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## TRUTH IN MOIST DIALECTICS

## ABSTRACT

The article assesses Chad Hansen's arguments that both early and later Moist texts apply only pragmatic, not semantic, terms of evaluation and treat "appropriate word or language usage," not semantic truth. I argue that the early Moist "three standards" are indeed criteria of a general notion of correct *dao* 道 (way), not specifically of truth. However, as I explain, their application may include questions of truth. I show in detail how later Moist texts employ terms with the same expressive role as "...is true." Thus, *contra* Hansen, the Moists can justifiably be said to have a concept of semantic truth.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The *Mozi* famously proposes three "standards" (*biao* 表) or "models" (*fa* 法) as criteria for evaluating teachings, claims, or policies. A longstanding controversy in the interpretation of Moist thought concerns exactly what the three standards are criteria of. Are they intended to evaluate whether a teaching is true, morally right, pragmatically useful, or something else? A seemingly natural interpretation, motivated partly by Western philosophical assumptions, is that the standards are criteria for judging the truth of an assertion or theory. Watson, for instance, interprets them as three tests of the "validity" of a "theory."<sup>1</sup> Schwartz and Wong both take them to be three tests for "verifying a proposition."<sup>2</sup> Graham calls them three tests of "assertion" and contends that they concern issues that are "purely factual."<sup>3</sup> In a more recent discussion, Van Norden suggests that they are "indicators of truth."<sup>4</sup> Against these interpretations, Hansen contends that the best explanation of the standards is that the Moists

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are concerned not with truth, but with “appropriate word or language usage” or pragmatic “assertibility.”<sup>5</sup> He suggests that the Moists are not treating the semantic issue of how to determine whether a sentence is true, but the pragmatic one of how to determine whether the use of words is appropriate.

The general approach of evaluating statements, actions, and policies by distinguishing whether they are relevantly similar to a standard figures prominently both in the core books of the *Mozi*, which present the Moists’ “ten doctrines,” and in the Moist dialectical texts, the six books that form the so-called “later Moist” texts or Moist “Dialectics.”<sup>6</sup> Both use the same terminology, referring to such criteria as *fa* (model, standard). Unlike the core books, however, the later Moist texts explicitly treat semantic issues, such as the grounds by which to distinguish whether things fall under the same general term and the status of utterances disputants make in debating which of two terms fits an object. If the three standards are not criteria of truth, are these later Moist texts also evaluating utterances in terms of some pragmatic status, rather than truth? Does a concept akin to truth have any role in Moist dialectics, whether in the core books or the dialectical texts? Hansen argues boldly that “Chinese philosophy has no concept of truth” and that later Moist thought instead applies purely pragmatic, not semantic, terms of evaluation.<sup>7</sup> Utterances are evaluated as to whether they are “admissible” or “assertible” by practical standards, not by whether they are correct in a specifically semantic sense. He offers three main grounds for this interpretation. The first is that early Chinese theories of language had a pragmatic, not semantic, orientation, and thus there was no role for a concept of truth. The second is that early Chinese thinkers did not theorize about the status of sentences, the units of language that admit of evaluation as true or false. The third is that Moist dialecticians evaluated utterances not in terms of a concept corresponding to truth, but in terms of whether they were *ke* 可 (“permissible”), a concept with a pragmatic connotation.<sup>8</sup>

This essay reviews the case for the claims that the Moists' three standards are something other than standards of truth and that even the dialectical texts employ no term of semantic evaluation corresponding to "true." I concur with Hansen that the three standards are not criteria of truth, specifically, but of a more general notion of the correct *dao* 道 (way). However, they do not preclude a concern with truth, and their application probably covers questions of truth. Later Moist dialectics likewise does not focus specifically on truth or employ a concept that aligns exactly with "true." Nevertheless, I argue, the texts do employ terms that play the same expressive role as "...is true." Thus, *contra* Hansen's thesis, these texts can justifiably be said to have a concept of semantic truth.

## II. THE THREE STANDARDS

The three books of the *Mozi* entitled "Rejecting Fatalism" (*Fei Ming* 非命) present three criteria for evaluating what the texts call *yan* 言 (statements or pronouncements). The three books present slightly different versions of the criteria. In Book 35, they are called the three "standards" (*biao* 表), in books 36 and 37, the three "models" (*fa* 法). For brevity, I will focus on the most elaborate version, that of Book 35. The book claims that states' failure to achieve material wealth, a large population, and orderly government can be explained by the many fatalists among the populace. It quotes the *yan* of the fatalists as follows:

If fated to be wealthy, people are wealthy; if fated to be poor, they are poor. If fated to be populous, a state or family is populous; if fated to have few people, it has few. If fated to be in order, a state is in order, if fated to be in disorder, it is in disorder. If fated for longevity, people enjoy longevity; if fated to die young, they die young. Given fate, even if one works hard, of what use is it?<sup>9</sup>

Mozi responds that "The fatalists are not morally good, so we cannot fail to clearly distinguish (*bian* 辯) the fatalists' *yan*."

To grasp the significance of these remarks, we need to understand the role of *yan* in Moist thought. A cornerstone of Moist ethics is the conviction that the proper moral and

political *dao* can be expressed and promulgated as *yan*, a general term that covers sayings, doctrines, and teachings. *Yan* are regarded as explicit dicta or instructions that reliably guide action. Like many early Chinese texts, the *Mozi* frequently pairs *yan* conceptually with *xing* 行 (conduct, practice). People's *xing* should correspond to their *yan*, and those who endorse contrasting *yan* can be expected to act in contrasting ways (although they may sometimes fail to).<sup>10</sup> Moist political theory calls for people to follow their rulers' *yan*, and moral education involves emulating the *yan* and *xing*—in effect, the words and deeds—of worthy political leaders.<sup>11</sup> Hence the Moists are here proposing criteria by which to evaluate doctrines and teachings that guide conduct—in effect, explicit expressions of the *dao*.

The text continues:

So then how do we clearly distinguish this doctrine? Our master Mozi stated, We must establish criteria. Uttering *yan* without criteria is analogous to establishing sunrise and sunset on a potter's wheel. The distinctions between *shi* 是 (this) and *fei* 非 (not) and between benefit and harm cannot be clearly known. So *yan* must have three standards.<sup>12</sup>

*Biao*, the word here rendered as “standards,” refers to gnomons, wooden poles used to fix the direction of sunrise and sunset on the horizon and thus to determine the four cardinal directions. Uttering *yan* without reference to proper criteria is like trying to identify the directions not by planting three fixed poles, but by marking them on a spinning potter's wheel. The result is that one cannot distinguish east and west from any other direction, since the marks rotate with the wheel and point to no fixed bearing.

The text specifies that the issue at stake—the purpose of the three standards—is to distinguish *shi* (“this,” right) from *fei* (“not-this,” wrong) and benefit from harm, using the technical term *bian*, “distinguish” or “discriminate,” which may refer to dialectics or to the process of forming a judgment. For the Moists, as for other early Chinese thinkers, evaluating a statement or forming a judgment is seen as a process of drawing distinctions. Formally, the outcome is not to establish whether a claim or doctrine is true, *per se*, but to distinguish

whether it is right or wrong, beneficial or harmful, and thus to indicate the proper *dao* for social policy and personal conduct. Benefit and harm here of course allude to Moist normative theory, according to which what is ethically right is determined by what tends to benefit people, what is wrong by what tends to harm them. *Shi* and *fei* allude to the basic, general conceptual structure by which the Moists—and pre-Han thinkers generally—explain perception, knowledge, judgment, reasoning, ethics, and action. All are regarded as grounded in distinguishing what is *shi* from *fei*—what is “this,” or part of the extension of a contextually specified term, from what is “not.” To judge that some animal is an ox is to distinguish it as an ox, or, equivalently, to distinguish it as *shi* with respect to the term “ox.” This judgment can be expressed by applying the term “ox” to the animal or, in a context in which the topic is understood to be oxen, by calling it “*shi*.” If the thing is not an ox, then it is *fei*, the contradiction of *shi*. In terms of pragmatic force, uttering the term “ox” or the pronoun “*shi*” in an appropriate context is equivalent to asserting that the animal is an ox.

When early Chinese texts speak of *shi* and *fei* in general, without specifying the term under discussion, “*shi*” typically refers to what is right, often in the sense of morally right, and “*fei*” to what is wrong. “*Shi*” and “*fei*” can also be used as verbs meaning roughly “to approve,” “to deem right,” or “to deem this kind of thing” and “to condemn or reject,” “to deem wrong,” or “to deem not this kind of thing.” To call something “*shi*” is to endorse doing it and, normally, to be motivated to do or promote it. To call it “*fei*” is to condemn or reject it and to be motivated to refrain from doing it or to help prevent it. Since both the descriptive issue of whether something is a certain kind of thing and the normative issue of whether some activity is ethically right or wrong are conceptualized as a matter of distinguishing *shi* from *fei*, talk of *shi-fei* distinctions tends to mix descriptive and normative issues. Thus, as criteria for distinguishing *shi-fei*, the three standards apply to both empirical descriptions and normative prescriptions. The Moists probably do not see them as standards specifically for

evaluating empirical facts, moral norms, or social policy, but instead combine all three areas together under one rubric.

As framed in the text, then, the three standards reflect an explicit concern not with truth but with *dao*, the right way of individual and collective conduct and policy—including linguistic conduct, or verbal pronouncements. Indeed, the text repeatedly refers to fatalism as “a criminal *dao*” because of the harm it purportedly causes.<sup>13</sup> One version of the three standards describes the field to which they apply as “undertaking *dao* through *wen xue* (文學),” a phrase that probably refers to the pursuit or promulgation of *dao* through strings of words (*wen*) and the study (*xue*) of explicit teachings.<sup>14</sup> The significance of these observations about the text’s phrasing is that in certain contexts issues concerning the proper *dao* might diverge from those concerning truth.

The “three standards” are that statements must have a “root,” a “source,” and a “use.”<sup>15</sup> The “root” is a historical foundation in the deeds of the ancient sage-kings, moral paragons who reliably distinguished *shi-fei* correctly. To give their doctrines such a “root,” the Moists typically cite the sage-kings’ fabled achievements and practices, from which they claim their doctrines derive. The “source” is an empirical basis in what people see and hear. This requirement can be fulfilled by showing that *yan* conform to common perceptual experience. The “use,” or application, is that if adopted as grounds for government policy and criminal punishment, *yan* must benefit the state, clan, and general populace. So if *yan* conform to the precedent of the sage-kings, are consistent with people’s perceptual experience, and promote the welfare of the state, clan, and people, they are thereby *shi* (right).

The first two standards articulate views widely shared in the Moists’ intellectual milieu. A common presupposition was that the ancient sage-kings were reliable moral and political exemplars. Sense perception too was generally accepted as a reliable source of knowledge. Only the third standard, benefit to society, could be expected to generate controversy.

Presumably the Moists justified it by appeal to their doctrine of heaven's intention, according to which heaven, the highest exemplar of what is right, intends for people to mutually care about and benefit each other. Ultimately, the third standard rests on the Moists' consequentialist ethical theory; opponents who reject the theory are likely to reject this standard as well.

Even if we were to endorse a consequentialist ethics, however, a broad appeal to the third standard to distinguish *shi* from *fei* seems problematic, for an obvious reason: good consequences may not always be a reliable guide to what is descriptively correct. Moreover, the specific consequences the Moists identify—primarily material wealth, a suitable population, and social order—are not obviously relevant to distinguishing *shi* from *fei* in empirical matters, such as the existence of fate or of ghosts, two prominent issues in the *Mozi*. In their defense, we can note that the consequences of an empirical belief may sometimes be relevant to our evaluation of it. Having bad consequences can be a factor that strengthens the grounds for rejecting a descriptively mistaken doctrine, by making it even more objectionable—for moral or prudential reasons—than otherwise. If a quack medical therapy not only is scientifically mistaken and ineffective, but prevents sufferers from seeking effective treatment, promoting it is worse than propounding a view that happens to be false but has no significant practical consequences. This line of thought suggests a view of the doctrine of the three standards that mitigates the oddness of applying a consequentialist criterion to evaluate empirical questions. The Moists probably assume that evaluation by each of the three criteria will generally yield the same result. For instance, as they see it, fatalism fails the test of all three: it was not the practice of the sage-kings, nor is fate empirically observable, nor does fatalism have good consequences. They may see the empirical side of the issue as covered mainly or entirely by the first and second standards—the sage-kings'

precedent and perceptual evidence—and the third as providing additional, supplementary moral or prudential considerations for accepting or rejecting a doctrine.

An obstacle to this interpretation, however, is that the Moists do not explicitly address how to handle potential conflicts between the three standards, and what little they do say might imply that the third takes priority over the second. In a striking passage in Book 31, “Understanding Ghosts” (*Ming Gui* 明鬼), Mozi is depicted explaining that even if ghosts do not exist—and thus fail to meet the second standard, since they cannot be seen or heard—we should still perform ancestral sacrifices because of their good consequences: they provide an occasion for a pleasant gathering and promote good relations among neighbors.<sup>16</sup> The priority given the third standard here is remarkable, since it might suggest that in some circumstances the Moists advocate applying consequentialist criteria to resolve not only normative issues but empirical ones as well.<sup>17</sup> Probably the best explanation of this stance is that, as discussed above, they see all judgments—descriptive, prescriptive, or otherwise—as a matter of discriminating *shi* from *fei*. These terms refer to right and wrong in an extremely general sense, without distinguishing between the different flavors of correctness and error implicated in describing, commanding, recommending, permitting, or choosing, or between issues falling into areas as diverse as science, politics, ethics, prudence, and etiquette. The Moists thus seem to be employing a very basic, primitive conception of correctness, of which truth, permissibility, and other normative statuses can be seen as species. If this is the case, then as Hansen proposes, their central concern is indeed not descriptive truth, *per se*, but the proper *dao* by which to guide social and personal life.<sup>18</sup> This focus on *dao* leads them to merge the empirical question of whether ghosts exist with the normative question of whether we should act on and promulgate the teaching that they do. The three standards thus reflect the practical orientation of Moist thought, in particular their assumption that the primary purpose of language and judgment is to guide action appropriately.



This practical orientation provides the strongest grounds for Hansen's contention that the Moists are concerned primarily with the issue of "appropriate language use" rather than truth. He contends that the best explanation of the third standard—and probably the first as well—is that the Moists are concerned not with truth, but the proper use of words. Rather than the semantic issue of how to determine whether a sentence is true, they are treating the pragmatic question of how to determine whether the use of terms is socially or ethically appropriate. So the three standards are not criteria for judging the truth of a claim such as "Fate determines one's lifespan." They are for judging, for example, whether it is appropriate to sigh, "Ah, fate!" in response to news of a friend's terminal illness—as opposed to responding constructively, such as by seeking a cure—or whether it is appropriate to place the word "you 有" ("there exists") before the word "*ming* 命" (fate). The Moists' concern, as he sees it, is not that fatalism is false but that it is not part of a social *dao* whose acceptance and performance leads to prosperity, increased population, and social order.

Hansen's proposal is particularly helpful in explaining how the Moists can acknowledge the possibility that ghosts may not exist without seeing this as refuting their teachings about ghosts. Were their aim to establish the truth of the claim "There are ghosts," their position would be self-contradictory. As Hansen contends, then, the issue as they see it seems not to be the truth of this claim, specifically.<sup>19</sup> To them, the three standards are indeed most likely criteria of some broader notion of correctness in distinguishing *shi-fei*. I suggest, however, that the sharp contrast Hansen draws between truth and the Moists' concerns is misleading. It is inaccurate to say they are concerned with pragmatic or normative issues *as opposed to* semantic or descriptive ones. Rather, they are working with a more fundamental notion of correct distinction drawing that covers both. They tend to assume the two coincide. When they do not, the Moists may favor pragmatic or normative criteria for distinguishing *shi-fei*, as Hansen contends. But conceptually a focus on *shi-fei* distinctions need be neither

specifically semantic nor pragmatic. In particular contexts, it could translate into a concern with either sort of issue or both. Moreover, a focus on pragmatics—how words are used—need not exclude a concern with semantic issues—such as whether some utterances correctly describe things. Indeed, the two cannot be divorced, since semantic content partly determines pragmatic force, while pragmatic force can in turn affect semantic content. Hence it is unconvincing to argue, as Hansen does, that since early Chinese theories about language have a primarily pragmatic orientation, they have no role for a concept of truth. The pragmatic orientation is largely irrelevant to whether they employ such a concept.

Without excluding an interest in semantic truth, then, the way the Moists present and apply the three standards does support Hansen's proposal that the standards are not primarily criteria of truth and that questions of descriptive truth or falsity are not the Moists' chief focus. However, Hansen presents these points hand-in-hand with two further claims, which I will argue are problematic. He contends that, as part of their focus on *dao* and *shi-fei* distinctions rather than truth, the Moists are concerned with the use of words, not the correctness of sentences—that is, truth-bearing units of language—and that the three standards are criteria for appropriate use of language, whose purpose is to reform how people use words, not to evaluate assertions or doctrines.<sup>20</sup> As explained above, judgment for the Moists lies in distinguishing *shi* from *fei*, or what is from what is not part of the extension of a term. So their primary theoretical focus is indeed words or terms, not sentences. However, this focus is compatible with the three standards being criteria for evaluating the correctness of assertions or doctrines. It is merely a consequence of how the Moists understand the structure of judgment and thus assertion. In their theoretical framework, a speaker typically makes an assertion by predicating a term of a thing, rather than by uttering a sentence. The utterance of a term can have the same assertoric force for them that uttering a declarative sentence does for us. Their formal interest in distinctions and terms thus does not provide

grounds for denying that they are concerned with evaluating assertions or doctrines we might express in sentential form, such as “Ghosts exist” or “Fate determines what happens to us.” They may still be concerned with truth-bearing utterances.

These further claims are intertwined with Hansen’s construal of the word “*yan*” (statements, sayings) in the passages that present the three standards. All three versions state that the standards apply to *yan*, which Hansen interprets as “language,” here referring specifically to the use of words. As a noun, the word “*yan*” typically refers to statements, sayings, teachings, instructions, or other utterances. Perhaps it sometimes also refers to language generally or to the use of words, but such contexts seem uncommon. In any case, in the present context, the text specifies exactly what “*yan*” refers to: the *yan* of the fatalists is their statement, translated earlier, that wealth, population, order, and longevity are determined by fate and so effort is pointless.<sup>21</sup> The text also refers to this statement as “*shuo* 說,” a word that typically denotes doctrines, teachings, or explanations.<sup>22</sup> Thus, consistent with its typical use throughout the *Mozi*, “*yan*” here refers specifically to a statement or string of statements that express a saying or doctrine.<sup>23</sup> Such *yan* are commonly treated as teachings or instructions to guide action. Passages in the Moist “Dialogues,” for instance, state that *yan* suitable for repeatedly guiding action should be recited regularly.<sup>24</sup> Probably, then, the *yan* to which the three standards apply are statements, doctrines, and instructions, not the general use of words or language. Hansen overstates the importance of “language reform” to the Moist project.<sup>25</sup> Clearly the Moists are concerned to reform how people distinguish *shi-fei*, and this will involve modifying how they distinguish the referents of various words, especially moral terms such as *ren* (moral goodness) and *yi* 義 (morality). It may also lead to changes in how people talk and the content of their speech. But the texts do not imply that the Moists understand their project specifically as a matter of reforming the use of words, nor the three standards as general criteria of language use. Rather, these appear

to be standards for evaluating the correctness of assertions such as the fatalists', which admit of semantic evaluation as true or false.

### III. SEMANTIC EVALUATION IN THE MOIST CANONS

The preceding section argued that the Moists do apply the three standards to evaluate assertions, in at least some cases. Although the standards are not primarily or specifically criteria of truth, they do not exclude questions of truth. They refer to a general sense of correctness that covers issues of truth as well as other normative statuses without distinguishing between them. Do the later Moist texts similarly not distinguish between truth and other bases for evaluation, such as utility or etiquette? As this section will show, the dialectical texts clearly employ concepts of semantic evaluation that correspond largely to the concept of truth. These concepts may not align exactly with truth. But at least one and perhaps several play conceptual roles that overlap so extensively with "...is true" that we can justifiably claim the conceptual role of truth is filled in Moist dialectics.

Just what is the conceptual role of truth? On this point, I propose to follow the lead of Robert Brandom, whose reconstruction of the concept of truth starts by asking how an expression must be used for it properly to be understood as meaning "true."<sup>26</sup> The key question is whether the Moist dialectical texts employ semantic terminology—specifically, in this case, terminology that applies to utterances with assertoric force—that overlaps the functions of "true" enough to conclude that the writers have a concept or concepts that fill much the same role. Brandom proposes that the function of the concept of truth is expressive: it allows us to say and do things with language that we would otherwise be unable to.<sup>27</sup> The predicate "true" does not attribute a substantive property to sentences. Rather, Brandom suggests, it is an anaphoric prosentence-forming operator that can be applied to any term that is a sentence nominalization or that identifies a sentence token to form a "prosentence" with

that token as its antecedent.<sup>28</sup> Analogous to how a pronoun inherits its reference from its antecedent, the presentence inherits its content from an antecedent sentence token. Such a presentence can be formed by applying "...is true" to either a quoted sentence ("‘Snow is white’ is true), a sentence nominalization ("That snow is white is true"), a noun phrase referring to a sentence ("Goldbach’s conjecture is true"), or a quantified sentence nominalization ("Every sentence in this paper is true"). The presentence can be used with assertoric force to endorse an assertion expressed by the antecedent sentence, as when someone asserts "‘Snow is white’ is true." This is perhaps the chief function of the concept of truth: it allows us to ascribe objective correctness to assertions by alluding to the content of an assertion and endorsing it from our own standpoint.<sup>29</sup> But "is true" can also be used without assertoric force, as when it is embedded in a sentence ("If ‘snow is black’ is true, then snow reflects little light"). To examine whether the Moist dialectical texts employ a counterpart concept to truth, then, we should explore whether they employ terminology that applies to assertions, or nominalizations referring to them, to form expressions that inherit their content from them and can be used to endorse them, quantify over them, or embed them in other utterances, in the ways that presentences formed with "is true" can.

A precondition for the existence of such terminology, of course, is that there are assertions to which it applies. Hansen’s second main reason for contending that early Chinese thought employs no concept of truth is that "true" is predicated of sentences, and classical Chinese semantic theory treats no syntactic units corresponding to the subject-predicate sentence. As I explained above, this generalization is largely correct, and later Moist semantic theory indeed focuses on distinguishing the proper referents of terms, not on the semantics of sentences. Hansen’s argument is that, given this theoretical focus, the Moists cannot be expected to employ a concept corresponding to truth. However, strictly speaking, truth is predicated of assertions, not sentences. Uttering a syntactically complete sentence is

not the only way to make an assertion. So even if the dialectical chapters do not develop an account of the subject-predicate sentence as a truth-bearing syntactical unit, they may nevertheless apply a semantic concept similar to truth, provided they have a conception of assertion.

Canon A79 identifies three types of *wei* 謂 (“uttering,” “calling”), of which at least one, “transferring” (*yi* 移), is plausibly interpreted as referring to assertion.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, in other canons and explanations, we find “*wei*” used of utterances that clearly have assertoric force. B47, for instance, mentions “*wei huo re ye* 謂火熱也” (“calling fire hot”), referring to an utterance that surely has the same assertoric force as “Fire is hot.” B35 reads “*wei bian wu sheng* 謂辯無勝” (“uttering disputation lacks winning”), clearly referring to the assertion that in disputation there is no winning. A32 indicates that *yan* (statements) can be the content of *wei* and that in *yan* speakers use words to mention things, giving descriptions of them—and thus making assertions.<sup>31</sup> A74 characterizes *bian* (“distinction-drawing,” “disputation”) as “contending over converses,” in which one side “*wei zhi niu* 謂之牛” (“calls it ‘ox’”), while the other “*wei zhi fei niu* 謂之非牛” (“calls it ‘non-ox’”). The text uses *wei* here to report two contradictory speech acts by giving the functional equivalent of *de re* attitude ascriptions. That is, the formula “*wei zhi* 謂之...” (“call it...”) identifies an object—the animal in question—and then reports what term the speaker predicates of it—“ox” or “non-ox.” Syntactically, the speaker’s utterance may comprise only a single word, but the *de re* ascription reporting the utterance combines a subject and a predicate, making it clear that, given the pragmatic context, the speaker’s one-word utterance constitutes a complete judgment or assertion.<sup>32</sup> Of course, the Moists themselves understand *bian* to be concerned with distinguishing whether something is a certain kind of thing and satisfies a certain predicate. But by our lights, *bian* is functionally comparable to a debate

over which of two contradictory assertions is true. The process of distinguishing, with respect to some term, whether an object or situation at hand is *shi* or *fei* is formally distinct from but pragmatically comparable to evaluating whether a corresponding assertion is true or false. Even if we grant, then, that the Moists conceptualize assertions differently from us and that they explain the correctness of assertions in terms of drawing distinctions correctly, they may nevertheless employ a counterpart notion to truth.

Are there, then, in the dialectical texts instances of explicitly semantic terminology—terms applied to evaluate or discuss utterances—that fill the expressive role of “true”? Prominent candidates for such terminology include “*dang* 當” (“fit,” “coincide,” “on the mark”), “*ran* 然” (“so”), and “*shi* 是” (“this,” “right”). Of these, the strongest case can be made that “*dang*” fulfills the expressive functions of truth.

“*Dang*” is used to express whether an asserted term properly fits an object. In A74 and B35, asserting a term of a thing, such as by calling it an ox, is a speech act that can be *dang* or not. Similarly, according to B35, with respect to a term, such as “ox,” if one party calls the thing “*shi*” (this) and the other “*fei*” (not-this), exactly one of these two utterances must *dang* the thing. As these passages explain, a speaker “wins” a disputation (*bian*) if the term the speaker asserts of a thing fits (*dang*) it: “*Dang zhe sheng* 當者勝” (“The fitting one wins”). These passages thus illustrate several parallels between “*dang*” and “true.” “*Dang*” can be used with a nominalizing particle (*zhe* 者) to form a pro-assertion that inherits its content anaphorically from an antecedent assertion, and the resulting pro-assertion can be embedded in a longer sentence. Also, an assertion that is *dang* has a privileged status. In reference to disputation, calling an assertion *dang* amounts to endorsing it as the “winner” between two opposing claims only one of which can be correct. “*Dang*” thus fulfills a central function of the truth predicate, namely to express, from the standpoint of the speaker, endorsement of an assertion.

“*Dang*” is not purely a term of semantic evaluation, of course. Besides utterances, a person’s conduct can also be characterized as *dang* (fitting) or not. Indeed, as applied to utterances, *dang* may have the connotation of endorsing them as “fitting” linguistic conduct. Hence the inferential significance of “*dang*” is probably not identical to that of “true”; one cannot speak of “true conduct” in the way one can of conduct that is *dang* (fitting, appropriate, on the mark). (Of course, “true” is not purely a semantic term either, since it has such non-semantic uses as “true craftsmanship,” “true friend,” and “his aim was true.”) This use of “*dang*” to refer to ethical or social propriety raises the question of whether it is in fact a term of specifically semantic appraisal. Perhaps it connotes instead a general sort of pragmatic propriety covering both speech and conduct. However, A74 and B34 indicate that “*dang*” applies to the “winning” assertion in a dispute specifically concerning which of two contrasting general terms applies to some object. None of the examples in the text—general terms such as “ox,” “horse,” and “dog”—has any ethical or other normative significance, and any of these terms asserted of an object is *dang* if and only if the object is the kind of thing denoted by that term. No other factor is relevant. Since the issue at stake thus seems purely semantic, it is overwhelmingly likely that in these contexts, at least, “*dang*” is a term of specifically semantic evaluation.

Asserted terms are not the only utterances that can be *dang* or not. As mentioned above, B35 rejects the sentential utterance “disputation lacks winning” (*bian wu sheng*) as “not *dang*.”<sup>33</sup> This evaluation implies that “*dang*” can be used to express endorsement of and “not-*dang*” disagreement with an asserted sentence. A14 refers to *yan* (statements) being *dang* or not, again indicating that not only terms but longer utterances can be *dang*. A14 is also notable as an example of how “*dang*” may be predicated of a noun phrase that inherits its content anaphorically: “*qi yan zhi dang* 其言之當” (“the *dang* of his statements” or “that his statements fit”).<sup>34</sup> Another example of “*dang*” applying to such a noun phrase occurs in B71:



“If this person’s *yan* (statement) is not permissible, then to take it as *dang* is surely injudicious.” This passage is also a further example of an embedded use of “*dang*.”

To sum up, “*dang*” indeed appears to be a term of semantic evaluation that fulfills the various functions of truth sketched above. It can be predicated of assertions or noun phrases referring to assertions to form “pro-assertions” that inherit their content from and can be used to endorse, embed, and quantify over assertions. Hansen too acknowledges the similarity between the role of “*dang*” and that of “true” and suggests that “*dang*” functions like the notion of semantic “satisfaction” of predicates.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, however, the texts use “*dang*” of sentential utterances, nominalized references to statements, and *de re* reports of assertions, as in “one side calls it ox.” So “*dang*” applies to assertions, not only to predicates. Hansen proposes to construe “*dang*” as a term of pragmatic evaluation, roughly “is appropriately predicable of.”<sup>36</sup> But since, as just discussed, the standard of appropriateness at stake is purely semantic, ultimately this construal amounts to acknowledging that “*dang*” is a semantic notion.<sup>37</sup>

This section has focused on the term “*dang*” because it is unmistakably used to appraise utterances and thus an especially strong case can be made that it shares the expressive functions of truth. Two other terms that may overlap the role of truth at least partly are “*ran* 然” (“so”) and “*shi* 是” (“this”). A passage in the “Lesser Selection” applies “*ran*” to *ci* 辭, “expressions” or “phrasings,” saying that “Their being *ran* (so), there is that by which they are *ran*” (*Qi ran ye, you suoyi ran ye* 其然也有所以然也).<sup>38</sup> “*Ci*” refers to combinations of words used to express a single thought. From the examples given in the text—such as that white horses are horses—*ci* clearly can be used to make assertions. Since “*ran*” is a contraction of “*ru zhi* 如之” (“resemble it”), the connotation of “*ran*” when applied to *ci* is probably that things are as the *ci* represent them. “*Ran*” is used this way at least once elsewhere in *Mozi*, when Mozi refers to the gentlemen of the world taking his statements

(*yan*) to be “*bu ran* 不然” (“not so”).<sup>39</sup> Both “*shi*” and “*ran*” may also be used to express semantic appraisal of terms asserted of things. According to some interpretations, the “Lesser Selection,” for instance, refers to utterances of the form “White horses are horses, riding white horses is riding horses” as “*Shi er ran* 是而然” (“this and so”).<sup>40</sup> The implication is that, asserted of white horses, “horse” is *shi* (this, right), and, asserted of riding white horses, “riding horses” is *ran* (so). In such cases, as Robins argues, “*shi*” and “*ran*” are terms of specifically semantic appraisal, since claiming that a predicate is *shi* or *ran* when applied to a thing is equivalent to asserting the predicate.<sup>41</sup>

However, instances in which “*ran*” or “*shi*” are unambiguously applied to utterances are relatively uncommon. These terms are more commonly predicated of objects. According to A70–A71, for instance, if an object is similar to a paradigm of the kind of thing denoted by a term, then that object is *ran* (so) with respect to that term. According to B9, “*ran*” refers to how things are—such as that someone has injured a person. Hence a plausible alternative interpretation of “*shi er ran*” in the “Lesser Selection” is that white horses are *shi* with respect to the kind “horses” and riding white horses is *ran* with respect to the kind “riding horses.” When Xunzi, for instance, rebuts opponents’ assertions by stating “*Shi bu ran* 是不然” (“this is not so”),<sup>42</sup> it is ambiguous whether the antecedent of “*shi*” is the opponent’s assertion or the object under discussion. In the first case, Xunzi would be rejecting an assertion as untrue; in the second, he would be claiming that some object is not as the opponent says it is. Because of this ambiguity, although it is clear that “*ran*” and “*shi*” can be used as terms of semantic evaluation filling much the same expressive role as “true,” “*dang*” provides a more direct and convincing example.

#### IV. LOGICAL-SEMANTIC “PERMISSIBILITY”

The third argument Hansen offers for the claim that the later Moists employ no concept of truth is that the main term by which they evaluate utterances is “*ke* 可” (possible, permissible), which appraises pragmatic assertibility, not semantic truth. “*Ke*” is indeed an important term of appraisal in Moist dialectics. However, the grounds for evaluating whether an utterance is *ke* are logical or semantic, not pragmatic. Appraising whether utterances are *ke* complements, rather than contrasts with, appraising whether they are true.

In non-semantic contexts, “*ke*” often expresses possibility, as when it is used in B73: “If the south has a limit, then it can (*ke*) be reached.” In semantic contexts, when predicated of utterances, it probably expresses a related concept, roughly semantic-*cum*-logical “possibility” or “permissibility.” An utterance is *ke* if it complies with semantic and logical norms and is consistent with contextually supplied premises. The utterance must be free of contradiction, inconsistency, or other logical or semantic error.

Canon B71 establishes a conceptual relation between “*ke*” and “*dang*”: if a *yan* (statement) is not *ke*, then “to take it as *dang* would surely be injudicious.” Being *ke* thus seems tantamount to a necessary condition for being *dang*. However, the converse may not be true, and *ke* may not be a sufficient condition for being *dang*. Perhaps an assertion can be *ke* without being *dang* in a particular context, provided it could be *dang* in some conceivable context. A73 links “*ke*” to the logical relation between “*shi*” (this) and “*bi* 彼” (that, other). “*Bi*” for the Moists is a technical term denoting whatever is not *shi*; a disputation (*bian*) lies in distinguishing what is *shi* from what is *bi*. A73 indicates that when two terms stand in the *shi-bi* (this vs. other) relation—such as “ox” and “non-ox”—then they cannot both be not-*ke*, or “impermissible.” At least one must be *ke*. Here evaluation of whether an utterance is *ke* seems grounded in logical norms governing the use of contradictory terms, specifically a version of the principle of excluded middle. Since, by the Moists’ conception of disputation,

exactly one of “*shi*” and “*bi*” must be *dang*, A73 also helps to articulate the conceptual relation between “*ke*” and “*dang*”: of two terms that cannot both be not *ke*, at least one must be *dang*. According to B72, claiming that what is *bi* and what is *shi* are both *shi* is not *ke*. Because of the logical relation between “*bi*” and “*shi*,” claiming that things designated by the two are both *shi* is a logical error, a type of self-contradiction. Such a claim would probably also entail a semantic error, as it would involve predicating a term of something not part of its extension.

For our purposes, the key consequence of these observations is that the basis for evaluating whether an utterance is *ke* is not pragmatic, as Hansen suggests. It is typically logical, invoking such norms as non-contradiction and excluded middle, and it is closely intertwined with *dang*, a semantic concept. So, although “*ke*” may be used in non-semantic contexts to refer to a broader social or ethical conception of permissibility or acceptability, in contexts related to utterances it seems primarily a logical or semantic notion. Appraisal in terms of “*ke*” is thus not an alternative to appraisal in terms of truth, and the later Moists’ concern with *ke* provides no reason for concluding they are not also concerned with truth.

## V. CONCLUSION

As Hansen contends, the Moists’ three standards are not criteria of truth, *per se*, but of the correct *dao* by which to guide social and personal life. Nevertheless, I have argued, despite this focus on pragmatic rather than semantic norms, the standards do not entail that the Moists were unconcerned with truth. They indicate only that the early Moists subsumed what we think of as questions of truth or falsity within the broader rubric of the proper *dao*. Hansen is also correct to contend that the Moists’ theoretical focus, early and late, is on distinguishing the extensions of terms, not examining the semantic status of subject-predicate sentences. However, as I have explained, this formal feature of their approach to language

and thought does not prevent them from discussing and evaluating the semantic status of assertions. Passages in the later Moist dialectical texts that specifically treat assertions employ concepts such as *dang*, *ran*, and *shi* that fill the same expressive role as truth. A further important term for evaluating utterances, “*ke*,” probably refers not to a pragmatic status, as Hansen suggests, but to a logical or semantic status. Hansen is correct, then, in his claims about the overall pragmatic orientation and term-centered structure of Moist dialectics. But this orientation and structure are compatible with the Moists’ being concerned with issues of truth and employing a concept of truth.

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#### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Burton Watson, tr., *Mo Tzu: Basic Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 164; David Wong, “Mohism: The Founder, Mozi (Mo Tzu),” in *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*, Antonio S. Cua, ed. (London: Routledge, 2002), 453.

<sup>3</sup> A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (LaSalle: Open Court Press, 1989), 37, 395.

<sup>4</sup> Bryan Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 161.

<sup>5</sup> Chad Hansen, “Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and ‘Truth,’” *Journal of Asian Studies* 44, no. 3 (1985): 513–514; *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 145.

<sup>6</sup> These comprise two books of “canons” (*jing* 經), two of corresponding “explanations” (*jing shuo* 經說), the “Lesser Selection,” and the “Greater Selection.” For an overview, see Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 137–170, or Chris Fraser, “Mohist Canons,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2011 Edition), Edward Zalta, ed., <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/Mohist-canons/>.

<sup>7</sup> Hansen, “Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and ‘Truth,’” 492, 505–509.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 493–496, 504–506.

<sup>9</sup> *Mozi*, 35: 3–4. Citations to the core books give chapter and line numbers in *A Concordance to Mozi (Mozi Yinde)*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series Supplement no. 21 (reprint) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 16: 24–29.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 11: 13–22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 35: 6–10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 35: 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 36: 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 35: 6–10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 31: 99–102.

<sup>17</sup> Alternatively, rather than applying consequentialist criteria to decide an empirical issue, the Moists could be interpreted as sidestepping the empirical question and instead contending that even if ghosts do not exist, acting as if they exist is not a bad mistake, since it has good consequences. (I thank Dan Robins for this suggestion.) Moreover, in recognizing

the possibility that ghosts might really not exist, they implicitly affirm a distinction between utility and truth, as they allow that a useful teaching might fall short of “reality” (*qing* 情). However, even if they keep the empirical question of ghosts’ existence distinct from the normative one of whether ancestral sacrifice is justified by its beneficial consequences, they assign priority to the criterion of good consequences.

<sup>18</sup> Another possible explanation is that the Moists lack the logical sophistication to “fully succeed in detaching questions of truth from appeals to authority and to social benefit” (Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 395). But an interpretation on which they competently present a theory couched in concepts different from ours renders them more intelligible than one on which they inexplicably present an incompetent theory about concepts that, though familiar to us, they fail to articulate clearly.

<sup>19</sup> For a similar view, see Hui Chieh Loy, “Justification and Debate: Thoughts on Mohist Moral Epistemology,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 35, no. 3 (2008): 460.

<sup>20</sup> Hansen, “Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and ‘Truth,’” 512; *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 143–47.

<sup>21</sup> *Mozi*, 35: 3–4.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 35: 6.

<sup>23</sup> Compare *Mozi*, 9: 67, 16: 21ff, and 25: 57, among many examples.

<sup>24</sup> *Mozi*, 46: 37, 47: 18, 46: 60.

<sup>25</sup> Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 144.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 278.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 283–305.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 598.

<sup>30</sup> References to the “canons” and “explanations” use the numbering system in A. C. Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science* (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1978). For simplicity, I refer to canon numbers without distinguishing between “canons” and “explanations.” Although the text of A79 may be faulty, “transferring” appears to involve linking two words so as to assert the second of the things denoted by the first. A second type of utterance in A79 that may constitute an assertion is “applying” (*jia* 加), which may refer to predicating positive or negative descriptors of an object.

<sup>31</sup> *Yan* have this function because mentioning a thing by means of a word is similar to presenting an analogue for it (A31), since using a general term of a thing indicates it is similar to other things of that kind (B70).

<sup>32</sup> Similar observations apply to other terminology besides *wei* that the Moists use to talk about assertions. Although they conceptualize assertion differently from us, it is still clear that they are talking about assertions in at least some cases when they discuss *yan* (statements), *ci* 辭 (expressions, phrasings), and what speakers *yue* 曰 (say).

<sup>33</sup> Hansen, “Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and ‘Truth,’” 509, n. 22, makes the same observation, but without acknowledging how seriously it undermines his position.

<sup>34</sup> This passage might also tentatively be taken as an example of applying “*dang*” to a quantified noun phrase, as “*qi yan zhi dang*” can plausibly be taken to refer to *all* the *yan* uttered by the speaker. This suggestion is tentative, since the text does not include an explicit quantifier. However, it would be grammatical to add the quantifier “*jie* 皆” (“all”) to the phrase to form “*qi yan zhi jie dang*” (“that all his statements fit”).

<sup>35</sup> Hansen, “Chinese Language, Chinese Philosophy, and ‘Truth,’” 509.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



<sup>37</sup> Dan Robins makes the same point in “The Later Mohists and Logic,” *History and Philosophy of Logic* 31, no. 3 (2010): 282.

<sup>38</sup> Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science*, 482.

<sup>39</sup> *Mozi*, 32: 34.

<sup>40</sup> Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics and Science*, 485.

<sup>41</sup> Robins, “The Later Mohists and Logic,” 282.

<sup>42</sup> *Xunzi*, Chapters 18 and 23, *passim*.