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*Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy: A Comparative Approach* by Alexis McLeod (review)

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Kwong-loi Shun's chapter 11, "On Anger: An Essay on Confucian Moral Psychology," is a philosophical construction of the problem of anger by appealing not only to Zhu Xi's account but also to Confucian views, broadly construed, showing how Chinese ideas may serve as the ground for some new perspectives on the subject of anger, which is so much a part of our psychological discourse, be it moral or cognitive.

The last chapter, "Spiritual and Bodily Exercise: The Religious Significance of Zhu Xi's Reading Methods," by Peng Guoxiang, argues that Zhu's engagement with texts is anchored in the ultimate goal of moral self-cultivation, such that reading is never merely a disembodied theoretical discursive exercise but an experience that requires and eventuates in the reader's indwelling and realization of the truths encased in words, which is Confucian religiosity in a nutshell.

Jones and He have given us a well-curated and well-conceived collective study of Zhu Xi, making the volume a place of profit not only for those already persuaded by the gravity of the subject matter but also for those who are looking for a way into the Song master's ideas and the ambient world of Neo-Confucian thought. No doubt other works will continue to "return" to Zhu Xi, but their journeys must go through the interpretive territories of this very compilation.

*Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy: A Comparative Approach.* By Alexis McLeod. London: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016. Pp. 197. Paper \$39.95, ISBN 978-1-78348-345-7.



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Did ancient Chinese philosophers offer theories of truth? Some scholars hold that they did not. Alexis McLeod's *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy: A Comparative Approach* offers an ambitious response to these scholars by arguing that ancient Chinese philosophers both employed multiple truth concepts and offered theories of truth. McLeod begins with a discussion of the relationship between truth and philosophy followed by a critical discussion of the interpretive debate over the status of truth in ancient China (Introduction; chap. 1). He then offers novel interpretations of early Chinese philosophical texts ranging from the Warring States period to the Han dynasty that he believes display a theoretical interest in truth (chaps. 2–6).

Overall, McLeod's two best-supported claims are (1) that ancient Chinese philosophers both had and used terms that assessed the *semantic* adequacy (i.e., truth) of language and therefore count as truth concepts (pp. 18–20), and (2) that an interest in the *pragmatic* adequacy of language did not prevent ancient Chinese thinkers from having a pragmatic theory of truth (pp. 16–18, 64–66). The first point he argues for

primarily by citing examples from the *Lunyu*, *Mencius*, *Xunzi*, *Lüshi chungiu*, and *Lunheng*, while the second one he argues for using Mohist writings. This review will focus on the first point, since it makes up the majority of the book.

McLeod begins by contending that the concept of truth, as well as a number of related categories, is essential to any project of “intellectual production” (p. x), and is therefore important in ancient Chinese thought (pp. ix–xv, 33–34). He worries that the scholars he criticizes—primarily Hansen and Hall and Ames—who see philosophers in ancient China as either lacking or uninterested in the concept of truth, rely upon narrow and Western-centric conceptions of truth, as well as monolithic views of ancient Chinese thought (pp. 21–26, 64–65). According to McLeod, since truth is a universal philosophical concept, we should expect that ancient Chinese philosophers utilized and theorized about it. However, in offering his critique and alternative, McLeod replaces his opponents’ generalizations about Chinese thought with an even more ambitious generalization about all philosophy, which he then uses to guide his interpretations. McLeod therefore adopts a methodology of positing *a priori* axioms and interpreting texts in accordance with them, which raises serious hermeneutical challenges, as he thereby encloses himself in a narrow interpretive space without room to adequately consider alternative interpretations.

For example, against Hall and Ames’ claim that in ancient Chinese philosophy there was no appearance-reality distinction—a distinction that McLeod holds is deeply related to the concept of truth—McLeod cites the butterfly dream story from Book 2 of the *Zhuangzi* (pp. 23–25). He argues that since the story explicitly concerns the appearance-reality distinction, it would have had no intelligible dialectical context unless there was an appearance-reality distinction in the discourse already. However, rather than use textual evidence from the dialectical context and secondary literature to support his view, McLeod argues that the necessity of the appearance-reality distinction guarantees that his interpretation is sound. It does not, though. Interpretations that do not prioritize the concepts of appearance and reality may do a better job of explaining this text<sup>1</sup> as well as more general early Chinese theories of cognition, perception, knowledge, and error.<sup>2</sup> Alternative interpretations take the point of the passage to be that individual perspectives are irreducibly plural and limited, so no one perspective can legitimately claim normative or epistemic priority over another. These and similar interpretations still explain the text’s main worry as epistemic uncertainty, but of a different kind than that arising from the appearance-reality distinction.

Indeed, in spite of his arguments that scholars such as Hansen or Hall and Ames may neglect the tradition’s philosophical insights by denying that it utilizes concepts such as truth, McLeod does not consider whether these scholars instead point out the possibility of a rich philosophical discourse based in different but intelligible fundamental concepts, methods, and concerns. This is an exciting prospect even if it does not utilize concepts many of us consider fundamental. Methodologically, the book suffers from resisting this possibility because of McLeod’s convictions about the concept of truth.

This problem manifests itself regularly in McLeod’s interpretations of texts, which are often grammatically unsound or less persuasive than alternatives that he does not

consider. His interpretations of texts that mention the word *shi* 實 (“stuff”/“objects”) is particularly worrying given its importance to his thesis. Early in the book, McLeod introduces the idea that *shi* is the late Han dynasty thinker Wang Chong’s truth concept, and then infers from historical continuity that *shi* must have functioned similarly during the Warring States period (pp. 10, 16, 20). However, on plausible readings of a number of important passages McLeod works with, the connection between *shi* and truth is difficult to motivate.

For example, McLeod translates *Mencius* 4B17 as, “Words without *shi* are not auspicious. The fruit (*shi*) of not being auspicious is obscuration of the fittingness of the sages’ activity” (p. 54). McLeod understands *shi* as “a property of a statement (*yan* 言) that has some kind of positive value. . . . [T]his certainly shows that early Chinese thought, by the time of Mengzi, has the ability to express a truth property as belonging to assertoric linguistic entities” (p. 54). However, a more natural understanding of *shi* in this context would be simply that it is what names or statements refer to, or, as the Later Mohists defined it, “what is called/deemed” (所謂) (*Canons* A81). In context, “statements without stuff (*shi*)” probably refers to nonsense, empty speech, exaggeration, overstatement, or even failing to live up to what one says rather than “false statements.” In any case, I see no compelling reason to read *shi* here as a property of *yan*.

McLeod’s discussion of *shi* in the *Xunzi* is similarly forced. For example, he translates a passage from *Xunzi*, Book 22, as “Names are without intrinsic connection to reality (*shi*). Agreement on them is made through fiat concerning reality (*shi*). When there is agreement, they are established, and customs are completed, this is called giving reality (*shi*) to names” (名無固實，約之以命實，約定俗成，謂之實名) (p. 96; my parentheses). McLeod’s readings of 固實 as “intrinsic connection to reality” and 約之以命實 as “agreement on them is made through fiat concerning reality” are not grammatically justified by the source text. On a safer parsing, we should translate this passage as “Names have no inherent stuff (*shi*); we agree on them in order to name stuff; agreements being settled and customs formed—call them the names of stuff.” Though McLeod discusses English-language secondary literature to support his interpretation, his argument suffers for not explaining why he rejects a more grammatically plausible reading like this one.

While I disagree with McLeod’s understanding of *shi* in the Warring States period, McLeod’s strongest example of an early Chinese philosopher interested in truth-like concepts is the Han dynasty thinker Wang Chong. This chapter (chap. 6) argues that the close connection between *shi* 實 and both the normative concept of *shi* 是 (“this”/“right”) and the descriptive concept *ran* 然 (“so”) in Wang Chong is evidence that he conceived of *shi* as a second-order pluralist truth concept (pp. 158–164). While this chapter cites the most primary source material that supports McLeod’s interpretation, there is still a sense that McLeod is translating the concept of truth into the text by translating *shi* as “truth” at the expense of other interpretations.

Consider his translation of 實[事]不能快意 . . . 是故才能之士，好談論者，增益實事: “The truth (*shi*) isn’t easily [or quickly] believed. . . . This is why scholars with talent, who enjoy discussion, add things to and exaggerate the truth (*shi* 實) about

affairs" (p. 154). First, the version of the sentence McLeod discusses has a typographical error. The first 事 (bracketed above) is omitted in McLeod's version, so to discuss 實 on its own in this passage is a mistake, since the combination 實事 appears twice in the original sentence. In any case, McLeod's translation of the combination is forced. The grammar of the combination is more likely to be a modifying adjective, 實 ("genuine," "real"), in front of a noun, 事 ("affairs," "things"), rather than two nouns ("the truth about affairs"). A safer reading of the combination is "affairs (事) as they really are (實)," or just "reality." The relationship between "reality" and "truth" ought to be close, but the grammatical subject here is not a true statement, but is rather "affairs" (事). On a plausible, alternative reading, then, we get "Reality is unable to be easily apprehended. . . . [T]his is why talented and able scholars who are fond of debate add to and exaggerate reality." Indeed, in other cases where McLeod translates *shi* as "truth," it seems that "reality" or "genuineness" would work just fine, and it is not clear to me what would be lost (pp. 153, 160).

In spite of what I take to be its methodological shortcomings, McLeod's book raises some of the deepest methodological issues in comparative philosophy. In particular it highlights the crucial question of how different we ought to expect conceptual frameworks to be from our own. For example, where *shi* does seem to have some kind of positive value when connected to statements in the appropriate way, ought we consider it a different version of a more general and basic concept of truth, or a concept all its own that has some similarities with but also differs from the concept of truth? More generally, on what grounds do we choose to see a concept as a different version of the same concept, or a numerically different but similar concept? Although I do not think that McLeod successfully answers these questions here, this work certainly forces the reader to think long and hard about them for herself.

#### Notes

I would like to thank Chris Fraser and Loy Hui-Chieh for comments on previous drafts of this review.

- 1 – Tim Connolly, "Perspectivism as a Way of Knowing in the *Zhuangzi*," *Dao* 10 (2011): 487–505.
- 2 – Chris Fraser, "Knowledge and Error in Early Chinese Thought," *Dao* 10 (2011): 127–148.