Practices of Truth in Philosophy

Historical and Comparative Perspectives

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4 Truth and Ideology in Classical China

Mohists vs. Zhuangists

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4.1 Introduction

The Mohists and the Zhuangists agreed that truth is normative (by which I mean action-guiding) and constitutive of our attitudes, dispositions, reasoning, emotions, and actions.[1] For both, *knowing that* something is true is *knowing how* to bring about a desired outcome with a certain level of certainty by operating in a field of relations. Both texts, the *Mozi* 墨子 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, argue that we should care for the truth not because it represents or describes reality in a more accurate way than false beliefs and statements, but because it guides our behavior in the most fitting way—in ways that help us thrive by virtue of leading to harmonious, effective, and peaceful social interrelations. As Fraser has noted, in Classical Chinese philosophy, truth isn't so much a representation of reality as it is a pattern of reliable activity. There's a shift from *are there true beliefs* and *does this belief represent the world accurately* to whether certain patterns of drawing distinctions (knowing) are more effective for our interactions with the world.[2] Truth can be defined as a series of embodied beliefs and perspectives that lead to fitting dispositions, emotions, and actions (regardless of whether they accurately describe the world, or whether there are other competing beliefs and perspectives that equally accurately or inaccurately describe the world). Whereas falsity, rather than mistaken representations of reality, are certainties that cause unfitting behavior: dispositions and actions that create ineffective interactions and lead to conflict and harm. We should care about truth not because of a theoretical interest in accurately describing reality but because of its normative power to guide our behavior in the most fitting way.

This shared understanding of truth, nevertheless, develops into two radically different sociopolitical and ethical positions. The Mohists wished to take advantage of the causal power of beliefs to implement a government-sanctioned ideology that couldn't allow for pluralism in values, norms, beliefs, and practices. The Zhuangists, on the other hand, warned

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us against the dangers of using single-truth discourses to enforce ideological monopolies and engaged in a sophisticated critique of dogmatism.

4.2 Mohist Philosophy: The Power of Ideology

> The sage, who takes ordering the world as his task, must know what disorder arises from; only then he can put it in order. If he doesn't know what disorder arises from, he can't put it in order. To give an analogy, it's like a doctor treating someone's disease. He must know what the disease arises from; only then can he treat it.[3]
>
> (*Mozi* 14.1; Fraser 2020, 50)

The Mohist project shares with other historical social and political movements a strong idealism toward the power of humans to determine their destiny and create better worlds by eliminating war, violence, abuse, corruption, inequity, injustice, famine, and poverty, all of them common harms in the Warring States period (476–221 BCE), and which the Mohists encapsulate under the umbrella term *luan* 亂—disorder. Mohist idealism feeds a social justice program to eliminate disorder by identifying its causes, starting from a realistic examination of social structures, institutions, and practices. They promote the institutions that assist in people's flourishing and strongly oppose those that impede it (such as war, deemed immoral both for its cruelty and the economic deprivation it causes; *Mozi* 18.2). The Mohists are keenly aware that people need certain socioeconomic conditions in order to thrive, that public social and material conditions shape people's individual choices as well as the possibilities and outcomes of their actions. The recognition of dependency on sociomaterial conditions addresses the masses' recalcitrant lack of power over their own lives and their perceived unequal competence with regard to the ruling elite, hence their need to be led in ways that promote their benefit and help them flourish.

The Mohists make two interesting observations that become fundamental for their social justice and political projects.

The first observation is that beliefs have causal power—namely, that holding certain beliefs affords certain behaviors while preventing others. The paradigmatic example is the belief in the existence of retributive ghosts and spirits, which are said to punish everyone equally, regardless of rank or wealth, when engaging in actions that, directly or by negligence, cause harm. The Mohists observe that, out of fear, those who believe in retributive ghosts tend not to engage in self-interested, vicious, or corrupt behaviors that lead to social disorder and harm, while disbelief in the existence of retributive ghosts frees people from the threat of metaphysical

retribution, making them more self-indulgent (*Mozi* 31.1a, 31.6a). Our motivations, dispositions, emotions, and actions follow naturally from our beliefs; as such, what we deem to be true has an enormous practical impact.

The second observation is that it's possible to manipulate people's beliefs to guarantee desired behaviors and avoid undesirable ones. The Mohists wished to harness this power of manipulation in order to establish a well-functioning, just, and peaceful society.[4] Even more, they felt the responsibility to do so: without unified top-down guidance, people will either think for themselves, each one the source of a plurality of conflicting values and beliefs, or be led astray by "false" doctrines promulgated by self-interested individuals.[5] Both possibilities are considered unacceptable. A lack of fixed standards on morality and truth leads to a dangerous pluralism, which the Mohists identify as the main cause of disorder (*Mozi* 11.1).[6] Therefore, it's the ruler's responsibility to sanction institutionalized norms, values, and beliefs, and to enforce this unitary standard through a system of social emulation and punishments and rewards (*Mozi* 11.4).

For instance, since the belief in retributive ghosts causes what the Mohists deem to be desirable behavior, it's the sage ruler's responsibility to sanction the belief in ghosts as truth and the doctrines that doubt or negate their existence as falsity (*Mozi* 31.6a). This stands even in the event that ghosts and spirits don't *in fact* exist. Against a critic who argues that honoring and making offerings to potentially inexistent spirits entails a waste of precious resources, the Mohists contend that it's not like "pouring the offerings in a sewage ditch and throwing them away," for the living relatives and the rest of the community partake of the food and wine, which makes for "an enjoyable gathering and builds kinship among the townspeople" (*Mozi* 31.7a, 7b).[7] Regardless of the facticity of spirits, everyone benefits from believing in their existence and power, and acting accordingly, which leads us to an important aspect of the Mohist concept of truth.

Given the causal power of our beliefs and the fact that our beliefs can be manipulated (both by self-interested individuals and by sage rulers), truth is more esteemed for its normative value than for its descriptive content. Which isn't the same as saying that the Mohists make no difference between the descriptive and normative aspects of truth. I take the previous claim on the desirable effects of the belief in the existence of ghosts (whether they exist in actuality or not) as evidence that the Mohists could and did establish this difference. However, they dismissed the representational or descriptive aspect of truth in favor of its normative value.[8] Notice that this is a non-essentialist approach to truth particularly compelling for assessing phenomena that can't be exhaustively comprehended by means of empirical observation, such as the existence of ghosts and fate. Given that evidence regarding these types of phenomena is either insufficient or

contradictory, truth discourses are approached in a non-representational, relational manner. And one of the most crucial relations is that of effect: what a thing *does* to others rather than what it *is* (or isn't) by itself. In a pragmatic consequentialist vein, the Mohists claim that we must take to be *true* whatever, upon analysis and regardless of the accuracy of the belief in its description of reality, causes fitting behavior according to a given standard.[9]

The standard to decide which actions and action-guiding beliefs are desirable originates in the Mohist's religious belief in Heaven (*tian* 天) as an anthropomorphized god-figure. Heaven is an infallible and impartial (*jian* 兼) moral agent who seeks to benefit all of humanity while preventing harm for all—what we'll refer to as the *collective benefit principle* (literally, "to benefit each other mutually and impartially"—*jian xiang li* 兼相利; *Mozi* 26–28). As van Norden notes, the Mohists define "benefit" in objective ways: resources to cover basic needs, large population to act as labor force, and social order.[10] Heaven gives humans a unified, objective, and universal standard by which to decide what's right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, and it's a consequentialist one.[11] All beliefs and their corresponding actions must be judged against the amount of collective benefit and harm they produce—not just for ourselves and our inner circle, not even only for our own state, but for all of humanity. Much as impartial Heaven, we humans must "do for others as one would do for oneself" (為彼者由為己; *Mozi* 16.1b),[12] a maxim leading to the elimination of disorder and the creation of a world without war, poverty, and inequities, where everyone can have equal opportunities to flourish.

The morality and desirability of a belief are evaluated by its consequences (i.e., the practical result of holding such belief in real life), and against the principle of collective benefit. If believing in retributive ghosts causes a larger amount of collective benefit, this belief must be sanctioned as morally right and desirable; and also true, since truth isn't primarily a question of facticity.

This notion of truth is also evident in the Mohist arguments against the existence of fate. In Classical China, fate (*ming* 命) is a non-subjective form of agency that causes things to happen without human control.[13] Fatalism is the doctrine that the efficacy of human agency is limited, that humans have no full power to cause desired effects regardless of the amount of effort, availability of means and resources, and rational planning (*Mozi* 35.1). The Mohist rejection of fatalism via the "three criteria/standards" (*san biao/fa* 三表/法) serves to illustrate their distinction between the descriptive and normative aspects of truth as well as their inclination to place a heavier weight on the latter.

The Mohists established three criteria to determine the truth or falsity (*qing wei* 情偽) of doctrines: root (*ben* 本), source (*yuan* 原), and utility

(*yong* 用).[14] The root criterion requires that we examine received beliefs in authoritative historical records containing reliable testimony from sage figures and experts from the past. A claim that has received continued support and has been acted upon by morally or technically competent cognizers such as the Sage Kings passes the test; whereas a claim only supported by individuals of no moral or technical authority and arguably self-interested motives doesn't. The source criterion, in turn, assesses the empirical evidence to justify a belief. It's based on the testimony of contemporaries who may be able to report on certain experiences, such as witnessing (literally, "having seen or heard") fate. Finally, the utility criterion is a pragmatic test investigating the utility of taking a claim as true, and acting *as if* it were true, in terms of the collective benefit principle.

In the "Against Fatalism" triad, the Mohists first use the root and source criteria to assess whether fate *in fact* exists, that is, whether the doctrine of fatalism is true in a descriptive sense. However, both criteria prove somewhat inconclusive, with past accounts and empirical witnesses' reports admittedly offering contradictory evidence. The Mohists urge us then to identify reliable epistemic subjects, such as the Sage Kings, who, according to records, never proclaimed nor acted upon the belief that they didn't have the power to shape the course of events. In contrast, those who appealed to fate did it only for their own convenience, not for the benefit of the world. In this way, fatalism is proven to be the way of the tyrant, vicious, and morally weak to exonerate and free themselves of responsibility and accountability (*Mozi* 37). Clearly, appeals to the facticity of fate are unavoidably merged with appeals to the consequences of the belief in fate, given that the validity of testimony must be examined against the intentions and agendas of the epistemic subjects providing it.[15] Hence the utility criterion presents the strongest argument against the belief in fate as *true* belief. Since a belief in fatalism brings disorder upon the world, the belief in fatalism must be strongly opposed (*qiang fei* 強非; *Mozi* 37.4).[16]

The Mohists are persuaded that only certain behaviors are desirable, and only certain beliefs reliably cause these desirable behaviors. All other beliefs necessarily cause unfitting behaviors, behaviors that create disorder and harm for all.[17] These assumptions explain the Mohists' profound distrust in pluralism—in people's capacity to live harmoniously and thrive while adhering to different moral views, holding different beliefs, and engaging in different practices. If there's a single, universal definition of benefit, only some actions that qualify as fitting behavior, and only some beliefs that *reliably* cause a disposition to engage in those actions, it logically follows that pluralism of beliefs and practices necessarily creates chaos and collective harm. The Mohists, having set the goal of ending disorder and bringing benefit to all within their social justice program, can't but control the doctrines that people deem to be true. Hence, their

political philosophy was intended to eliminate pluralism and impose a unified and institutionally sanctioned system where they control not only resources, institutions, norms, and practices but also people's dispositions, morals, values, and beliefs.

The following points summarize the reasoning and combination of claims that drive the Mohists to become authoritarian ideologues:

1. Beliefs have causal power: they directly cause people to engage in certain behaviors.
2. True beliefs are those that cause fitting behavior (with lesser to no concern with facticity).
3. Fitting behavior is evaluated according to Heaven's collective benefit principle: actions that promote benefits for all while avoiding harm.
4. Benefit is defined as wealth and resources, large populations, and social order.
5. Only certain beliefs cause benefit-promoting fitting behavior; all others lead to disorder and harm.
6. Beliefs can be manipulated.
7. Therefore, it's the political elite's task to institutionalize, sanction, and impose a unitary system of beliefs that cause fitting behavior while eradicating all others.

The Mohists were radical both in their implacable quest for social equity and justice and in the extreme means that they were willing to implement in order to achieve it, which may have resulted in a dystopia had Mohism been governmentally implemented (it never was at great scale). Van Norden has argued that the fact that the norms and beliefs institutionalized by the Mohists aren't decided arbitrarily (they are decided according to Heaven's principle of collective benefit) acts as a limiting condition to their authoritarianism.[18] However, appeals to divine will have often served the purpose of legitimizing the agendas of autocratic rulers, both in ancient China (with appeals to Heaven) and modern Europe and North America (with appeals to God). Additionally, as Locke explains, arbitrariness is only one among several factors involved in the creation of authoritarian regimes and ideologies; other threats against pluralism include absolutism and uniformitarianism.[19] Mohist claims 3, 4, and 5 in the previous list are absolutist. There's a single, substantive (content-dependent) definition of fitting behavior; a single, substantive definition of benefit; and a unitary set of substantive beliefs leading to those. Values, beliefs, and their corresponding behaviors are thought to universally apply to all humans and are ultimately justified by appeals to an absolute and infallible divine will. These claims also hold the view that values, beliefs, experiences, norms, and practices must be homogenized to avoid conflict arising from

competing claims. The system that the Mohists wished to implement was a government-sanctioned authoritarian ideology, which by definition couldn't allow for pluralism in values, norms, beliefs, and practices.

As Žižek explains (with Hegel), ideological phenomena comprise (1) "explicit doctrines, articulated convictions on the nature of man, society, and the universe"—such as the Mohist doctrines against fatalism and for the existence of retributive ghosts. (2) External "material existence in institutions, rituals, and practices that give body to it"—such as the Mohist system of social emulation and the institutions that enact punishments and rewards. And (3) social reality, "the elusive network of implicit, quasi-'spontaneous' presuppositions and attitudes" that lie at the core of economic, legal, political, sexual, etc., practices—such as the Mohist-sanctioned attitudes of impartiality and care.[20] I understand the Mohist system as an authoritarian ideology insofar as it aims to impose by manipulation (via both coercive and noncoercive means) a unitary, uniform, and absolute set of beliefs, values, and norms that admittedly have causal power and will guide people toward a unitary, uniform, and absolute set of behaviors that are institutionally sanctioned as desirable (claims 1, 6, and 7).

I'm taking a moderate approach to ideology between minimalist and demanding definitions. A minimalist definition understands ideology as a "descriptive vocabulary of day to day existence" that mediates our understanding of the world, how it functions, and what's our role within it.[21] Our reality is always mediated by a mutually reinforcing set of action-guiding beliefs that appear *naturalized* (not constructed nor externally imposed) and so remain unseen, which makes them extremely difficult to identify and challenge.[22] In this view, there's no outside to ideology; there's only participation in *this* or *that* ideology.[23] In contrast, a more demanding definition such as the Marxist understands ideology as the state product of modern class struggle, an apparatus of coercion of the ruling class based on misleading and false ideas that help support a social structure in favor of existing relations of domination and the (often economic) interests of those in power.

The moderate approach that I attribute to the Mohists, in turn, sees ideology as an intentionally constructed apparatus of belief, value, and practice manipulation. Ideologues impose a unitary perception of reality after their own conception of what's good in order to manipulate people into desired patterns of action. The ideas promoted have a clear political purpose: to shape people in ways conducive to the ruling power's agenda and to cause them to act on behalf of particular interests. Nevertheless, the promoted ideas aren't necessarily false in a descriptive sense nor are the ideologues' interests necessarily aimed at subjugating the ruled people for their own benefit. In the Mohist case, the ruling power's agenda is a social justice program, and their interests are those of benefiting all of humanity.

In my reading, their good intentions don't turn their proposal any less ideological nor any less authoritarian, for the reasons discussed earlier.

Taking an action-guiding, normative take on truth and acknowledging the causal power of beliefs doesn't necessarily lead to authoritarian patterns of thought. In the next section, I present a case where these premises are combined with pluralism, skepticism, and perspectivism in a sophisticated critique of ideological dogmatism.

4.3 Zhuangist Philosophy: Pluralism and Anti-Dogmatism

> Knowledge has something upon which it depends to be correct, but what it depends on is peculiarly unfixable.[24]
>
> (*Zhuangzi* 6, 225; Guo 2004, 225)

Where the Mohists acknowledged the power of beliefs to guide action, the Zhuangists attribute this causal power to every single element of a person's (or conscious being) *intersectional perspective*. Zhuangist perspectives aren't limited to sets of doxastic commitments such as propositional beliefs.[25] Along the lines defined by Camp—"an open-ended disposition to notice, explain, and respond to situations in the world,"[26] a perspective structures "one's thinking in certain ways, so that certain sorts of properties stick out as especially notable or explanatorily central in one's intuitive thinking."[27] Zhuangist perspectives are constituted by the beliefs we commit to and the values we endorse, but also by social norms, roles, and relationships; our sense of identity, personal aspirations, motivations, and expectations; preferences, fears, and dislikes; physical capabilities and limitations; formation, education, and skills; transitory moods; and no less importantly, biological features, needs, and tendencies. All of these elements intersect with one another in the emergence of a perspective, some being relatively stable like social roles whereas others, like moods, are transitory.[28] Intersectional perspectives are the place (*fang* 方) from which we experience, know, interpret, value, and interact with the world. A window into reality that conditions what we're able to see and imagine (and what remains hidden in plain sight, inaccessible and inconceivable), what we're willing to accept as possible and right, and ultimately what our world becomes.

Knowing that something is true means being able to imagine, formulate, and justify a claim from a uniquely bounded ground (a frame of reference) afforded by one's temporarily adopted or relatively stable perspective. Truth is indexical: it depends on the perspective from which a claim is formulated.[29] Just like *this* means different things depending on what I'm pointing at, any truth claim depends for its possibility, formulation, and

justification upon the perspective from which I'm asserting it. By virtue of appearing so, things are justified *from within* the perspective that affords their appearing so: "Each thing necessarily has some place from which it can be affirmed as thus and so, and someplace from which it can be affirmed as acceptable. So no thing is not right, no thing is not acceptable" (*Zhuangzi* 2, 69; Ziporyn 2020, 15). And things appear to us in radically different and even contradictory ways. This plurality is irreducible: opposing views, beliefs, values, perceptions, experiences, and truth claims all have their own grounds on which to be formulated and an equal right to be affirmed, their own field of justification inherent to the perspective that enables its emergence.[30] At the same time, this irreducible plurality of coexisting truths, realities, and paths (*daos* 道) implies that no single one of them has the right to claim itself absolute or universal. In other words, the very fact that our perspective allows us to see and affirm the world in a particular manner entails the possibility and justification for our view. But since there's an endless number of coexisting perspectives from which to perceive things and make claims about them, there's no single standpoint from which to know the world nor a unitary standard from which to justify our truth claims. As the quote at the beginning of this section emphasizes, "what knowledge depends on is peculiarly unfixable."[31]

For things are neither *this* nor *that* (distinctions, positions, and judgments belong to human perspectives, not to things), or rather, they are both *this* and *that* insofar they afford all possible experiences and assertions that can be made about them by humans and other conscious beings (and potentially also those that we aren't able to make due to our own limited features). Feces are disgusting for humans but nutritive food for rabbits.[32] Sleeping in a damp place makes humans ill and eels thrive. Is this wooden structure a beam or a pillar? Is this person a beauty or a leper? Which perspective is truer? The Zhuangist answer is that things accommodate any two opposite points in a dichotomy, that

> To be a *this* is in fact also to be a *that*, and every *that* is also a *this*. *That* is itself already both *this* and *not-this*, both a right and a wrong. But *this* is also already both *this* and *not-this*, both a right and a wrong.
>
> (*Zhuangzi* 2, 66; Ziporyn 2020, 14)

Since the claim that knowledge is perspectival is made from within a particular human perspective, we must remain skeptical about whether things ultimately are different from or identical to what we perceive them to be, whether they are independent from our knowing them or instead they transform along with our knowing them. A human will never have access to a nonhuman perspective, although we're capable of conceiving that there are nonhuman perspectives and even envisioning how they might

look like (with no guarantee of accuracy; it's an exercise in imagination, as when we attempt to relate to how other species experience the world, or when we discuss the world from a *dao*-perspective, which we imagine to be neutral and all-embracing, without preferences, hierarchies, and distinctions). We know that what we can know is limited, contingent, and conditioned by our shifting but always human perspectives, and that's enough to understand that things aren't just *this* or *that* but both and more.

The plurality and unfixability of both reality and knowledge are followed by two normative observations in the *Zhuangzi*, one against action-defeating relativism and another against dogmatism.[33]

First, Zhuangists suggest that plural, even contradictory, truths coexist. My belief that x is so is just as true as your belief that x is not so. Nevertheless, this truth pluralism doesn't imply that all true beliefs have the same status, that they all are equally valid and useful for all situations. Some views, beliefs, values, and norms, afforded by some perspectives, are *situationally* and *contextually* (not universally) more fitting than others for a given agent dealing with a particular phenomenon within a field of relations.[34] The normative implication is that we must acknowledge the binds and limitations of our own perspective, and be open to entertaining perspectives other than our own so that we can make good use of them as needed, which brings us to the stance against dogmatism.

In experiencing the world from the naturalness and obviousness afforded by our perspective, we become oblivious to the multitude of coexisting ways in which things appear to others and tend to endow our valuations of rightness, possibility, normalcy, and acceptability with inflexible correctness and unwarranted universality. Zhuangists identify this recalcitrant rejection of the legitimacy of alterity as the main cause of strife, harm, and unhappiness in the world of humans.[35] They contest it with the fact that any given perspective logically implies the coexistence of its opposite; every *this* (*shi* 是) implies that there's a *that* (*bi* 彼), and there's no concept of *right* (*shi* 是) without the concept of *wrong* (*fei* 非)—what's referred to as the doctrine of "mutual generation of opposites" (方生之說). Simply this realization, this sudden awareness of the relativity, codependence, and coexistence of multiple perspectives, already entails an epistemic opportunity to become more flexible and open-minded, less dogmatic.

Becoming aware of our own perspective *qua* perspective has revelatory value in the sense attributed by L. A. Paul, the value of discovering something new regardless of the subjective value we may assign to what we've discovered.[36] As Connolly notices, a revelation is precisely at the core of what the Lord of the River (or River God) experiences in "Autumn Floods" (*Zhuangzi* 17). Flooded with autumn rains, the Lord of the River takes himself to be vast and limitless; yet upon his encounter with Ruo of the Northern Sea, he becomes suddenly aware of his limitations, his being

small in relation to something unexpectedly larger. In assessing himself for the first time from an unfamiliar and bewildering contrastive position, he discovers that what he previously took to be reality simpliciter was just reality from within *a* particular perspective. As a result, as in a Cartesian frenzy, he feels compelled to doubt and relativize his previously strong-held beliefs and values. Through this experience, Connolly remarks, the Lord of the River

> does not merely change how he thinks about his own values, but he learns something about the nature of value itself. His experience reveals that because each context has its own standard, which is particular to its place and time and cannot be applied beyond it, we are mistaken to attempt to apply one set of values as we make our way through the world.[37]

In gaining awareness of our own perspectives *qua* perspectives, it's revealed to us that our entire perception of the world is partial and limited, a contingent and quasi-accidental product of perspectival intersectionality. That is, we gain a new insight into the process by which values and beliefs are formed—and with it, a newly found epistemic humility.[38] Then, there's the further revelation that our world, what we take to be absolute reality without caveats nor qualifications, can transform simply by shifting perspectives (just like the Lord of the River's self-identity transforms from unbound vastness to a small body of water, and his conception of the nature of evaluative standards shifts from unitary, universal, and necessary to plural, local, and contingent). To anyone who's gone through an equivalent experience, this revelation includes an opportunity to transform how we construct our identities, how we relate to our own views, beliefs, and values and those of others, and how we interact with the world. An opportunity to change our *practical attitude*, which I further discuss next with the notions of True Person (*zhen ren* 真人) and True Knowledge (*zhen zhi* 真知).

Imagine that, upon having this revelatory experience, the Lord of the River had stopped at replacing his previous appreciation of himself as limitless vastness with the new (and shocking) appreciation of being just a small body of water in comparison to the sea. He would have simply traded one perspective for another, one that's certainly larger and, we may say, better informed, toward which he would now show the same level of commitment as he used to the old one. By switching to a larger perspective, the Lord of the River would have acquired epistemic awareness of his own limitations, which is fundamental to combat the kind of clouded ignorance that triggers dogmatist views. But this larger perspective is still limited, partial, and contingent—one among many others, bound to its own premises.

The Lord of the River's initial belief in his vastness is just *as true* as his new belief in its smallness; they just depend for their justification on the relative distinctions and comparisons that are being established in each case. The point of the revelatory experience that we're invited to undergo in many of the stories in the *Zhuangzi* isn't to replace a previously accepted epistemic framework with a new one. The ideal result of the perspectivist corrective (its revelatory value) is the insight that every perspective, old and new, smaller or larger, conventional or alternative is contingent and provisional, limited and relative so that this realization informs a different practical approach to action. But this ideal result isn't something that automatically or instantly happens to the Lord of the River upon having his contrastive experience. He must accept the invitation extended by the experience and put the new insights into practice over time in order to effect a transformation in his overall outlook and attitude.[39]

At a level higher than truths (which are plural, relative, and justified within their own perspective, although not all of them of equal relational value and utility), Zhuangists place the notion of True Knowledge (*Zhuangzi* 6), the attitude that emerges from practicing the insights gained from the unique intersectional perspective of a True Person.[40] This unique perspective is conceptualized as being located at the center of a circle (also called the axis of the *dao*). Each one of the infinite number of points that can be traced in a circle represents a singular perspective from which to open up the world. All but the point in the center, which instead of a perspective leading to a fixed set of beliefs, values, and dispositions, represents an empty location without commitment to any particular perspective, from which we're virtually able to access all existing perspectives and use them *adaptively* (what Ziporyn calls the "wild card," Moeller and D'Ambrosio call the "genuine pretender," and I call the "adaptive agent"[41]). Positioned at the center of the circle, the True Person is a metaphorical shape-shifter ("now a snake, now a dragon"; *Zhuangzi* 20, 667–678), a person who accepts the plurality of truths afforded by reality and doesn't privilege one over another except provisionally, situationally, and temporarily. As such, the True Person avoids commitment to the content-dependent norms, values, beliefs, and dispositions caused by any particular perspective, and acts adaptively in response to the thusness of a given situation (*yin shi* 因是)—now affirming *this* and then *that* (*Zhuangzi* 2, 70).[42] Like the mirror that reflects any and all shapes it encounters but doesn't store them—not allowing any of them to determine its identity (*Zhuangzi* 7, 307).[43] This attitude is also called acting "without a method" or "without a fixed place/perspective" (*wufang* 無方; *Zhuangzi* 17, 584)—an open structure that allows the agent to be temporarily guided and filled with a plurality of mutually replacing perspectives and courses of action, none of which can ever become a stable standard nor replace the structure itself.[44]

A lived experience and practice, True Knowledge isn't a set of doxastic and axiological commitments nor a collection of doctrines, but a practical attitude of constant skepticism and relativism, perspective-shifting, and adaptability.[45] True Knowledge embodies what the Zhuangists consider to be fitting behavior—not a set of fixed actions deemed universally beneficial (as it was in the case of the Mohists), but the attitude to not know anything with certainty, relativize to what oneself and others take for granted; continuously reevaluate one's positions, beliefs, and values against competing ones; shift in between perspectives without finally endorsing nor committing to any of them; and act according to circumstances in an adaptive manner.

This content-neutral and procedural definition of fitting behavior explains why the True Person's perspective acquires its privileged status as *True* Knowledge. As discussed earlier, if things are both *this* and *that*, they permit a multiplicity of perceptions, distinctions, assertions, and judgments, all of which can potentially become valuable for certain contexts and situations. But the perspective of the center affords an attitude toward knowledge and reality that is *always fitting*, insofar as it's procedural and doesn't commit the agent to a fixed set of content-dependent beliefs, values, norms, and actions.[46] Instead, it encourages her to find the best fit among all available options at any given time and within a particular relational context. Ziporyn has argued that True Knowledge, a perspective just like any other, satisfies two criteria for objective knowledge that no other perspective (no other of the endless points in the circle but the center) can satisfy: first, it remains in force and irrefutable no matter what content-dependent perspective is operative, and second, it has practical advantages that help us handle the world more effectively regardless of our goals.[47] While all plural and contradictory beliefs are *true* in the sense that they are justified from within a particular perspective, True Knowledge is *True* insofar as it affords us the practical attitude to effectively and happily live in a world of irreducibly plural and contradictory truths. True Knowledge is pragmatically superior to all other perspectival truths because of its comparatively advantageous guiding power, not because it describes the world in a perspective-independent or more accurate way.

We can consider Zhuangist perspectives to act as ideologies in the minimalist definition, an everyday vocabulary that mediates our perception of reality. In this view, there's no outside to perspectives, no perspective-free knowledge of the world, much as there's no outside to ideology. Perspectives open up worlds, but they also impede the unfettered circulation of world-making possibilities; they act like ideological blinders through which only some amount of light can pass, filtering our experiences. Perspectives are "the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning," as Foucault said of the ideological function of the author in the interpretation

of texts.[48] Believing that there are a plurality of coexisting perspectives always at work and that each comes with a set of limitations and possibilities (as the True Person does) is a perspective itself—an ideological mediation of reality; but one that doesn't lend itself to dogmatic uses and that's highly effective insofar as it invites becoming a wanderer (*you* 遊), an agent that isn't stuck in a single epistemic position and can pragmatically and noncommittally travel between them.[49]

As McLeod writes, Zhuangists suggest that universal and absolutist approaches to truth are stultifying.[50] More so, they're dangerous because they lead to dogmatic attitudes that create unnecessary strife and are highly ineffective in guiding our actions. Where the Mohists saw pluralism as the root cause of disorder and harm, the Zhuangists reversed the argument: it's precisely the dogmatic adherence to values taken as universally valid, absolute, and indisputable (without awareness of the perspectivist corrective) which leads to disorder and harm, as the fable of the death of Chaos (*hundun* 渾沌) at the hands of his well-intentioned but ignorant dogmatic colleagues manifests.[51] The goal, then, is to be able to identify our perspectives for what they are so as to not be deluded (like the frog in the well, who mistakes the blue circle above for the entire sky), caught in zero-sum games (like the archetypical opponents Confucians and Mohists, trapped in an endless circle of affirmations and negations of each other's side), enslaved to arbitrary social conventions of virtue, normalcy, propriety, and morality (like Bo Yi and Shu Qi, who died of starvation in self-inflicted exile due to their steadfast loyalty to their king), or unintentionally harmful to others (like the king who killed the adored seabird by pampering it with a golden cage and other human commodities, and the mythical emperors who accidentally provoke Chaos's death by applying to him their own standards of normalcy).[52]

Zhuangists believe that the death of pluralism under the yoke of dogmatism is the death of the possibility to live in a joyful and beautiful world, which reminds us of the *Daodejing*'s 道德經 injunction: "As soon as everyone in the world recognizes the beautiful as beautiful, therein already lies ugliness. As soon as everyone in the world recognizes the good as good, therein already lies evil" (Ames and Hall 2003, 79–81). It calls our attention to the principle of mutual emergence: opposites conceptually depend on one another both for their arising and intelligibility. More importantly, it reveals that any value we may cherish reverses into its opposite (*fan* 反) when universalized, absolutized, and institutionalized, when it's meant to apply to all situations and all persons, accepting no deviations nor accommodations. In the Zhuangist view, we can't imagine a future without coexisting contradictory perspectives/ideologies. But we can imagine a future where perspectives aren't naturalized as neutral appearances of truth; where they are recognized as perspectives within a plurality of possible and

acceptable realities. Zhuangists encourage us to seek the conditions (such as the Lord of the River's revelatory experience) that help us emerge as self-aware epistemic subjects capable of adaptively embracing and navigating a plurality of worlds. This is the Zhuangist sociopolitical and ethical pluralistic and anti-dogmatic project encapsulated in the notion of True Knowledge.

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Notes

1 Given that most if not all of the texts in the received corpus of Classical Chinese philosophy and literature were composite and enjoyed plural authorship, I use the terms "Mohists" and "Zhuangists" to represent views included in the compilations *Mozi* and *Zhuangzi*, respectively (rather than referring to individual philosophers Mozi and Zhuangzi). By Zhuangists I don't mean a group of authors in contrast with Primitivists or Yangists, as per Graham's classification (2001). I refer to all the views elaborated in the text, even when contradictory. I've used the following editions of the classical texts: Guo Qingfan's (2004) 郭慶藩*Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 and William Hung's (1956) *A Concordance to Mo Tzu* 墨子引得. The *Mozi* and the *Zhuangzi* can be conveniently accessed, in Classical Chinese and English translation, on Chinese Text Project (n.d.) ctext.org.
2 Fraser (2016, 22–23).
3 For an introduction to Mohist philosophy, see Fraser (2002/2020, 2016).
4 Beyond controlling their beliefs, the ruling elite has other means to guarantee that people act in desired ways. These include emulation of authority figures and a consistent and transparent social system of punishments and rewards to reinforce the desired behavior until it becomes practically unavoidable. In the "Impartial Care" chapters, the Mohists argue that people are capable of doing difficult things in which they find no pleasure and toward which they show no a priori personal preference, such as going to battle, starving themselves, wearing impossibly painful clothes, or sacrificing one's life for posthumous fame. They make these claims as a response to critiques of impracticability against their demanding injunction on *impartial and reciprocal care* (*jian xiang ai* 兼相愛, also called *inclusive care*, *impartial care*, and *universal love*). See van Norden (2018).
5 They explain that the reason why many of their contemporaries doubt the existence of spirits and endorse fatalism (deemed unfitting disbelief and belief,

respectively) is because evil rulers have initiated and transmitted these doctrines, thereby confounding the common, the poor, and the simple (*Mozi* 31 and 37). People must be protected against the evils caused by the spread of false doctrines, the Mohists argue in a way reminding of the most common principled defense of authoritarianism: *paternalism*. In Dahl's words, "[T]he most readily available justification for nondemocratic rule is, as it has always been, the need for guardians of superior knowledge and virtue" (Dahl 1989, 262, 52, 64; in Mayer 2001, 148). This paternalistic guardianship is based on the principle of *unequal competence* or the *incompetence argument*: "those excluded are said to lack the capacity to make good political judgments and should therefore defer to some élite that does possess the requisite abilities" (Mayer 2001, 151).

6 Van Norden (2011, 58–60) also makes this point.

7 See discussion in Fraser (2016, 68).

8 See discussion in McLeod (2016, 63–71).

9 Referring to the blending of descriptive and normative issues, Fraser (2016, 68) argues that "the Mohists do not apply their own models judiciously enough" because, in the long run, we probably benefit more from pursuing beliefs (or their corresponding behaviors) that are true, rather than just instrumentally useful. Fraser's assessment can be challenged from, at least, two perspectives. First, some scientists like Hoffmann (2019) have persuasively shown that we, humans and other conscious animals, don't benefit from truth (which here stands for perception-independent reality). We have evolved to *not* see things as they are but through an interface that guides us toward useful action, presenting the salient features that we need for our survival. A second perspective from which to challenge Fraser's assessment is historical. Ideologies such as nationalism, racism, capitalism, and individualism, as well as religious beliefs, have proven to be extremely efficient in motivating and manipulating behavior toward particular agendas, both in the past and in current days.

10 Van Norden (2011, 52).

11 Many have read Mohist ethics as a sort of utilitarianism or consequentialism (even "the world's earliest form of consequentialism"—Fraser 2002/2020). Among them: Hansen (1985), Graham (1989), Fraser (2002/2020, 2016), and Van Norden (2007, 2011).

12 Van Norden (2011, 51) and Fraser (2020, 56–53).

13 Further discussion on how fate was conceptualized in Classical China and its functions in Valmisa (2019a).

14 See the Mohist triad against fatalism: *Mozi* (35, 36, 37). The expression "to separate truth from falsity" appears in *Mozi* (36.1). Fraser (2016, 64–69) argues that the three standards reflect an explicit concern not with truth or falsity but with *dao*—the proper way of policy by which to guide social and political action. This claim can only be made if we attribute a correspondence theory of truth to the Mohists. Indeed, the Mohists wouldn't be concerned with truth if they understood true statements primarily as statements that accurately describe or represent reality. But this isn't the case. For the Mohists, a belief or doctrine is true when it effectively causes fitting behavior (according to the collective benefit principle). They are very concerned with truth thus understood, as it determines policy and social order. See further discussion in McLeod (2016, 70 and onwards).

15 McLeod (2016, 66–70) has an illuminating discussion on how the Mohist reasoning for the existence of ghosts is a hybrid between empirical evidence

("ghosts exist") and normative concerns ("we should believe that ghosts exist").

16 Interestingly, some of the Mohist arguments against fatalism overlap with their arguments for the condemnation of music (*Mozi* 32). Both the belief in fate and musicking (listening to music, dancing, singing, etc.; Small 1998) are said to prevent people from working toward the production of their own conditions of living (*Mozi* 32.7b; 35.1; 39.4–5). The Mohists can't conceive of a person capable of enjoying music in the evenings and getting up for work in the morning, much as they can't conceive of a person who believes that their personal agency is limited and yet gives their best effort in their professional and ethical lives.

17 The eradication of unfitting beliefs and behaviors is discussed in the "Identifying Upward" triad (*Mozi* 11–13). Among other measures, subordinates are expected to *identify* with what their superiors "deem right and wrong" (*shi fei* 是非)—that is, to share in their beliefs or, at least, to act *as if* they shared in those beliefs, which the Mohists thought should have the same practical effects as genuinely believing in something. The latter point is most explicit in the "Inclusive Care" chapters (*Mozi* 14–16), where it's argued that acting *as if* (*ruo* 若) we cared for everyone equally reliably brings out the same fitting behavior as genuinely caring for others.

18 Van Norden (2011, 60).

19 Locke (1942, 53–66).

20 Žižek (1994, 10–15).

21 Fields (1990). Although, when it comes to the ideology of racism in the United States, Fields adds conditions that make it a more demanding definition, such as promoting false beliefs for which there is abundant counterevidence.

22 Barthes (1957).

23 Žižek (1994, 1). Žižek famously explains this minimalist approach to ideology with a joke from the movie *Ninotchka* (1939): "A man comes into a restaurant. He sits down at the table and he says, 'Waiter, bring me a cup of coffee without cream.' Five minutes later, the waiter comes back and says, 'I'm sorry, sir, we have no cream. Can it be without milk?'" Even though we would get the same thing in both cases, each *feels* different depending on how we conceptualize the absence. There's no such thing as *just* black coffee (no such thing as reality simpliciter; reality is "phantasmic"; Žižek 1994, 2); there's only coffee *without cream* or coffee *without milk*, according to our ideologies.

24 For an introduction to Zhuangist philosophy, see Hansen (2014); Valmisa (forthcoming 2024).

25 As in Schoenfield's definition (Schoenfield n.d., 2, in Chung 2021, 2–3).

26 Camp (2017, 78–79), in Chung (2021, 4).

27 Camp (2017, 74), in Chung (2021, 3). I discuss the formation of *situations* via salient features afforded by our perspectives in Valmisa (2021a).

28 Species-relative examples of perspectives abound in the *Zhuangzi*. A fine steak is delicious and nourishing for humans, but it leaves a bird indifferent. Intraspecies examples also abound. A gigantic bird seeks the heights in the sky while small doves and quails see them as dangerous and inappropriate. A man like Confucius is agitated upon the sighting of a person in the wild waters of the Lu cataracts while the swimmer is just placidly taking a bath.

29 Hansen (1992, 281).

30 Here I'm disagreeing with McLeod 2016, 111–116 who argues that what makes a statement true in the *Zhuangzi* is not coherence with one's own perspective but consistency with the *dao*, which is perspective independent. In his

account, there are perspective-independent truths, even though they can only be expressed and known from a particular perspective (they can be multiply expressed and run true across all perspectives). My current reading, as expressed above, is that, as finite beings whose knowledge of the world is necessarily constituted by *this* or *that* perspective, we can't know whether there are perspective-independent truths, and for all practical effects reality depends on our perspective (including our evocative and powerful imaginations of a neutral, all-embracing *dao*).

31 Readers will remember that the Mohists wished to bring order to the world by establishing a universal, substantive definition of benefit as the main standard by which to evaluate the desirability of practicing a doctrine, then institutionalizing as true the doctrines that (in their analysis) reliably caused beneficial behavior according to their definition. Zhuangists explain why this won't work. The standards that we can use to justify an assertion are as varied, contingent, and unstable as our perspectives. Not only the same phenomenon will be judged differently depending on the standards we choose to direct our inquiry, but there's a high level of unfixability within the standards themselves. For example, we may want to take benefit as the standard to evaluate the desirability of a doctrine, as the Mohists do, but no stable content-dependent definition of benefit can be established. What can be asserted as beneficial in each case depends on the shifting situations, actors, perspectives, entities, and relations involved. This is what Zhuangists mean with the expression "external things cannot be relied upon/taken as necessary" 外物不可必 (*Zhuangzi* 26). We can't know with certainty what kinds of behavior will reliably lead to desirable outcomes, for two reasons. First, things constantly change over time and along their shifting relations with others, so the same actions won't lead to same outcomes. Second, there's no possibility to establish a universal substantive definition of desirable outcomes, for this always depends on a plurality of shifting contingent factors. As we'll see, the Zhuangist understanding of fitting behavior is procedural and content-neutral.

32 Hoffman (2019, 88) presents this lucid and (probably unknowingly) Zhuangist example.

33 McLeod (2016) also interprets the *Zhuangzi* as developing a position against radical relativism. Like Connolly (2011), Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2017) suggest that Zhuangist perspectivism is a methodological tool to present a polyphony of voices and avoid seriousness about any single reified position. They humoristic key in which they read the *Zhuangzi* is also a tool against dogmatism, as it "inserts a certain irony into the text that renders any understanding provisional and adds a grain of salt into the mix" (11).

34 I explain this point more clearly in Valmisa (forthcoming 2024), section "Implications and Further Research."

35 Apart from dogmatism, this diagnosed recalcitrance leads to a variety of problems also explored in the *Zhuangzi*, which aren't the focus of my discussion here, such as inefficacy in action, disharmony, maladjustments, tiring and fruitless games of rhetoric and disputation, lack of creativity and imagination for problem-solving, leading impoverished and narrow lives, physical danger, metaphysical discomfort, anxiety toward aging, illness, and death, etc.

36 Paul (2014, 13).

37 Connolly (forthcoming).

38 On epistemic humility, see Ryan and Lai (2021, 673–675).

39 In the narrative, the River needs a gentle nudge from the Sea to continue deepening his insights into the nature of value and perspective until he effectively transforms his overall attitude. Here I'm with Callard's qualification to Paul's analysis of transformative experiences in that experiences themselves (at least many of them) don't effect and complete the transformation; the person does over an extended period of time (Callard 2018, 61–62). Indeed, we find in the *Zhuangzi* many examples of missed opportunities to effectively transform the characters' understanding of reality, value, belief, and perspective. For instance, the small flying animals in the opening passage of the *Zhuangzi* gain no revelation when confronted with the unusually larger Peng bird, an experience that should, at the very least, have caused them to relativize their own perceptions of the normal and the good. Instead, the small birds arrogantly reaffirm themselves in their own limited perspectives and *adaptive preferences* while derogatorily dismissing Peng as irrisory, abnormal, and useless. Graziani (2021, 146, 160) similarly refers to the True Person as having a certain "temperament" and engaging in a "practice." Valmisa (2019b) discusses the attitude of the small flying animals as a case of adaptive preferences/sour grapes (Elster 1983).

40 On the True Person's unique epistemological perspective and its pluralistic practical implications, see Fox (2015).

41 Ziporyn (2012); Ziporyn (2015) reads, "Instead, what has appeared in Zhuangzi's hand is a *wild card*. That is, it is indeed just one more card, one more perspective appearing out of nowhere, but it has some peculiar properties, for it has no *fixed shi/fei* of its own; and for that very reason it *enhances the value of whatever shi/fei is currently operative*"; Moeller and D'Ambrosio (2017) (see focused discussion on *yin shi* on pp. 114–115). In my account, the True Person is an *adaptive agent*. On *adapting* as a strategy for effective relational action in Classical Chinese philosophy, see Valmisa (2021b).

42 The linguistic equivalent of adapting for debate and persuasion (*bian* 辯/shui 說) are *goblet spillover words* (*zhi yan* 卮言; *Zhuangzi* 27), poured in response to what the opponent wants/needs to hear, only to leave the goblet empty again and refilled with new adaptive words to be poured, etc. See De Reu (2017).

43 Mengsun Cai is a privileged example of adapting to the thusness of a situation while "employing his heart-mind like a mirror"—he mourns when mourning is the most fitting course of action as dictated by social norms but without identifying himself with the mourning or the feelings associated with it. "He wails without becoming a wailer" (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017, 121). The most famous image remains the monkey-keeper in *Zhuangzi* (2), who adapts his affirmation of *this* or *that* to pacify the one-sided monkeys. *Zhuangzi* (6) is filled with illustrations of the True Person's adaptive use of perspectives; for focused discussion, see Valmisa (2021b, 139–147).

44 More discussion in Valmisa (2021b, 19–25, and chapter 1 overall).

45 Without addressing the *Zhuangzi*, Nguyen (2022) discuss the anti-dogmatic benefits of *playful perspective-shifting*. On perspectives and pluralism, see also Lai (2006).

46 As discussed in a previous footnote, McLeod (2016) argues that Zhuangists resolve the problem of self-contradiction in perspectival relativism by resorting to perspective-independent truths that can be expressed in contradictory ways and remain true across most if not all perspectives due to their consistency with the *dao* (116). If this were so, the statement "both the Ru and the Mo are right" (which, in McLeod's reading, would be a perspective-independent true

statement due to its consistency with the *dao*) should remain true across both the Ru's and Mo's perspectives, which clearly isn't the case. I propose that the reason why Zhuangists don't defeat themselves with their own perspectivism is due to their pragmatic, non-content dependent, and procedural definition of True Knowledge, which in its emptiness of content encourages attitudes that are always fitting and effective insofar as they aren't limited to a single perspective nor content-dependent dispositions, values, norms, and beliefs.

47 Ziporyn (2015).

48 Foucault (1969).

49 In a delightful Zhuangist manner, Žižek (2012 (1994), 17) remarks that the position that there's a demarcation between ideology and reality is *just as ideological* as the position that all is ideology; hence, we must renounce the notion of extra-ideological reality. Best we can do, then, is to live in the tension—while knowing that "ideology is at work in everything we experience as 'reality,'" strive to keep the critique of ideology alive: "[i]t is possible to assume a place that enables us to maintain a distance from it, *but this place from which one can denounce ideology must remain empty, it cannot be occupied by any positively determined reality*—the moment we yield to this temptation, we are back in ideology" (*qua* narrow and blinding system of action-guiding beliefs).

50 McLeod (2016, 103).

51 In the fable of the death of Chaos (the emperor of the Center), Swift and Sudden, emperors of the Southern and Northern Seas, decide to return Chaos's favors as a host by drilling seven holes on him over seven days, "as all humans have for the purpose of seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing" (*Zhuangzi* 7; *Zhuangzi jishi* 7: 309). As a result, on the seventh day, Chaos died. The involuntary crime of Chaos closes the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, overtly and dramatically manifesting the dangers of non-pluralist, dogmatist views. See Valmisa (2021b, 65–66).

52 All these examples appear in the *Zhuangzi*. For the latter point on challenging subjugating and harmful homogenizing social conventions, norms, and values, see particularly *Zhuangzi* (5) on the perspectivist power of abnormality and deviation (also, Galvany 2009 and 2019); and *Zhuangzi* (29) on the perspectivist power of amorality (also, Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017, 103–111).

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