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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