Symposium:
Does the Concept of »Truth« Have Value in the Pursuit of Cross-Cultural Philosophy?

Abstract
The symposium »Does the Concept of ›Truth‹ Have Value in the Pursuit of Cross-Cultural Philosophy?« hones on a methodological question which has deep implications on doing philosophy cross-culturally. Drawing on early Confucian writers, the anchor, Henry Rosemont, Jr., attempts to explain why he is skeptical of pat, affirmative answers to this question. His co-symposiasts James Maffie, John Maraldo, and Sonam Thakchoe follow his trail in working out multi-faceted views on truth from Mexican, Japanese Confucian, and Tibetan Buddhist perspectives respectively. As these positions substantiate, the aforementioned non-Anglo-European traditions seem to draw on an integrated view of thinking, feeling, and living a human life. For their practitioners, truth is less of a correspondence with a given external reality. In fact, it enables human beings to strike the right path in living good, social lives.

Keywords
theories of truth, truthfulness, concept-clusters, comparison, Chinese Confucian philosophy, praxis-guiding approach, Mexican philosophy, Japanese Confucian philosophy, *makoto*, Tibetan Buddhist philosophy, Gelug school.

Introductory Statement[1]

The answer one gives to the methodological question entitling this symposium cannot be a general one in my opinion; individual comparative or cross-cultural philosophers can only respond for themselves. A contemporary scholar trained in the Anglo-American analytic tradition might, for example, be seeking conclusive arguments in favor of the »deflationary« theory of truth as against correspondence, coherence, semantic or pragmatist theories, and consequently might seek insight into the issue(s) by looking at how the concept of truth, or a close analogue thereof, was dealt with in one or more non-Western traditions. Clearly this scholar's overall methodological approach to comparative thought is to ask: »To what extent do these texts suggest answers to philosophical questions which vex us?«

This kind of dependency on the comparative scholar's concerns clearly holds equally for concepts other than truth, such as justice, beauty, logic, human rights, the existence of God, theories of reference,

[1] I applaud the rationale, scope, and goals for introducing this new journal *Confluence* to the philosophical world, in the hope of making the discipline as truly all-encompassing in the future as it has been mistakenly thought to be in the past. I am consequently pleased and honored not only to have been asked to serve on its Board of Editors, but to also participate in setting the symposium topic for this first issue. I thank the Editor, Professor Dr. Kirloskar-Steinbach, for both invitations. After framing the topic question and having it accepted, however, to my chagrin I discovered that I could not myself answer it competently in the 4–5 pages I had been allotted, in which I was to both say something about problems of truth in general, and from my own field in particular, Chinese thought. I have endeavored to meet both goals, but have clearly begged many more questions in so doing than I have answered, and worse, may well have framed the issue in a way my co-participants in the symposium would find confining. I have therefore added, in addition to some references, a number of endnotes that either elaborate on a theme in the paper, and/or carry it in another possible direction, to provide more opportunities for coherence among and between the several papers in this symposium.

and many other topics of Western[2] philosophical interest. Thus, for those of a comparativist bent who address non-Western materials against a Western framework in this way, the answer to the methodological question, and others like it, will obviously be answered affirmatively, as has been done by the great majority of comparative philosophers – and theologians, beginning with the early missionaries to East and South Asia in the seventeenth century, and continuing today. This approach gives the »Other« some otherness, but tends to concentrate attention on similarities rather than differences cross-culturally.

Much good work has been done with this approach in the past, beginning with a number of the missionaries themselves, from whom we might date the founding of the field of comparative religion. Matteo Ricci was not only the first missionary to China, he was one of the best in acquiring highly sophisticated sinological skills. But because he was looking for it with great care, we should not be surprised that he found the concept of the Abrahamic God in Chinese texts, a concept which non-Christian scholars have had difficulty finding since then.[3]

The manifold insights of comparative scholarship stemming from a focus on cross-cultural similarities notwithstanding, there are significant problems with this approach in my opinion, sufficient in number and scope to have made me very skeptical of affirmative answers to the methodological meta-question, especially when accompanied by the dogmatism that all too frequently attends claims to having found the TRUTH – objectively, no less.[4] For myself – especially as a translator –

[2] Given the great variety of philosophical orientations within Western civilization it is in one sense unmeet to use the adjective as a blanket term for all of them. But then there would be no contrast for the expression »non-Western philosophy,« and no philosopher of my acquaintance has been loath to use the latter expression, which provides at least some warrant for the former.

[3] The best all-round book on Ricci to my mind is Jonathan Spence's *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (1985).

[4] To take only one example of this (and several related themes in this paper), Bryan van Norden of Vassar College gave a talk at the Columbia Society for Comparative Philosophy in December, 2013, and included the following in the Abstract he forwarded:
»Most of my talk will address two issues:
1. Did Chinese thinkers assume something like a Correspondence Theory of Truth?
2. Were Chinese thinkers interested in truth in any sense?
In short, my responses will be:
1. It depends on what you mean by a »Correspondence Theory.«
2. Of course.«

I prefer to work with the idea of there being better or worse interpretations of classical and sacred texts and thus attend more to cultural differences when reading them,[5] requiring in turn a different overall approach to the other tradition, especially, in my own case, the writings of the early Confucians: to what extent do these texts suggest we might ask very different philosophical questions? Or, put another way, what sense can be made of these texts *on their own terms*?[6]

In addition to finding God in places where he almost surely is not there are other problems with the similarities approach. First, it presupposes that the philosophical questions addressed by the Greeks and their successors were asked in the same or very similar ways by reflective people in every civilization and were thus truly universal.[7] This presupposition is highly dubious to my mind, and I believe requires its truth in all efforts to prove it. Worse, if, after perusing some non-Western texts, it appears that the questions and relevant concepts are not to be found in them, it becomes very tempting to conclude that the philosophical authors and compilers of those texts were simply not as intelligent or sophisticated as our own – for which, unfortunately, there is an abundance of evidence.[8]

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[5] Thus I allow there to be more than one very good reading of a work, and of differing ways of life. This however, makes me a pluralist, not a relativist. For me there can be no *best* interpretation (by whose cultural criteria would it be evaluated?), but it doesn't follow that I can't distinguish better or worse interpretations (or ways of life). My being a deontologist does not imply I cannot say many good things about the ethics of utilitarianism or virtue ethics, and I can easily distinguish all three from the ethics of fascism.

[6] This altogether original idea was first put advanced for the study of Chinese thought by David Hall and Roger Ames in their seminal *Thinking Through Confucius* (1987).

[7] To be sure, we still speak of »true north« and »a true friend,« but these expressions are carryovers from the Greeks, who, if Heidegger (in *Sein und Zeit)* and some others are to be believed, linked the concept of truth to the concept of *being* much more than to language. Similarly, it is highly doubtful that Pontius Pilate would have understood a grammatical response from Jesus to his question »What is truth?« (John 18:38).

[8] In September 2013, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article, »Chinese Philosophy Lifts Off in America.« News indeed. As recently as 2008 there were only three universities in the USA that could train Ph.D.'s in Chinese thought (Hawai'i, Stanford, and Duke). One comment on the *Chronicle* article reads in part: »The then Chairman of the University of Washington Philosophy Department [1981], from whom I was taking a graduate seminar, insisted that China had no philosophy and once, when I suggested that chaos and cosmos might function in Western philosophy in a role analogous to yin and yang in the Chinese tradition, he dismissed it, saying, »From now on, when you walk through that door, leave that Chinese crap out in the hall.«

A second difficulty with this approach, to return to the scholar seeking proof of the deflationary theory of truth, is that any concept or theory of truth claimed to be found in non-Western texts, if it is to be useful philosophically, cannot be too dissimilar from our own; which, since the eighteenth century at least, has been closely linked to formal logic, language, and linguistics: »is true« and »is false« are predicates of sentences in the indicative mood. Thus, in order to speak about theories of truth in Western philosophy today we also need to consider related language-based theories of *meaning* and *reference*, and we will need additional concepts such as *validity*, the *sentence* (as opposed to the word), its philosophical corollaries *statements* and *propositions*, plus a few others like *semantics, denotation, connotation*, etc.[9]

All of these terms plus several others linked to them constitute what I have called a »concept cluster,« such that they bind each other, and are necessary for the full philosophical elucidation of any of their components, reflecting an overall world view. (Morals, or ethics today employs a concept-cluster including *freedom, rights, autonomy, individual, principle, choice, reason, liberty*, etc. In early modern England, however, the discussions would cluster around »honour,« and include other terms necessary to understand it such as »sake,« »liegeful,« »varlet,« »villein,« »soke,« »sooth,« »shent,« »chivalric« and another half dozen or so additional terms that are no longer in the English lexicon.)[10]

My investigation of early Confucian texts has not turned up lexical equivalents for the terms in the contemporary concept cluster surrounding *the term »truth« itself*, and consequently I would argue that the concept of truth as Western philosophers are interested in it today is not to be found in those texts, and consequently in turn, no theory of truth can be attributed to Kongzi (Confucius) or his early followers.[11]

[9] The roots of this orientation can be traced to the work of people like Boole and Venn – and exhibited in the children's tale written by the logician C. L. Dodgson (Lewis Carroll), *Alice in Wonderland*. It becomes a »movement« when Bertrand Russell began calling attention to the seminal writings of Gottlob Frege during the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

[10] For more on concept clusters, see the paper I did with my collaborator and close friend Roger Ames (Rosemont, and Ames 2010).

[11] Philosophers have drawn linguistic and epistemological swords on this issue for some time. To some, my position will seem to be »unfair to babies,« making the point that we are willing to attribute concepts to infants before they have the words to express them. And it must be allowed that at times it is legitimate to assume that a single concept

Worse, if this claim can be sustained, it means that we will miss much of what the non-Western texts may have to say to us today if we do not try to meet them on their own terms.

It may seem highly counterintuitive at first blush that a text like the *Analects* that basically chronicles brief conversations between Kongzi and his students has no statements at all of the form »That's true,« but such is indeed the case. How is that possible?

The counterintuitive nature of the claim is largely due to another unspoken presupposition, that the basic function of human language is to describe and explain the world in which we live (the sciences have been importantly determinative of this orientation). If one's culture sees language primarily as a vehicle for conveying information, it had better have terms for distinguishing the accurate from the inaccurate information conveyed, which »true« and »false« do very well.

But if we keep in mind that language use is a social practice, it will be easier to appreciate that different cultures may see its basic functions in different ways. In my view the Kongzi (Confucius) of the *Analects* is best understood as using language not to describe the world but as *praxis-guiding discourse.*[12] He is little concerned with his students knowing *that*, but rather knowing *how,* knowing *about,* or knowing *to.*[13] He is basically concerned to get them to act and react in certain ways, and to have certain motives and responses to situations. When we read in 13.18,[14] to take a famous example, that when Kongzi was

might indeed have been held by the author of a text without a lexical item for it if the translation runs more coherently. But it is the idea of concept-clusters that can stop the morphemes of other languages from becoming Rorschach blots to the translator: the significance of pointing out the lack of a lexical equivalent for »truth« in classical Chinese lies in the fact that none of the other terms associated with it in the English-speaking philosophical world will be found in the Chinese texts either.

[12] In addition to Roger Ames, I believe Chad Hansen would concur with this position. In his influential *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* he regularly uses the expression »way-making discourse« as one basic reading of the pregnant Chinese graph *dao* (道) which he discusses throughout the book (Hansen 1992).

[13] It may well be surprising to some that classical Chinese scientists saw knowledge in pretty much the same way. Nathan Sivin, a distinguished scholar of Chinese medical, astronomical, alchemical, mathematical, and other Chinese sciences said of the term translated as »knowledge« in English, that it »refers to understanding and recognition of significance as aspects of knowledge, not to objective factual knowledge isolated from the act of understanding and evaluation« (Sivin 1995; see esp. Chapter 8, p. 328, n. 46).

[14] All references to the *Analects* are from Ames, and Rosemont, Jr. (1998).

told about a young man who turned in his father for stealing a sheep he said »In my village a father covers for his son, and a son covers for his father,« we are not to read him as making an anthropological statement as a participant-observer; clearly he is telling us normatively that in any conflict between family and state, the family must always win. An equally clear example of the Master's orientation is in 11.22, when Master Kong gives contradictory answers to the same question about how to proceed in a filial situation, asked by his students Ranyou and Zilu. A third then asks him why he gave such conflicting answers, to which he replied, »Ranyou is diffident, and so I urged him on. But Zilu has the energy of two, so I sought to rein him in.«

These are but two of numerous examples of Confucius using language not to convey information, but to guide behavior, and instill attitudes toward that behavior, as when he insists that simply providing materially for one's parents does not make one a filial offspring, for even dogs and horses are given that much care. In 2.7 he asks, »If you do not revere your parents, what is the difference?«

There is nothing strange about seeing the basic function of human language in this way, because when not philosophizing and asking »Is that true?« we often say contradictory things ourselves on occasion, such as »You're never too old to learn,« and »You can't teach an old dog new tricks.« This orientation obliges us to attend not simply to *what* is said, but equally, and often more importantly, *why* it was said in the social context in which all language use takes place, in which case we may evaluate the *appropriateness* of what is said, to whom, and when. And altogether unsurprisingly, although classical Chinese has no close lexical equivalent for »true« (or »false«) – or any of the terms in its concept-cluster – it does have a graph (義 *yi*) which is properly translated as »appropriate,« and can be negated as »inappropriate.«[15]

In sum, while I would not want to discourage other comparative philosophers from continuing to seek answers to questions generated from within their own cultural heritage, I have found it much more useful to approach the philosophical and religious texts of other cultures on their terms rather than mine as much as possible. I have

[15] I have discussed this view and its implications in my *A Reader's Guide to the Confucian Analects* (2012).

learned much in this way – not least about my own culture, seen from another perspective; there are certainly more things in heaven and earth than can be dreamed of in any one philosophical tradition.

–Henry Rosemont, Jr., Department of Religious Studies, Brown University, USA