct, the winner between two opposing claims only one of which can stand. *Dang* thus fulfills a central function of truth, namely to express, from the standpoint of the speaker, endorsement of the correctness of an assertion. In these contexts, do such endorsements reflect specifically semantic appraisals? *Dang* applies to the winning assertion in a dispute concerning which of two contrasting general terms applies to an object. The examples the Mohists give—general terms such as "ox," "horse," and "dog"—have no ethical or other normative significance, and asserting them of an object is *dang* if and only if the object is the kind of thing normally denoted by that term. Evaluation of whether an assertion is *dang* in such contexts thus seems a purely semantic matter. So it is likely that *dang* here is indeed a term of semantic appraisal tantamount to "true."[13]

In broader philosophical discourse, *dang* plays other roles beyond semantic evaluation. Besides utterances, a person's conduct can be *dang* (fitting, apt).[14] Indeed, even when applied to utterances, in some contexts *dang* probably has the connotation of endorsing them as socially appropriate, rather than true. A passage in *Xunzi* describes the gentleman as "correcting his [use of] names and making his [use of]

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to whether it conforms to the speaker's actual thoughts (Graham 2003: 275). In other contexts, *xin* may refer to whether an utterance is reliable or trustworthy.

[13] Hansen notes this role of *dang* but suggests *dang* is nevertheless a term of pragmatic, not semantic, evaluation, which he interprets as "is appropriately predicable of" rather than "is semantically satisfied by" or "is true of" (Hansen 1985: 509, n. 22). Like Robins, I see no difference between Hansen's suggested interpretation and taking *dang* to refer to a semantic status (Robins 2010, 46: n. 72). Either way, as Robins points out, a predicate *F* is *dang* with respect to a thing *a* if only if *a* is *F*, a relation sufficient for *dang* to refer to a semantic status.

[14] The *Xunzi* refers to a gentleman's speech, conduct, and cognition as being "largely *dang*" (Xunzi 8/57–58) and describes the sage as "*dang* right and wrong" (Xunzi 8/103)—the point presumably being that the sage acts and speaks in conformity to the norms of right and wrong. Citations to *Xunzi* give chapter and line numbers in the Harvard-Yenching concordance (Xunzi 1966).

expressions *dang* in order to clearly express his thoughts" (Xunzi 22/49). Here *dang* probably concerns not the truth of the gentleman's assertions, but the suitability of the expressions he uses with respect to facilitating communication. A passage in *The Annals of Lü Buwei* warns that the explanations and expositions of a gentleman must "*dang* [coincide with] righteousness" (Knoblock and Riegel 2000: 184, sect. 7/5), suggesting that the moral status of the gentleman's utterances may be more important than their semantic status. In some contexts, then, *dang* seems to express semantic appraisals and functions much as "true" does, while in others it may connote a general notion of propriety grounded in rhetorical, prudential, and ethical norms, not only semantic ones. Indeed, outside of the Later Mohist writings, contexts in which *dang* unambiguously expresses semantic evaluation are uncommon.

Ran 然 and *Shi* 是

Examples of semantic appraisal in pre-Han philosophical texts often occur in passages devoted to citing and rejecting opponents' assertions. Such rejections may claim that the opponent's statement (*yan* 言) is "*bu ran* 不然," or "not so." For example, the *Xunzi* cites an assertion, attributed to Mencius, that "people who study, their nature is good" and responds that "*shi bu ran* 是不然," or "this is not so."[15] The ensuing rebuttal adduces distinguishing features of people's nature (*xing* 性) and non-spontaneous, intentional activity (*wei* 偽) to argue that the Mencian claim is mistaken because it conflates the distinction between the two. What people acquire through study is not their nature, Xunzi contends, and therefore that people who study become good does not show their nature is good (Xunzi 23/10–20). The grounds on which Xunzi rejects the claim, then, are norms for distinguishing different kinds of things, namely nature (*xing*) and non-spontaneous, deliberate activity (*wei*). According to how *ran* (so) was commonly understood at the time, such norms are precisely the basis for semantic appraisals. For example, the Later Mohists explain that something is *ran* with respect to a kind or name when it is similar to a model associated with that kind or name (Graham 2003: 316, A70–71). Assessments of whether things are *ran* thus rest on norms for distinguishing similar from different kinds of things. By extension, assessments of whether assertions are *ran* rest on norms for distinguishing the kinds of things mentioned in the assertions. Xunzi's line of argument against Mencius thus renders it likely that *bu ran* (not so) in this context invokes semantic norms. Probably, "*shi bu ran*" here expresses the attitude that Mencius's claim is not semantically correct—in other words, it is not true.

The Mohist "Lesser Selection" uses *ran* and also *shi* 是 (this, right) to express semantic assessments of terms asserted of things. On one plausible interpretation, the text uses *shi* to endorse predication of *ming* 名 (names), or nominal predication, and *ran* to endorse predication of *ci* 辭 (expressions, phrasings), or verbal predication (Robins 2010: 35). For example, the writers refer to utterances of the form "White horses are horses, riding white horses is riding horses" as "*shi er ran* 是而然" ("this and so") (Graham 2003: 485). The implication is that, asserted of white horses, "horse" is *shi* (right), and, asserted of someone's riding white horses, "riding horses" is *ran* (so). In such cases, *shi* and *ran* seem best explained as terms of semantic appraisal, since claiming that a predicate is *shi* or *ran* when applied to a thing is equivalent to asserting the predicate of that thing (Robins 2010: 45–46). Saying "*shi*" of "white horses are horses" or "*ran*" of "riding white horses is riding horses" is thus tantamount to deeming these assertions true.

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[15] Xunzi 23/10. From the context, the only reasonable interpretation of the pronoun "*shi*" (this) is that its antecedent is Mencius's assertion, as the next line of the text clearly uses "*shi*" again to refer to the assertion, complaining that "this [Mencius's assertion] does not attain to knowledge of people's nature."

Since the Mohists give a reasonably clear account of the concept of *ran*, their dialectical writings furnish the basis for a plausible conjecture about how they might have explained truth, had they been interested in formulating a theory of truth. *Ran* in Classical Chinese is a contraction of "*ru zhi* 如之" ("like it," "resemble it") (Pulleyblank 1995: 10). To say something is *ran* is to say it is like or similar to some antecedently specified thing or has some antecedently specified feature. The Mohists seem to have explained most forms of predication as a matter of asserting that a relevant likeness or similarity obtains between the object of which a term is predicated and paradigmatic referents of that term (Fraser 2013: 13–14; Fraser 2015, sect. 6). Assertions predicating kind terms of things enable us to communicate, they thought, because they show us what the subject of the assertion is like—namely, it is like other, standard referents of the term predicated, with which we are already familiar (Fraser 2013: 11–12; Fraser 2015, sect. 4.2). By extension, to evaluate an assertion as *ran*—and thus true—is to affirm that what is asserted of things is indeed like those things. "Riding white horses is riding horses" is *ran* because riding white horses is indeed an action relevantly similar to other actions referred to by "riding horses." To evaluate an assertion as not *ran*—and thus false—is to deny that the things referred to are like what the assertion states. "Riding horses is riding oxen" is not *ran* because riding oxen is a different kind of action from riding horses, and thus the asserted predicate is not like the action referred to.

What determines whether two things should count as similar, and thus whether an assertion is true when it predicates of one of them a term normally associated with the other? This question can be regarded as a variant formulation of a pivotal issue in early Chinese philosophy of language, epistemology, and metaphysics: what determines the norms—the proper *dao*—for drawing distinctions between different kinds of things? In the theoretical framework of early Chinese philosophy, what we regard as issues concerning truth can be expected to instead be formulated as issues concerning the *dao* of language use, specifically how to draw distinctions properly. Suitably elaborated, then, early Chinese thinkers' different accounts of the practical norms of distinction-drawing underlying the proper use of words could also yield explanations of semantic correctness and thus truth.

Although *ran* (so) and *shi* (this, right) can indeed be used to express semantic appraisals, contexts in which these terms are unequivocally applied to assertions are relatively uncommon in pre-Han texts. Both terms are more frequently predicated of objects or situations, to describe how they are, to indicate that they are like other objects or situations, or to assert that something previously said also applies to them. Of more than three dozen occurrences of *ran* in the Mohist canons, for instance, none are unambiguously applied to utterances.[16] Typical examples of how *ran* is used include the explanation of a "minor reason"—a necessary but not sufficient condition—as "having it, [things are] not necessarily so (*ran*); lacking it, [things are] necessarily not so (*ran*)" (Graham 2003: 263, A1) and the statement that "how things are so (*ran*), and how we know it, and how we make others know it need not be the same" (Graham 2003: 359, B9). As to *shi*, even in logical and semantic contexts it is more often used of objects than of assertions, as when the Mohists explain distinction-drawing debates (*bian*) as "one side calls it *shi* (this), one side calls it *fei* 非 (not-this), and the one that fits (*dang*) wins" (Graham 2003: 403, B35). The *Xunzi* regularly uses *ran* as a term of semantic assessment only in contexts concerned with rebutting opponents' views;[17] outside of such contexts examples of *ran* used this way are unusual. Even within such contexts, *ran* may be applied to things or persons. Rejecting Song Xing's doctrine that to be insulted is not disgraceful, for instance, Xunzi contends that everyone from the

[16] The examples of semantic appraisal using *ran* considered above are from the "Lesser Selection" (*Mozi* book 45), not the canons (books 40–43).
[17] See *Xunzi* books 15, 18, and 23. Even in these contexts, not all instances of *ran* are unambiguously predicated of utterances rather than of things.

sage-kings on down follows the same traditional norms in distinguishing honor from disgrace; only Song Xing is not *ran* (not so), or not like everyone else (Xunzi 18/112). Another example occurs in a passage explaining why Mencius's assertion that people's nature is good is not *ran*. The passage contends that, counterfactually, if people's nature were indeed good, they would spontaneously be "upright, well-organized, peaceful, and orderly," but "now [it's] not so" (*jin bu ran* 今不然)—in fact, people are not like this (Xunzi 23/39).

To sum up, although *ran* and *shi* can be used to appraise the semantic correctness—and thus truth—of assertions, they are used this way only infrequently. More often, they are predicated of things, people, or situations. Moreover, the most prominent early Chinese texts that treat philosophy of language hardly address the topic of semantic evaluation using these terms.[18] The paucity of attention devoted to them again supports the generalization that truth was not a focus of theoretical interest in early Chinese philosophy.

Ke 可

As we saw, one argument proposed against ascribing a concept of truth to pre-Han philosophical discourse is that, rather than assessing whether assertions are true, early Chinese thinkers supposedly evaluated whether utterances are pragmatically assertible, using the term "*ke* 可" (permissible, acceptable, possible). Throughout the pre-Han literature, *ke* is regularly used to express assessments of conduct or policies as socially or ethically acceptable or permissible. As it turns out, however, outside of the Later Mohist canons and the *Gongsun Longzi* 公孫龍子, pre-Han texts rarely use *ke* to evaluate utterances. Moreover, in the Mohist canons, assessments of whether utterances are *ke* seem best explained as resting on logical and semantic grounds, not pragmatic ones. Appraising whether utterances are *ke* is thus intertwined with, not an alternative to, appraising whether they are true.

In non-semantic contexts, *ke* is sometimes used to express possibility, as in "If the south has a limit, then it can (*ke*) be reached" (Graham 2003: 448, B73). In semantic contexts, when predicated of utterances, it seems to express a related notion of logical-semantic possibility or permissibility. An utterance is *ke* if it is logically and semantically possible for it to be correct. To be *ke,* an utterance must comply with logical and semantic norms and be consistent with contextually understood premises. The utterance must be free of contradiction, inconsistency, and other logical and semantic errors, perhaps including practical contradiction with the speaker's actions.

Ke and *dang* 當 (fitting) are interrelated. One Mohist canon indicates that if *yan* 言 (statements) are not *ke*, then "to take them as *dang* would surely be injudicious" (Graham 2003: 445, B71). This remark suggests that a statement can be *dang* only if it is also *ke*—it can fit what it is asserted of only if it is a permissible utterance, one that conforms to relevant logical and semantic norms. Conversely, a statement can probably be *ke* without being *dang* in a particular context—it can be permissible (*ke*) as long as it could potentially fit (*dang*) in some conceivable context, without necessarily fitting in the actual context. Another canon indicates that when asserted of an object, two contradictory terms, such as "ox" and "non-ox," cannot both be not-*ke*, or "impermissible" (Graham 2003: 317, A73). At least one must be *ke*. Assessment of whether an utterance is *ke* is thus partly grounded in logical and semantic norms governing the use of contradictory terms, specifically including some version of the principle of excluded middle. According to the Mohists' conception of a distinction-drawing debate (*bian* 辯), exactly one of any pair of contradictory terms, such as "ox" and "non-ox," asserted of an object must fit (*dang*) it (Graham 2003: 318, A74). Consequently, of two assertions that cannot both be impermissible (not-*ke*), at

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[18] Examples include the Mohist canons, the *Xunzi* "Correct Names" essay, and the essays cited earlier on language use in *The Annals of Lü Buwei*.

least one must fit (*dang*) its object. Another canon indicates that, having distinguished two opposing terms and their objects, it is impermissible (not-*ke*) to apply one of the terms to the referents of both, as doing so leaves us without any semantic relation between name and object that can be applied consistently (Graham 2003, 446, B72). Using a term this way would be a logical error, presumably a type of self-contradiction, as well as a semantic error, in that the term would not be used consistently to refer to the same kind of object.

As this quick survey of the Later Mohists' use of *ke* shows, in contexts addressing the use of words and statements, *ke* is not primarily a term of pragmatic evaluation. Assessments of whether an utterance is *ke* appeal to logical norms, such as excluded middle and non-contradiction, and depend partly on semantic norms. They may contribute to semantic appraisals, as they pertain to the conditions under which assertions can fit (*dang*) their objects. Appraisal in terms of *ke* thus complements appraisal in terms of truth, and the Mohists' concern with *ke* provides no reason for thinking they may not also employ concepts with roles that overlap that of truth.

5. Concluding Remarks

Pre-Han philosophical texts employ at least three terms—*dang* 當, *ran* 然, and *shi* 是—that in some contexts are best explained as expressing evaluations of the semantic correctness of asserted words, phrases, and statements. Since these evaluations seem to appeal specifically to semantic norms, they are functionally analogous to appraisals of truth. Pre-Han thinkers can thus defensibly be said to employ terms whose function is similar to "...is true," to evaluate assertions as true or false, and to have a conception of assertions being correct according to semantic norms, rather than only pragmatic norms.

At the same time, however, the interpretive effort required to extract early Chinese concepts of and views on truth from the texts only underscores how marginal issues of truth were in pre-Han philosophy. The emphasis of Chinese philosophy of language and logic lay elsewhere, on the role of names and statements in communicating, guiding action, and preserving social order. The central semantic issue concerned how the use of terms is grounded in practical norms for drawing distinctions between what is similar or different. Logical inquiries mainly investigated norms of term use, grounded primarily in similarity relations. Discussions of inference and argumentation were concerned chiefly with how predication is based on pattern recognition and analogical inference, and not with truth-functional or formally valid inference.

Nevertheless, as we have seen, the early Chinese theoretical picture of correct term use as resting on norms for distinguishing similarities and differences could yield explanations of the semantic correctness of assertions which amount to implicit accounts of truth. Pre-Han thought thus exhibits a structural and thematic focus on *dao*, norms of term use, and the action-guiding role of language while still employing truth-like concepts and yielding explanations of semantic statuses comparable to truth.

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