A. GENERAL PERSPECTIVES

The concept of truth in Chinese religion does not willingly offer itself up for sacrifice upon the altar of academic inquiry. Legend has it that the only reason the Old Master bequeathed to posterity the text we know as the Daode jing was that he was desperate to get out of the country and was, presumably, in such a hurry that he had left his driving license, credit cards, passport, visas and exit permits at home. He was therefore at the mercy of the keeper of the mountain pass who, correctly discerning that the old man was a sage, asked him the obvious question: what is the secret of the universe? The old man, however, fulfilled the request with a denial of the possibility of an ultimately satisfactory answer: “Dao? Yes I can tell you about Dao, but it won’t be true for ever. Names? Yes I can name names, but names don’t last for ever either.” We do well to beware, therefore, that truth is frequently exacted at a price, sometimes as the result of compulsion, and often is not what we are looking for in any case. It is, perhaps, the satisfaction of a craving that indicates a failure of intuition, conscience or natural spontaneity.

To trace the origins of “religious truth” we must first note that the guiding religious category is not divinity (God, his being and his attributes) but divination. We are not dealing in the first instance with abstract propositions that relate eternal Being to (corrupt) temporal phenomena, but rather with events of mediation that disclose paths of action.

The eminent linguist-philosopher-sinologist, Chad Hansen, argued (1992) that the distinction between “Being” or “Truth” and “Way” is so fundamental and so hard to grasp that classical Chinese philosophy has been profoundly misinterpreted not only by Western sinologists but, more significantly, by Neo-Confucian philosophers struggling to react to the powerful Indo-European logic of Being imported by Buddhist missionaries. These revisionist philosophers, he argues, reified the concept of Dao, turning it into a metaphysical entity and logical category that it had never been in the mind of Laozi or Confucius.

Yet when we turn to the religious nature of logical propositions about Being and Truth, we find that the distinction is perhaps not so significant after all. The nature of Christian Trinitarian formulae, for example, though couched in the seemingly arid terms of Greek philosophy, centers precisely on the nature of God (or Being in classical Christian philosophy) as an event of mediation and relation (Christ) that certainly discloses paths of action (Spirit). As Hegel argued, even the formal structure of the syllogism is itself a process of dynamic, relational becoming. Moreover, logical truth, if we are persuaded by it, carries a force of compulsion that
results in the modification of behavior. Knowledge is often more dictator than maidservant.

The distinction Hansen notes between logical formulations in Indo-European languages and their most obvious Chinese equivalent, the Mohist “School of Names” is that in the latter “[w]e find no concepts of beliefs, concepts, ideas, thoughts, meanings or truth. Mohist thinkers create realist semantics out of the project of finding constant guiding discourse” (Hansen 1992, 235). Yet although Greek or Indian logic, if we may be permitted for the sake of argument to elide them both, is constructed in terms of “beliefs, concepts, ideas, thoughts, meaning or truth” this does not mean that such a logic is necessarily morally or religiously neutral. Surely the reverse is the case: however abstract the logical terminology we use to form truth-propositions, they must, if they are interesting enough to have been formulated, be able to be cashed out in terms of a moral or religious value. Whether truth is expressed in the form of mathematics or music, in neither case is it religiously uninteresting. A sharp distinction between “truth as logic” and “truth as performance” is predicated on the belief that somehow belief and action belong to two entirely discrete domains of human being. Perhaps from the standpoint of certain forms of Western philosophy this appears so, but it is in the religious sphere that these two most nearly coincide.

If there is anything particularly distinctive about the revelation of truth in Chinese religion, it is that these events of mediation are not oral or oracular in nature, but encoded symbolically in Chinese characters. Indeed the Chinese writing has its origin in scapulimancy: ritual acts of divination performed by the Shang priest-kings in which the marks formed by heating the scapulae of oxen or the shells of tortoises were interpreted in relation to a particular question asked of the ancestral spirits. The purpose of divination was not fortune-telling but the discernment of a right course of action in a given concrete situation: dao.

Skip a thousand years. It was the cosmologists of the next great dynasty, the Han, who first succeeded in regularizing the patterns of correspondence between heaven, earth and humanity in terms of the five phases, an eternal hierarchical cycle of arising and decaying. What made this possible was the compilation of histories (the greatest literary and intellectual figure of the Han, Sima Qian, was a historian) from the analysis of which patterns of interaction between heaven, earth and humanity could be deduced.¹ This provoked an unprecedented restructuring of the Chinese religious imagination for it turned the supreme religious art of divination into a proto-science. The semiotic substructure is the same: Chinese characters—not transcriptions of human speech, but ideographic representations of phenomena and

¹ Dong Zhongshu (c.179-c.104 B.C.E.) is the most well-known advocate of what I would call the “cosmology of history.” His Chunqiu Fanlu (Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn Annals) is an attempt to deduce dynastic laws from an analysis of the classic Spring and Autumn Annals, a terse and cryptic history of Confucius’s native State, Lu, from 722-481 B.C.E., allegedly written by the sage himself. A partial translation and introduction is found in Chan (1963, 271-288).
concepts-form the matrix that encodes the interaction of heaven, earth and humanity analogously to the way that mathematical formulae encode the laws of physics. The difference between cosmological formulae and shamanistic divination lies in the fact that the former are prescriptions for cosmic-human interaction, the latter descriptions of such events. The difference between cosmological formulae and modern scientific formulae lies in that the former are the inductions of correspondence, the latter determinations of causality (see Porkert 1974).

More interesting to the Han cosmologists than the observation of causality between two temporally successive events in one particular situation, was the observation of correspondence between two different situations that are temporally simultaneous. Correspondence rather than causation is the underlying principle of investigation, and a continuous intra-related universe rather than a temporal contiguity of discrete objects its metaphysical presupposition. The result of this type of observation was the formulation of patterns of correspondence sometimes so elaborate that they seem grotesquely fanciful:

The feelings of men and rulers rise up to penetrate heaven. Thus executions and cruelties correspond to many whirlwinds; oppressive laws and ordinances match many insect plagues. As the innocent are put to death, so the countryside reddens with drought. As ordinances are not accepted, so there are many disastrous floods (Huainanzi 3:2a-2b; see Henderson 1994, 25).

What is disturbing about this passage from the Huainanzi is that the two halves of each clause seem unrelatable as a scientifically plausible causal sequence. To make sense of the text (which is the goal of the intellectual historian) requires thinking not in modern Western scientific terms, but in the terms of a cosmologically entailed correspondence. This means that we must accept a completely different taxonomy of the natural world in China.

The degree to which human knowledge is intimately connected with the methods used for its classification is the subject of the preface of Michel Foucault’s The Order of Things. Here he presents a reminder of that great passage in Borges’s Ficciones that cites “a certain Chinese encyclopedia’ in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a very long way off look like flies” (Foucault 1984, xv).

This humorous and exaggerated ficción had to be Chinese not because Chinese taxonomies are irrational, bizarre, and incomprehensible, but because their logic seems irrational when placed in comparative contrast with the relative familiarity of its Greek, Indian or Arabic counterparts. This contrast Borges heightens by juxtaposing the Chinese categories with the most simple, rational, logical, Indo-European form of classification, the alphabetic sequence. Yet from the Chinese perspective it is the alphabet itself that is highly arbitrary and bizarre. Why not group together the vowels, or the sibilants, or the fricatives? Why not place the
letters in descending order of frequency? Why not emulate a Chinese dictionary which orders characters according to their component parts and number of brush-strokes, starting, for example, with “l” and ending with “m”? It is superficially disturbing to realize that the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the most venerable English-language repository of knowledge and interpreter of truth, is itself a particularly egregious embodiment of the irrational conventions of Western civilization.

To make sense of the Huainanzi text, then, we must think not in terms of a temporal causal series, but in terms of a cosmologically entailed correspondence. If this is true, then we have moved from the analysis of actual phenomena to the synthesis of cosmological norms, from description, as it were, to prescription. Each prescription, moreover, encodes a particular aspect, however, small of the universe of transformations. Each is a clue or a symbol of the creative power of the cosmos, and therefore functionally correlated to a prescription for the compounding of drugs or an elixir: extremely valuable, potentially dangerous and to be used very wisely.

In the revelation of the Shangqing scriptures, we learn that the texts of the revelation pre-existed in heaven, and, indeed, “predate” time itself. The scriptures (jing) are moreover the weft of the cosmos itself, and the talismans (fu) are distillations of primal cosmic breath. Religious truths are theochemical prescriptions: methods for transforming the physical body into a cosmically translucent and immortal one. The language of religious truth, then, is not primarily direct spoken communication but written in Chinese characters: signs that encode transformations, simultaneous concealments and revelations.

To understand the development of truth in Chinese religion we must place Confucius in direct relation to this seemingly esoteric tradition. Confucius was not, however, concerned with discovering the proper prescriptions to enact. Language, after all, had already been created; the signs were already there; the classics had already been written; and Confucius claimed to be a transmitter, not a creator. The problem was how to perform them. Interpretation, thus, was not a matter of intellectual comprehension, but authentic relational embodiment or sincerity, the most fundamental forms of which were filial piety and music. Knowledge was “connaitre” rather than “savoir.” To this end, therefore, he engaged in the project of “discourse and conversation” (lunyu) we know as “Analects.”

**B. XUE (LEARNING) AND ZHI (KNOWING)**

**B.1. The Analects**

The Analects begins with the character xue (learning) just as confidently and symbolically as the Daode jing begins with the character dao (way). The line is “Learning and its timely practice: is this not delightful?” By means of amplification on the nature of delight, the next line reads “To have a friend come from a distant place: is this not a pleasure?” And then the third line introduces the character zhi (know): “People do not know him yet he is not hurt: is he not a gentleman?” From these three short phrases we may discern the Confucian heart.
There is nothing explicitly religious about any of these statements yet their terse profundity has transcendental quality to it. Learning what is true, noble and valuable is something that requires constant discipline. It is never a matter of sudden enlightenment or divine revelation, but it is nonetheless a source of deep human happiness. Learning and happiness coincide in the visit of friends from distant places, because then one’s horizons may be expanded in the course of discussion and conversation just as one’s memories are being re-affirmed. Truth is never to be sought on lofty mountains or experienced in lonely isolation, but always in the pleasurable society of those whose shared cultural background forms the condition for the possibility of rational discourse. Those whose learning and conversation have gained for themselves a certain connaissance of truth and value will, however be marked with a pathetic quality. Although learning is necessarily a social process, it has a deeply private purpose, such that true nobility may not be recognized (zhī) by others. It is between the pleasure of friendship (intimate knowledge) and the failure to be truly recognized (public ignorance) that the delight of learning finds its place.

Learning is delightful in the same way that the visit of a distant friend is pleasurable: it is a process of reacquaintance. Truth, whether experienced in friendship, or learned in books, is never new, but always reclaimed and re-authenticated. Confucius said of his student Zi Gong that they could discuss the Odes because Confucius only needed to begin a phrase and Zi Gong would know the its proper sequence (Analects 1:15). Familiarity with the classics, therefore, was the prerequisite for any meaningful conversation just as familiarity with cultural codes (lì) was the prerequisite for successful social interaction, and the rectification of names (zheng ming) was the prerequisite for good government. If we are to speak of truth or virtue then we must already be inside some established social, semiotic, and political system. We simply cannot invent the truth, but only discover, renew and transmit it in discourse and conversation (lunyu). In fact the particularity of language and culture, far from constituting a sort of permanent epistemological alienation from the real, is in fact to be celebrated as our only means of intercourse with that which is real, true and valuable. Human beings are always and irrevocably instituted. Being true, correct, appropriate or optimal is likewise an institutional process.

The moment of Confucian spirituality, however, turns on the fact that learning is a lifelong process towards the attainment of personal sagehood. The truth that is learned has no obvious technical or functional value: “The gentleman is not a utensil.” Though the Confucian virtues are modesty, frugality and reciprocity, there is an aspect to the process of learning to be a sage that is sheer personal extravagance. It requires costly discipline, an expensive education, suffering wives and personal risk. In this respect we may safely generalize that anything truly valuable is always truly costly. Just as Confucian bureaucrats endured the personal sacrifice of exile by unreasonable emperors, so too Daoist adepts required vast financial reserves to purchase the expensive ingredients to concoct elixirs of immortality. Since Zhang Daoling, the first Celestial Master came from a poor family, he went to Shu (present-day Sichuan province, read California) where the people
were rich and gullible. After receiving a vision on Mt. Heming, he became a cult leader and quickly amassed enough cash to purchase the necessary ingredients for the elixir (Ge Hong, The Biographies of Spirit Immortals (Shenxian Zhuan)).

B.2. The Zhuangzi and our Confucian Project

Although it is common to classify Zhuangzi in direct opposition to the early Confucians, it is helpful also to be aware of commonalities. We may start, perhaps, with Confucius’ statement that the junzi (the true gentleman possessed of authentic nobility and humane sensitivity) is not sectarian (bi: a unit of five households) but universal (zhou: a full circuit) (Analects 2:14). This points toward a basic impulse in Chinese epistemology that truth, if it is true, is comprehensive. Moreover, in the Confucian scheme comprehension is achieved by returning to the root (ben) instead of remaining at the level of the branches (mo). For Confucius himself, this schema of root and branches was conceived on a historical axis. Returning to the root meant retrieving the rituals of the previous unified empire and actualizing them in contemporary human life. There is thus a dialectical movement back and forth between unitive vision and interpretive performance that is, curiously, not unlike the theoretical foundation for this research project. This connection is made explicit when Neville translates his discussion of theory in Part IV of his Axiology of Thinking series into the concrete terms of practical responsibility (Part V). He writes:

> It was argued earlier that every thing in the cosmos [tianxia: all under heaven] every process, substance, composite, institution, or situation [wanwu: the ten thousand things] is to be understood in terms of four primary cosmological categories. Every thing has a form or pattern [li: principle] whereby it integrates its components. Every thing has components [xing: nature] that are integrated. Every thing existentially actualizes its components [xing] and form [li] together with haecceity in an existential, temporal environment [shi: actuality] with a fixed actual past, a future structured as a field relating to other things [ming: destiny], and with present moments of decision. Every thing achieves [de: obtain] some actual value [de: virtue, power], a value that grows [qi: arise] or unfolds [fa: issue, manifest] through the enduring process of actualization [shi], and that has a cumulative worth relative to what might have been (Neville 1995, 118).

This is, we might say, a theoretical analysis of the process of the movement from an unformed, unrealized, vague root (ben) to the actual flowering of a realized branch (mo). What is important to realize about this scheme is that it is wholly qualitative. At no point is it possible to quantify truth or value or actuality such that it could be measured absolutely. In this respect this theory (readily understandable in Neo-Confucian categories) builds upon an important insight that is frequently encountered in Zhuangzi (that truth resists quantification) but that is developed in three directions that together constitute a Daoist critique of the desirability and the possibility of this Confucian project of comprehension. They are: (1) truth is realized in skillful practice and cannot be communicated by words; (2) logic relies on
conventions and thus is equally useless; (3) truth is only comprehended fully in the concept of “One”.

The first point is illustrated in the story of wheelwright Bian.

Duke Huan was reading a book at the top of the hall, wheelwright [Bian] was chipping a wheel at the bottom of the hall. He put aside his mallet and chisel and went up to ask Duke Huan

“May I ask what words my lord is reading?”

“The words of a sage.”

“Is the sage alive?”

“He is dead.”

“In that case what my lord is reading is the dregs of the men of old, isn’t it?”

“What business is it of a wheelwright to criticize what I read? If you can explain yourself, well and good; if not, you die.”

“Speaking for myself, I see it in terms of my own work. If I chip at a wheel too slowly, the chisel slides and does not grip; if too fast, it jams and catches in the wood. Not too slow, not too fast; I feel it in the hand and respond from the heart, the mouth cannot put it into words, there is a knack in it somewhere which I cannot convey to my son and which my son cannot learn from me. This is how through my seventy years I have grown old chipping at wheels. The men of old and their untransmittable message are dead. Then what my lord is reading is the dregs of men of old, isn’t it?” (Zhuangzi 13 trans. Graham 1981, 139-40; see also Yearley 1996)

The second point was aimed at the logicians who attempted to arrive at truth through a process of binary discrimination (bian). This process took the form of posing clearly defined questions, to which the answer could only be “it is” (shī) or “it is not” (feī), “so” (ran) or “not so” (bu ran), “admissible” (ke) or “inadmissible” (buke). The purpose was to arrive at absolute clarity by forcing language to address reality in these binary quanta. Aside from the difficulty of dealing with instances of actual transformation in the cosmos-an ox, it turns out, is both ox and non-ox at the moments of birth and death (Graham 1981, 12)-Zhuangzi’s point was that “ox” is merely a conventional designation, and that if I so choose, “ox” could refer to a horse or a telephone or a particularly bad dose of the flu (see Zhuangzi 2). If we cannot even agree on basic terminology, what hope is there for ordering those terms in a logical sequence?

Although we readily recognize in our project that the vague categories that we employ are purely conventional designations (though they always have a genealogy in a particular religious tradition) from Zhuangzi’s point of view this would be a further compounding of the error. Not only is conventional language conventional, our inter-religious comparative language is yet one step further removed from actuality and skillful practice. Not only is it the dregs of men of old, it is the combined dregs of many old men swilled around then carefully distilled into vague comparative categories. Moreover if what we achieve through these comparative categories is the means to comprehend, say, Hindu pramana theory as explicated by Shiv Kumar (1980) then wouldn’t that only be further proof that the process was mistaken?
The problem, of course, is that Zhuangzi has to use language and logic to get his point across, and in doing so opens himself up to the possibility of having that language and logic dissected in scholarly tomes. We can do that, just as we can analyze Nagarjuna’s systematic negation of conventional truth in favor of the truth of no-truth (see Loy 1996). If we do that, however, then we cannot escape the feeling that in doing so we have missed the point. Zhuangzi, in a sense, defies comparative analysis. At the very least the theoretical tools that we use to do so run the risk of missing what Zhuangzi wants us to understand.

Perhaps, thirdly, this problem is compounded by the fact that the Zhuangzi\(^2\) itself offers a framework for a comparison of religious truth:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{From where does the daemonic [shen] descend?} \\
\text{From where does illumination [ming] come forth?} \\
\text{Sagehood is born from something,} \\
\text{Kingship forms out of something;} \\
\text{All have their source in the One.}
\end{align*}
\]

There is an analogy in the ears, eyes, nose and mouth; all have something they illuminate but they cannot exchange their functions, just as the various specialties of the Hundred Schools all have their strong points and at times turn out useful. However, they are not inclusive, not comprehensive; these are men each of whom has his own little corner. They split the glory of heaven and earth down the middle, chop up the patterns of the myriad things, and scrutinise some point in what for the ancients was a whole. There are few who are able to have the whole glory of heaven and earth at their disposal, and speak of the full scope of the daemonic-and-illumined [shenming]. (Zhuangzi 33 trans. Graham 1981, 275-276).

The syncretist scale is, like that of Confucius, historical. In the earliest times, the Way was unified, but lately it is so divided that people mistake what is sectarian for what is comprehensive. The syncretist goes on to commend Confucius as having correctly grasped a portion of the Way, and further lauds Zhuangzi as being even more comprehensive: “As for the Root, he opened it up in all its comprehensiveness, ran riot in the vastness of its depths” (Zhuangzi 33 trans. Graham 1981, 283). Zhuangzi’s project of extravagance, moving the goal-posts, undermining viewpoints, being rude in conversation, and roaming far beyond the bounds of the conventional perhaps in the end does offer some justification for beginning a project such as ours, though it would never justify its completion.

\(^2\) It is fairly certain that the following chapter of the Zhuangzi was not written by Zhuangzi himself. Graham refers to this as one of the later “syncretist writings” (1981, 256). This syncretistic approach, however, is a dominant mode of Chinese philosophy.
REFERENCES


