

A Substantive Pluralist Theory of Truth in Early Chinese Philosophy: Wang Chong on Shi (實)

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As I've argued in my recent book, *Theories of Truth in Early Chinese Philosophy*, a number of sophisticated and interesting theories of truth can be found in the Chinese tradition. Part of the reason these theories have been so long neglected by Western scholars is that they are sometimes very different from the theories we find in Western philosophical thought. Chinese thinkers make very different assumptions, apply truth properties to sometimes very different entities—at least from those contemporary analytic philosophers are concerned with. In addition, there is no *single* term we can unproblematically translate as 'truth' across texts—although here I will argue that we should understand Wang Chong's *shi* 實 as truth in the *Lunheng*. In early Chinese thought, there is a cluster of terms, and concepts, associated with truth. Also, as philosophers such as Chad Hansen have pointed out, most early Chinese philosophers (in the Pre-Han period, anyway) were only minimally concerned with issues of language and semantics, if at all.

None of this, however, shows that early Chinese philosophers did not have a conception of truth and did not offer theories of truth. While I don't have the space here to rehearse the fuller arguments I make in my book, I will say a few words about this here. First—the concept of truth is the most basic concept in human intellectual culture. The bar for determining that a particular culture or tradition did not have a concept of truth should thus be fairly high. If we do not readily see anything in another tradition that seems to correspond to what we understand as "truth", it is far more likely that we simply have not seen all there is to be seen concerning truth, and that the tradition in question emphasizes different aspects of this concept, than it is that the tradition does not have a concept (or concepts) of truth. In addition, philosophers in general have in past years neglected the Han period, which follows the brief Qin dynasty of Qin Shi Huang, the infamous "First emperor of China". By far most philosophical attention has been paid to the Pre-Qin period, in particular, and texts associated with it such as the Confucian *Analects*, *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, the Daoist *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, the *Mozi*, and the *Hanfeizi*. If we concentrate only on these texts, we will come away with a very sparse conception of truth, really only the incipient beginnings of possible theories. Part of the reason for this is that the main focus of Pre-Qin texts was ethical and political theory, and it was not until the late Warring States period (in *Zhuangzi* and *Xunzi* in particular) that philosophers began to worry that ethical and political theory might require more robust investigation in language and truth. Then, of course, you have the beginning of empire with the unification of the Warring States in 221 BCE, and we sometimes act as if all philosophical thought suddenly ended—as if we were given this dramatic cliffhanger in which Chinese thought was about to take a methodological and linguistic turn, and then all of a sudden the lights just went out.

But of course this is a fiction, one established and reinforced not just by contemporary scholars, but by a long line of Chinese commentators at least as far back as the 12th century CE (Zhu Xi). Philosophy did not end with the transition from Warring States to Empire, any more than it ended in the West during the expansion of the Holy Roman Empire, ended in the Islamic world upon the conquests of North Africa and Spain, or ended in India on the conquests of Aśoka. On the contrary, it not only thrived but *advanced* during those periods. The philosophers who made these developments and innovations concerning method and language did not disappear when Qin came to power. Throughout the vanishingly brief Qin period (15 years, from 221 to 206 BCE) and into the Western (or Early) Han (206 BCE- 9 CE) and Eastern (or Later) Han (25-220 CE), the considerations of language and methodology that were just beginning to appear in the late Warring States grew and came to a peak that would not again be seen in Chinese thought until the modern period. Because many philosophers neglect the Han, we miss this major development in early Chinese thought. There are numerous historians and other sinologists working on issues in Han dynasty thought, but they also miss much of the philosophical significance of what is going on in the period—not of their own fault, they are simply interested in different questions. Thus, we have plenty of studies looking at the compilation of the *Huainanzi*, Liu An’s political purposes in constructing it, its effect in the court of Liu An, and the way the contents of the text influenced political ideology, but much fewer on the actual philosophical content of the text—and almost all of those by non-philosophers. The situation is similar for other Han texts, including Wang Chong’s *Lunheng*, which was constructed in the Eastern (or second) Han Dynasty, after the Wang Mang interregnum.

If philosophers come to pay attention to periods beyond the Pre-Qin in larger numbers, they will discover that philosophy didn’t end in the Han, but flourished and changed. If the Pre-Qin period was the period of ethics and political philosophy in Chinese thought, the Han was the period of metaphysics, methodology, and language. While ethical and political considerations did not disappear in the Han (nor were metaphysical and linguistic considerations wholly absent in the Pre-Qin), an investigation of the Chinese tradition for theories of truth will bear much more fruit if we look to Han sources. And there are few texts of which this is more true than the Eastern Han philosopher Wang Chong’s *Lunheng* (Balanced Discourses).

One of the things we can learn from the Chinese philosophical tradition, aside from the arguments I make below concerning Wang Chong’s particular theory, is that the non-semantic aspects of truth *matter*. It may very well turn out to be the case that our inability to make headway on truth is largely because we are focusing too narrowly on one aspect of the concept. The pluralist, I contend, *should* be open to the fact that truth is not only multiply realized (if you will) for statements in different domains of discourse, but also multiply realized for different entities in different areas of human life. It is not an accident or coincidence that we use the English term ‘true’ to discuss the “true friend” or the “true person” or even the “true path”, in addition to the “true statement.” This use is not limited to English or even

languages of the Indo-European family. The Arabic term *haq* works in this way, as does the Yucatec Maya word *halach*, which is often used in the construction *halach uinic* (true/real person). If our various uses of the term ‘true’ express a single concept or cluster of concepts (which I think we have plenty of reason to accept), then understanding what makes the true person or the true friend true will help us understand what makes the true statement true. The early Chinese tradition can assist us here, as for the most part early Chinese thinkers began with a conception of truth connected primarily to *conduct* (*xing* 行), and tended to think of semantic truth in terms of this “behavioral truth”. Indeed, much of the reason scholars have overlooked theories of semantic truth in early Chinese literature is that the greater truth focus was on conduct. If we don’t take behavior as being in the realm of truth, then when we find a cluster of concepts connected most of the time with behavior in the early texts, we will tend to dismiss them as truth concepts at all. When we find these same concepts connected to linguistic entities such as *ming* 名 (name/word) or *yan* 言 (statement), we may be tempted to read them as something *other* than truth concepts, such as pragmatic justification, simply because we cannot accept that concepts connected to behavior can be truth concepts that may have semantic aspects as well.

In the Warring States (475-221 BCE), truth concepts were focused more on *conduct* and persons than on statements (*yan* 言). If we think about the ways we might appraise the behavior of an individual or group, there are certain commonalities with the way we may appraise statements or sentences. *Acceptability* (*ke* 可) is one basis on which we might appraise both. Either a statement or an action can be acceptable. What *makes* the statement or action acceptable turns out to be, for schools like the Mohists and certain Confucians, the same thing. Does the action, or does the statement, contribute ultimately to social harmony? The objection that a statement cannot directly contribute to social harmony as such, but only as a component of a *belief* does not have much strength here, as behavior has a similar issue. It can only contribute to social harmony insofar as it happens in a social context, is publicly understood, etc. The acceptability of a statement or an action, then, might be understood in terms of the effect concerning social harmony given all of the requisite secondary conditions (being believed and expressed, being socially accessed through public expression, etc.).

It is in the *Mozi* that we see the first indication of the basis of a key feature of Wang Chong’s theory of truth. As I argue elsewhere, the Mohists move back and forth between the claims that *we ought to believe x* and *x is the case* because they see the two as mutually entailing. That is, we ought to believe *x* *iff* *x* is the case. The truth of a statement (*yan*) includes normative facts concerning what we ought to hold or accept (for the Mohist tied to the value of the belief in creation of benefit/profit). While this was seemingly rejected by a number of his contemporaries, it was to become an influential way of thinking about statements when they once again came to play a prominent role in philosophy during the Han

dynasty.

The second development relevant to Wang Chong's theory took place in the early Han (206 BCE- 24 AD). In the *Huainanzi* (composed mid 2nd century BCE), the "syncretic" project (in part fueled by the Han imperial project) developed, in which there was an attempt to "unify" the various disparate statements, teachings, and schools, understanding them as all combined in a single *dao* 道 (Way). Part of the idea here was to explain how various conflicting positions (whether *yan*, statements, attitudes, etc.) could all be equally true. While the *Huainanzi* devised a system of "root-and-branches" to construct this unity, and the specifics of the account of the *Huainanzi* lost favor in later years, the idea that truth might be understood *multiply* in some sense remained in the philosophical air. In particular, one position of the *Huainanzi* is that some statements seem to be in conflict because they apply to different areas or topics. While the Confucian views on ritual, for example, may be acceptable or true in government (and the Mohist or Daoist principles not), the Daoist principles of spontaneous action from one's nature may be acceptable or true in our close relationships (and the Confucian ritual view not). According to the *Huainanzi*, understanding the *dao*, understanding *reality*, is in part a matter of knowing where particular principles apply. What we must recognize in order to understand reality, *dao*, is that each thing has its abilities relative to some aspect of *dao*. This is the same with statements (*yan*). The *Zhushu* (Art of Rulership) chapter reads:

湯、武，聖主也，而不能與越人乘幹舟而浮於江湖；伊尹，賢相也，而不能與胡人騎驢馬而服駒駘；孔、墨博通，而不能與山居者入榛薄險阻也。

Tang and Wu were sagely rulers, but they could not compete with the men of Yue in navigating little boats and sailing on the rivers and lakes. Yi Yin was a worthy minister, he could not compete with the Hu people in riding horses from Yuan and breaking wild steeds. Confucius and Mozi had broad understanding, but they could not compete with mountain-dwellers in entering overgrown thickets and hazardous defiles.

It is all of this that Wang Chong inherits, and he adds another piece to the puzzle, that has enormous interest for those of us working in contemporary analytic philosophy. Unlike most earlier Chinese philosophers, Wang is *centrally* concerned with *yan* (statements) and evaluation of them. He is much less concerned with issues of moral conduct (though not completely unconcerned with them). Wang Chong (~27-100 CE) wrote during the early to middle part of the Eastern, or Later Han dynasty. Unlike many earlier philosophers, he was concerned mainly with evaluation of previous texts on the basis of the *consistency* of their teachings. He subjected well-known and widely accepted common beliefs, philosophical teachings,

and religious doctrines to the scrutiny of the method he called “questioning and challenging” (問難 *wen nan*). To ground and justify this method, he developed a number of positions on issues of language and its connection with the world that went beyond much of that which came before. Unlike most thinkers from the Warring States through his own time, Wang was more concerned with language and metaphysics than he was with ethics and political thought. Wang’s focus on language and on semantic truth, as well as his particular method for distinguishing true from false statements (very similar to the Socratic *elenchus*) made him an important thinker for Western sinologists beginning in the 19th century. Western scholars saw something in Wang Chong they recognized as philosophy, at a time before they came to see philosophical tradition in China as involving different ways of thinking than the usual patterns of the West. Here was a philosopher who was doing what looked like something generally accepted as philosophy in the West.

Shi and Xu in the Lunheng

Wang Chong uses a term translatable as ‘truth’, *shi* (實), that has an interesting and relevant history, and opposes it with the term *xu* 虛 (false, or literally “empty”). I will first give a brief explanation of some basic points of Wang’s theory of *shi* 實, then I will explain how it is what we might call a “substantive pluralist” theory of truth, and ways it could contribute to contemporary discussions of pluralism about truth.

Wang mentions the seemingly attractive features of *xu* (empty, false) entities in the *dui zuo* chapter of the *Lunheng*, in his discussion of *shi* (實). He says of the “common people”:

俗之性,好奇怪之語,說虛妄之文。何則?實不能快意,而華虛驚耳動心也。是故才能之士,好談論者,增益實事 *It is the nature of common people to enjoy strange stories and sayings, to delight in empty (xu 虛) and absurd writings. Why is this? The truth (shi 實) isn't easily [or quickly] believed, but flowery and empty speech astounds the hearers and excites their minds. This is why scholars with talent, who enjoy discussion, add things to and exaggerate the truth (shi 實) about affairs.*

Xu statements are (or at least can be) flowery, ornate, and naturally appealing to the “common people.” *Xu* statements are appealing partly because they *appear* to be true, even when “appearance” is thought of in terms of tendency to accept (something we easily accept may be thought to, in this way, *appear to us* as true). There is much more to be said about Wang’s conception of *xu* and why he thinks it is of concern, but I focus here on *shi*.

Shi 實 is used to flag *actual* properties (the actual possession of the properties that we seek when appraising statements) as opposed to merely *apparent* properties (the mere apparent possession of these properties) of statements, teachings, or whatever can be *shi*-apt. To see what these properties are,

we have to look to Wang's discussion surrounding the concepts related to *shi* and *xu*.

In the *Duizuo* chapter, there are two dichotomies discussed in relation with *shi* and *xu*—namely *shi-fei* (是非) and *ran-fou* (然否). *Shi* (是) and *fei* (非), when discussed as concepts rather than verbally used, seem to be connected to ethical or normative contexts. Alfred Forke, in his translation, noticed this and translated *shi* (是) and *fei* (非) in the *Duizuo* chapter as “right” and “wrong,” respectively, in all the places where they are discussed as evaluative properties. We see *shi* and *fei* mentioned along with *ran* and *fou*, “is the case” and “is not the case” in discussions of *shi* (實) in the chapter. Two passages in particular show us the two dichotomies discussed together:

明辯然否,病心傷之,安能不論? ... [孟子]引平直說,褒是抑非 *Those who can determine what is the case and what is not the case feel an ailment in their hearts which pain them [at the thought of truth being subverted by the “common people” and flowery scholarship] ... [Mengzi's] language was straight and to the point, according high place to the right (是 shi) and sup-pressing the wrong (非 fei).*

況論衡細說微論,解釋世俗之疑,辯照是非之理,使後進曉見然否之分

The Lunheng uses precise language and detailed discussion, to reveal and explain the doubts of this generation of common people, to bring to light through debate right and wrong principles (是非之理 shi fei zhi li), and to help those who come later clearly see the difference between what is the case and what is not the case.

Here, we see *shi* and *fei* connected to the “principles” (*li* 理) that Wang aims to uncover. His purpose in the *Lunheng* is to reveal *shi* and *fei* principles and to help people distinguish between what is the case and what is not the case. What is the reason for using two different formulations here, *shi-fei* and *ran-fou*, if he means something like “truth and falsity” in both cases? It is implausible that this should be seen as simply using synonyms to mean something like “truth and falsity,” so that he is saying that he wants to (1) uncover true and false principles, and (2) help people distinguish between what is true and false. This point is strengthened by his use of *li* (理), by which Wang means something like “moral principle” (though this is not the general usage in the Han). This is far from the Neo-Confucian use of *li* (理) to express a foundational metaphysical concept. The above mentioned is the only occurrence of *li* in the *Duizuo* chapter, but if we look to the *Wenkong* (“Questioning Confucius”) chapter, in which consideration of argument and method is a central theme, we learn more about how Wang uses *li*.

難 孔子,何傷於義?誠有傳聖業之知,伐孔子之說,何逆於理? ... *[If we] challenge Confucius, how is this injurious to moral appropriateness? If, sincerely attempting to*

transmit the knowledge of the sages' teachings, one attacks Confucius' words, how does this oppose principle (li)?

This is clearly a view of *li* as either the collection of moral norms or the ground of moral norms. Wang's second sentence explains and elaborates upon his first. Challenging (難 *nan*) Confucius is not injurious to moral appropriateness (義 *yi*), because attacking Confucius' words in order to clear things up does not violate the correct moral principles that make certain acts appropriate or inappropriate.

It looks like the passage gives us two separate goals of the *Lunheng*—a moral goal, uncovering true moral principles, and a non-moral goal, of determining what is the case and what is not the case. Now, the question becomes, why distinguish the two? Wouldn't simply "discovering the truth" take care of both of these? Why didn't Wang simply say that the purpose of the *Lunheng* is to *uncover the truth*, to help us distinguish between *shi* 實 and *xu* 虛, which seems his main purpose as he describes it in other passages? If he is after *truth*, after all, then it looks like facts about moral principles and what is the case will just fall out of this pursuit. If we know what is true, then by definition we will know which moral principles, if any, are right, because we will know whether normative statements, such as "one should never pick on the weaknesses of another," are *true*.

There seems to be some connection between *fou-ran* and *shi-fei* in *Lunheng* 84.363.3-5 above, where Wang talks about Mencius' ability and action. According to this passage, those who have the ability to discriminate between what is the case and what is not the case (*ran* and *fou*) are able to use language to point out what is right (是 *shi*) and what is wrong (非 *fei*). So knowledge of moral principle does seem to follow from the ability to discriminate between what is and what is not the case. Does this, however, show us that there is a single property of truth, such as *ran* (what is the case) that is operative in all contexts? A consideration of *shi* (實) shows us that it is the wise person's grasp of *shi* (實) that enables him to both distinguish between what is and what is not the case *and* to distinguish between right and wrong moral principles. It is not the ability to distinguish between *ran* and *fou* that makes one able to distinguish between *shi* and *fei*, but rather the ability to distinguish between *shi* (實) and *xu* (虛) that makes one able to make both of the other types of discrimination. The fact that Mencius had the ability to distinguish between *ran* and *fou* showed that he had the ability on which the ability to distinguish between *shi* (是) and *fei* (非) rests.

The ability to distinguish between 實 *shi* and 虛 *xu* then presumes the ability to make a number of other useful discriminations involving teachings, statements, and other entities. *Shi* and *xu*, that is, seem like *higher-order* concepts, unlike *ran* and *fou* or *shi* and *fei*. I believe that the best way to make sense of this is to take 是 *shi* and 然 *ran* as ways in which something can be 實 *shi* ("actual," "true"), while 非 *fei* and 否 *fou* are ways in which something can be 虛 *xu* ("empty," "false," "only apparently true"). That is, Wang is offering a view of 實 *shi* in which what makes a

statement (言 *yan*) 實 *shi* is either being 是 *shi*, or being 然 *ran*.

Which properties then are expressed by 實 *shi*? Moral acceptability (是 *shi*) is one property expressed by 實 *shi*, in the moral domain. This property of acceptability would *not*, however, make nonmoral statements about physical objects true. This property can only be a *shi*-making property in the appropriate domain. Nonmoral statements cannot be 是 *shi*, just as moral principles cannot be 然 *ran*.

One key feature of the concept of truth, or the concept of 實 *shi*, is that it should be a *univocal* concept. Even though there might be different properties in different linguistic contexts that make a statement true, it cannot be the case that “truth” (or 實 *shi*) *means* different things in different contexts. It should mean the same thing to say that a moral statement is true as it does to say that a nonmoral statement is true.

We find passages in the *Lunheng* that show us that Wang did think of *shi* as univocal. The following passage from the *dui zuo* chapter is informative here:

人君遭弊,改教於上;君臣(愚)惑,作論於下。[下]實得,則上教從矣。冀悟迷惑之心,使知虛實之分。實虛之分定,而華僞之文滅;華僞之文滅,則純誠之化日以孳矣。 *When the ruler does badly, instruction to change conduct is directed toward the person on high. When the ruler's subjects are doltish, engaging in discussions is directed toward the people below. When the people below obtain the truth (實 shi), then instruction of the person on high follows. I hope to stir some of these minds, to help them distinguish between truth (實 shi) and falsity (虛 xu). Once the distinction between truth and falsity is established, then flowery and artificial writings can be eliminated. When flowery and artificial writings are eliminated, pure and sincere transformations will grow more abundant day by day.*

In this passage, we see that the ability to distinguish between *shi* and *xu* leads to transformation of conduct as well as the elimination of error in writings. Since much of Wang's criticism in the *Lunheng* is directed at physical and metaphysical as well as moral writings, we can see this second ability as reaching both moral and nonmoral domains or contexts. Wang also asserts a connection between elimination of false (虛 *xu*) writings and moral transformation (we have to assume this is what he means here by 化 *hua*, as the passage began by speaking of conduct and this should be taken to point back to that). We see again that the ability to discriminate between 實 *shi* and 虛 *xu* allows us to both distinguish between 然 *ran* and 否 *fou* and to distinguish between 是 *shi* and 非 *fei*. In order for this to be the case, there must be some univocal concept of 實 *shi* that captures the similarities between the various properties that qualify a statement as true.

The univocality of *shi* 實 is based on its second-order status. The property of *shi* 實, for Wang, is the property of having properties that we actually do and should seek when we appraise statements. This makes truth rest in part on normativity.

The normativity involved here, however, is basic, in a sense that what we *should* do is linked with what we *in fact do*, but is not explained by the fact that we do these things. That is, the descriptive element is not meant to explain the normative, but to be a further basic fact beside it. Here, both concepts are in the employ of the truth function, as an explanation for what makes a particular statement true (*shi* 實). If we consider the properties of 然 *ran* and 是 *shi* that can belong to statements in the nonmoral and moral domains, respectively, we can begin to see what is meant. The properties of *ran* and *shi* are properties that humans naturally seek when they appraise sentences, according to Wang. No one accepts as true a statement that they believe to be 不然 *bu ran* or 非 *fei*. Rather, the reason a statement is accepted by anyone is because one believes (sometimes mistakenly) that this statement is either 然 *ran*, 是 *shi*, or has some other 實 *shi*-making property. It is a brute fact about humans that we do seek properties such as 是 *shi* and 然 *ran* when we appraise sentences and accept or believe statements based on whether or not we have reason to think they are *ran* or *shi*. Thus the key question to be answered when we consider whether or not something is 實 *shi* is whether the statement *actually* has the properties we naturally seek. In addition to this description of what humans actually do, however, there is an added normative element. Not only *do* we seek properties like 然 *ran* and 是 *shi*, but we *ought* to seek such properties. Why ought we? That is, what explains the normativity? Wang takes this normativity as *basic*. Although this certainly would strike most of us in the contemporary Western-based philosophical tradition as strange or implausible, this view (if Wang's own) would be completely unproblematic in ancient China, in which many thinkers accepted such a position.

Dealing with Objections to Pluralism

It is sometimes objected that pluralism cannot account for the truth of statements or propositions that are conjunctions of propositions belonging to different linguistic domains. The reason for this, in general, is that on most pluralist theories, there are particular properties in particular domains that play the truth role. For example, say that in non-moral contexts, correspondence plays the truth role, while in moral and aesthetic contexts something like coherence plays the truth role. There then comes a problem in giving an account of what plays the truth role for propositions containing both non- moral and moral or aesthetic conjuncts.

Wang's theory of truth has an easy solution to this problem. In fact, we might think that one of the reasons that the problem never occurred to Wang is that it could never have gained traction given his particular view of *shi* 實. Because a statement is *shi* 實 just in case it has the properties we do and should seek when appraising sentences, it is not necessary for there to be only *one* particular property playing the truth role for a given statement. The necessity of there being one truth property for any given statement or proposition, I contend, is what gets the pluralist into the problem. However, if "is true" expresses a unique truth property that is linked (in virtue of being a second-order property) to the lower-level "truth properties," there is no need to rely on only one property to play the truth-making

role. A functionalist pluralist theory of truth (like that of Michael Lynch) *does* require a single property to play the truth role for any given proposition, and Crispin Wright's "platitude" pluralist approach appears to need it as well, because he specifies a higher-order property as being linked to the (single) property that meets the platitudes in a given domain of discourse. The truth property can be defined differently, however, so as not to link it to a single truth-making property that must belong to a statement for it to be true. If a statement is true when it has properties that we do and should seek, it is not necessary for a mixed conjunction to have a single lower-level property that makes it true. It is enough that both conjuncts are true by virtue of having properties we do and should seek.

Consider the following mixed conjunction:

"Mars is the 4th closest planet to the sun and murder is wrong."

Wang's theory can account for the truth of this statement by analysis of the properties of the conjuncts. If each of the conjuncts has lower-level properties we do and should seek and on the basis of which we do and should accept statements, then the conjunction is 實 *shi*. And there is no difficulty here, because the two conjuncts are true in exactly the same way—that is, they both possess properties we do and should seek, and thus the entire statement possesses these properties. Note that the entire statement does *not* possess both *ran* and *shi* (the moral conjunct does not possess the property of *ran*, for example), but the entire statement *does* possess the second-order property of 實 *shi* in virtue of the possession of each conjunct of properties that we do and should seek. This is so because there is no *single* lower level property required for every statement, and *shi* 實 can be said to belong to each of the conjuncts in *the same way*. We can explain this ultimately in terms of the properties at the lowest level, in this case 然 *ran* and 是 *shi*, but we can construct ever higher levels in the theory of 實 *shi*. Thus, the above statement is 實 *shi* in virtue of having *shi*-making properties (然 *ran* and 是 *shi*), and the conjuncts considered separately are 實 *shi* in virtue of having 然 *ran* (in the first conjunct) and 是 *shi* (in the second). We can see here that refraining from tying the truth property to a single truth-making lower-level property has enormous advantages over the properties defined by Wright and Lynch.

We can see already how the theory will avoid a related difficulty of pluralist theories. Consider a "platitude" pluralist approach. If the second-order property obtains in virtue of a proposition's meeting the various platitudes for truth, then it looks like the truth property itself *doesn't* meet the platitudes for truth. Thus, the second-order property does not itself qualify as a truth property under the definition of truth on Wright's account. Wang Chong's account of *shi* does not have this problem. Although it is a second-order property, unlike Wright's truth property it *does* itself qualify as a truth property under the conceptual description of truth.

The property expressed by *shi* is the property of (actually) having properties that we do and should seek when appraising statements. Does this property itself

meet the criteria for being *shi*? That is, is *this* property something that we do and should seek when appraising statements? It is. But notice that we will only be concerned about whether or not *shi* obtains when there is semantic ascent, or some question as to whether a certain statement does actually or does not have the lower-level properties we seek when appraising statements. Consider the statement:

“One should imitate the actions of the Zhou kings.”

This statement may be 實 *shi* by virtue of having the property of 是 *shi* (right). So there are two relevant properties here—實 *shi* (true) and 是 *shi* (right). 實 *Shi* is the second-order property. So, are we looking for *that* when we appraise this sentence? In a sense we are—we are looking for both. The second-order property is especially relevant when we engage in semantic ascent. Consider the statement:

“The statement ‘you should imitate the actions of the Zhou kings’ is true (實 *shi*).”

What property or properties do we and should we seek when appraising this sentence? Now that we have semantically ascended, the lowest-level properties such as 然 *ran* and 是 *shi* will be out of the immediate picture, and the sentence must be appraised to see if it has the property of 實 *shi*. What we ought to and will seek here is the *second-order property* itself, because the possession of this will tell us whether the relevant statement is true. Thus, the relevant properties of this statement are the original property of 是 *shi* (right), which makes the second-order property of 實 *shi* obtain, and a third-order 實 *shi* property along side of that.

So the question of whether the second- (and higher-) order property of *shi* can be something itself that counts as a truth property under the given definition of truth can be answered in the affirmative. The definition of truth given here does not bar higher-order properties constructed in this way from serving as truth-making properties.

Substantive Pluralism

There is an additional problem pluralist theories of truth face. Truth is not only a unified single concept, but it is a complex one that can be the focus of our study and about which we can uncover much. It is a concept that is itself a proper focus of inquiry, and one that is complex and intricate, having tendrils that reach deep into every aspect of human life, and our most basic activities. Gila Sher has criticized pluralist views in her previous work for failing to offer substantive accounts of truth. Crispin Wright’s “platitude” approach to pluralism is an example—there turns out to be no property associated with truth itself, but rather an associated set of platitudes that pick out different robust properties in different domains of discourse. It is these properties—which are *not* truth properties, that are doing all the work. Sher has suggested that we might move to different accounts

that offer us a substantive property connected with truth, but also allow for different *ways* of being true in different domains. She has herself offered a kind of view we might call a “correspondence pluralist” view to solve this problem, taking correspondence as the primary truth property, which is itself understood differently in different domains of discourse.

Wang Chong’s theory of truth, I contend, offers us an alternative kind of pluralist view that fits Sher’s requirements for “substantiveness” (which I think are good ones), but does it in a very different way. At basic, a substantive account is, according to Sher, “a theory that provides an explanatory, constructive, and systematic account of a rich, significant, and fundamental subject matter” (Sher 2004: 5). Wang’s conception of *shi* 實 provides this.

Wang Chong’s view, although it entails that there are multiple different properties involved in truthmaking in different domains of discourse, does not rely on a standard “second-order property” approach, with all the attendant problems of such. This is because *shi* 實 is a *substantive* second-order property. This enables it to resist some of the problems raised with second-order property views. It relies, of course, on something many philosophers may find problematic: the “basicness” of normativity. But I believe a good case can be made for this, and it can certainly be connected to earlier positions in Chinese philosophical literature concerning non-semantic senses of truth (the true person, etc.) that are themselves very plausible. How acceptable we find the idea of the basicness of normativity and its existence in nature will to a large extent rely on how plausible we find the other philosophical assumptions on which it rests. While the view is that normativity is basic, it is *not* the case that this view came fully formed into the world, or that it is not dependent on a web of other positions. Normativity is *metaphysically* basic, not philosophically independent or inaccessible to reason.

The property of *shi* 實, being the property of having properties we do and should seek, as I mentioned above, is a substantive property. What makes it a substantive property, where the property of satisfying Wright-like platitudes is not, is that the *behavioral* aspect of truth here playing a role—in particular, alignment of proper action with *dao* 道 (way, ground of reality). The properties we do and should seek concerning statements (*yan* 言) should be understood as a proper subset of the ways we do and should *act* in general. That is, the normativity of truth is not simply a platitude, but is based on important facts about the nature of human activity with which truth is related. This does not make truth a anti-realistically construed concept, as humans are ourselves bound and to some sense determined by *tian* 天 (nature). We will assume for purposes of this that there are ways around the problems of agency generated by all of this. Such problems are at least no *more* difficult than those faced by Western theories, so if we do reject Wang’s view, it’s unclear we should reject it on this ground.

We can consider a test case—take two statements we will stipulate as true (as well as the conjunction!):

“Geumgang Mountain is in North Korea” and “The *qin* makes a beautiful sound when

played skillfully.”

These both have properties we do and should seek. In the case of the first statement, perhaps it has the property of correspondence, however we choose to determine correspondence (that is, I’m swerving around the issue of what the relations in the correspondence relation are, and how we understand correspondence between them). In the second case, it may be the property of social acceptance. Both of these properties are properties that we do and should seek when appraising statements, according to Wang. But not in an uncoordinated way. It is not that we do and should seek correspondence in the domain of aesthetics, or social acceptance in the domain of physics. We do and should seek certain properties only in particular domains of discourse. This is all included in the concept of what we do and should seek. There can be (and is!) plenty of explanatory depth to this. So then the idea that truth should be substantive such that it takes commitment and study and insight to understand the nature of truth can be made perfect sense of. There is much to say about why we do and should seek certain properties and why we do it in certain domains. To learn more about why we do this and how our doing of this mirrors reality (*dao* 道) is ultimately then to learn more about truth. A fully detailed picture of Wang Chong’s theory of truth as *shi* 實 would say much more than “what we do and should seek”—this is an overview, a broad or “thin” description, that would be filled out by study of human nature, activity, and connection with the world. And within *each* of these different domains of discourse there are then further things to learn about the nature of truth, having to do with the nature of the properties we do and should seek in these areas. If we do and should seek correspondence in the domain of physics, it is not only the property of *correspondence*, the first order property, that is substantive and a proper object of study, but the second-order property of having a property we do and should seek is itself interesting and substantive and a proper object of study—probably even *moreso!* (as it should be if we are calling *it* the truth property, rather than the first order property).

Why do we and should we seek correspondence in physics and social acceptance (say) in aesthetics? The answer to this *for us* may differ from Wang Chong’s answer or the standard answers we will find in early Chinese thought in general. We can adopt *parts* of Wang’s theory without the whole. But let’s follow Wang further along the path, and see what *his* answer might be. The “do and should” part of Wang’s program traces back to the same thing we saw in the Mohists. The properties we do seek (within domains) are also ones that we should seek. This normativity is not explained by our nature, or the fact that we do so seek these properties, but is a separate and additional fact. We also cannot say that we *do* seek these properties because we should seek them, as it is not the normativity that explains our seeking. There certainly is no justificatory or motivational structure in which our understanding of the normativity of the properties drives our seeking of them (a structure we see in a number of Western theories going back to the ancient Greeks). The normativity and descriptivity is explained by the nature of *dao* 道. Thus to answer the questions of *why* we do and should seek certain

properties in particular domains, we must learn more about *dao* 道 itself, and the patterns (*tian li* 天理, “natural propensities”) inherent in *dao*. *Dao*, as the early Daoist text *Daodejing* and most similar texts after it hold, is ultimately ineffable. Yet there are discernible patterns in *dao*, manifest through the actions of the skilled person. Insofar as we can discern these patterns, however, we can do so through perception of and response to them.

The Correspondence Intuition

Finally, allow me to return briefly to Gila Sher’s conception of truth, and say something about correspondence according to Wang Chong’s theory of truth. Both Sher and Terrence Horgan offer theories of truth that take *correspondence* to be the central truth property, while allowing room to understand it differently in different domains of discourse. There is some sense in which Wang Chong’s theory of truth can be thought of as endorsing a kind of correspondence, though it is unclear we can take his *shi* 實 to be anything like Sher’s or Horgan’s conceptions of correspondence, or even that of a traditional Russellian correspondence theory. What we *can* say about Wang’s theory, however, is that it does have connection with what we might call a “correspondence intuition”, and a strong correspondence intuition, taking *shi* 實 to ultimately be about *reality* or *the way things are*, based in both human activity as well as other facts (or something like them) about the world, grounded in *tian li* 天理 (natural propensities or patterns).

The term *shi* 實, which Wang Chong uses as a truth term, can in earlier Chinese texts be translated as ‘substantiality’, ‘actuality’ or ‘reality’. The connection between conduct (*xing* 行) and statements (*yan* 言) in earlier texts explains why the property of *shi* 實 (having properties we do and should seek) would be taken as corresponding with reality in some way. Insofar as our (proper) action mirrors *dao* 道 (the ground of reality), then what we do and should seek is connected to this ground of reality. There is thus a kind of correspondence on Wang Chong’s theory of truth, but it is not this correspondence that characterizes the truth property itself—directly, at least. Notice, however, that this correspondence *does* meet a kind of correspondence *intuition*—there is a kind of correspondence *associated with*, if not definitive of, truth—and also that the correspondence involved here is a proper object of investigation and something we might learn much more about through this investigation. Truth, on Wang Chong’s account, turns out to be as broad and robust as human activity itself. This seems to match well with an intuition about truth that few of our theories have been able to capture—that truth is *complex*, requires connection of some kind between the truth-bearer and reality, and is multi-layered. A statement that has the property of having properties we do and should seek is a statement that represents “the way things are”. What we do and should seek is one way of construing “the way things are”. What would fail to be sufficiently basic is if Wang were to make the claim that we do and should seek certain properties *because* they represent the way things are. But he does not hold this at all. What we do and should seek is itself basic. There is no further fact about the connection between

what we do and should seek and “the way things (actually) are.” Indeed, if what I have described above is correct, what we do and should seek shows us the way things are, and the further facts as to why we do and should seek certain properties are facts about *why certain things are true*, rather than about truth itself.

The substantive pluralism of Wang Chong, then, offers us a pluralist theory that gives us a plausible account of why we take truth to be so central, basic, important, and difficult.

Note from Alexis:

For whoever may be interested, there are a couple of works in which I fill out much of what is just suggested or briefly mentioned in this paper, which brings together a number of things I’ve been working on. For a more detailed picture of what is going on here, see:

(2011) "Pluralism About Truth in Early Chinese Philosophy: A Reflection on Wang Chong’s Approach", *Comparative Philosophy* 2.1, and the “Constructive Engagement Dialogue” section of *Comparative Philosophy* 6.1 (2015) with responses to the 2011 paper from Bo Mou and Lajos Brons, along with my response to them.

(2012) “Wang Chong”, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (for an overview of Wang and his concerns)

(2015), *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy: A Comparative Approach*, chapters 5 and 6 (especially 6)