

Truth and the Way in Xúnzǐ

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One way to think about truth is as a guiding norm or end of belief and inquiry. We seek to believe what is true, and inquiry aims at forming true beliefs. Indeed, we can think of a commitment to truth as a constitutive aim of epistemic agency. Part of what it is to be an agent engaged in making judgments and forming beliefs is to aim to represent truly how things are.¹

The central, fundamental place of truth in the structure of belief, inquiry, and discourse can seem so obvious as to be unquestionable. But a useful role of comparative philosophical study can be to help us question the obvious and by so doing better understand it. Comparative inquiry can help us identify assumptions we take for granted and possible alternatives to these assumptions.

The third-century BC Ruist “masters” text *Xúnzǐ* 荀子 presents a sophisticated approach to semantics and epistemology in which, I will argue, a concern with truth is at best secondary, not central.² *Xúnzǐ*’s primary concern—the prevailing concern of much discourse from this period—is with identifying and applying the apt *dào* 道 (way), which for him is a more fundamental concept that underwrites and explains what we—although perhaps not he—would take to be truth claims. *Dào* refers to a way or path of personal and social conduct, covering prudential, aesthetic, ethical, and political concerns.³ In advancing this interpretation of *Xúnzǐ*, I am not suggesting that he is unaware of the issue of whether assertions are true, nor that he lacks the conceptual

¹ See, for example, the discussion in Sosa (2015, 2016).

² The pre-imperial Chinese “masters” texts are the various compilations of writings attributed to “master” figures, such as the Confucian *Analects*, the *Mencius*, the *Mòzǐ*, and the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Each of these is a composite collection of brief writings composed, compiled, and edited by unknown hands over many years or even generations. The *Xúnzǐ* (“Master Xún”) is a compilation of short, mostly third-century BC writings named after the influential scholar, teacher, and official Xún Kuàng, who flourished during the middle decades of that century. It is unclear to what extent the material was composed by Xún himself or by his students, associates, or later followers. But the writings present a largely coherent set of views, provided we allow some leeway for development and refinement over Xún’s long career. For convenience, I will discuss the *Xúnzǐ* as if it presents the views of a single author, Xúnzǐ, although historically it is likely the various short texts discussed were actually written down by a number of hands.

³ Since the original Chinese does not mark plurals, in some contexts I will use the romanized word “*dào*” as a singular noun, in others as a plural.

resources to offer semantic appraisals corresponding to those expressed by “...is true” or “...is false.” As we will see, although he uses different terminology, he addresses the status of assertions as what we would consider true or false, and he has the theoretical resources to offer an explanatory account of what it is for an assertion to be true or false, were he motivated to give such an account. My core interpretive thesis is that this cluster of issues is secondary, even peripheral, among Xúnzǐ’s philosophical concerns. The *Xúnzǐ* text does not thematize truth as a topic demanding attention and does not directly or explicitly discuss it. Moreover, for Xúnzǐ, what we consider questions of truth follow from and are resolved by more fundamental issues concerning *dào*.

Xúnzǐ makes for an informative case study on these points, because no other early Chinese source is as dedicated—even obsessed—with rebutting and explaining away the views of philosophical opponents. If any text in the early Chinese literature were going to display a concern with truth, it would be the *Xúnzǐ*. Xúnzǐ, or the circle of his followers who compiled the collection of writings named after him, was clearly dedicated—systematically and methodically—to getting things right. What, then, was he doing if not aiming to identify the truth? An informative answer to this question, I suggest, begins from the observation that there are multiple modalities by which utterances can be said to “get things right.” One such modality is by being semantically correct. An utterance that asserts a content that is semantically correct—it holds of what it is asserted of—is true.⁴ But a thinker or a discourse may be concerned with other flavours of correctness. Utterances can be correct insofar as they are true, but also insofar as they conform to norms of etiquette, rhetoric, or poetic meter, for example. Something can be the wrong thing to say because it is false, but also because it is rude, tactless, or impious, violates conversational norms, fails to rhyme, or is insufficiently humorous. To be concerned with truth is to be concerned with correctness as assessed specifically according to semantic norms. The interpretive thesis I argue for here is that Xúnzǐ is primarily concerned with whether utterances, along with actions, policies, and social practices, are correct in conforming to *dào*—specifically, the *dào* of “good order” (*zhì* 治)—rather than whether they are correct in being true. As I will explain, in some contexts, Xúnzǐ does make semantic assessments of assertions that coincide with assessments of their truth. However, the basis for such assessments derives from the status of such assertions as following *dào* or not. A consequence, as we will see, is that for Xúnzǐ questions of value and culture are more basic than questions of truth.

1. On “Having a Concept” of Truth

Much discussion of the role of truth in early Chinese thought since the 1980s has revolved around the question of whether pre-Hàn Chinese discourse “has a concept” of

⁴ This formulation is an attempt to remain neutral between competing theories of truth.

truth. Since an aim of the present essay is to move beyond this discussion, I should explain why I see it as unproductive.

Controversy over the role of truth in pre-Hàn discourse was ignited by Chad Hansen's contentious thesis that Chinese philosophy "has no concept of truth," since its theoretical focus is on pragmatic features of language use and how these interact with ethical, social, and political *dào*—that is, practical ways or paths of action (Hansen, 1985).⁵ Hansen's discussion sought to develop Donald Munro's earlier, inchoate observation that early Chinese thinkers seemed concerned primarily with the "behavioral implications" of a belief or proposition, rather than its truth (1969, 55). Hansen's emphasis on the central role of the concept of *dào* complemented an insight put forth by A. C. Graham, namely that for pre-Han philosophers, "the crucial question . . . is not the Western philosopher's 'What is the truth?' but 'Where is the way?', the way to order the state and conduct personal life" (1989, 3). Hansen proposed that in pre-Han thought, the practical, pragmatic focus on *dào* grounded a theoretical orientation fundamentally different from one focused on truth, or semantic, language-world relations. This thesis was echoed and amplified by David Hall and Roger Ames, who argued that early Chinese thought lacks the "cultural requisites" for a concern with a "Western-style notion of truth" (1998, 123)—such as, in their view, a focus on abstract, systematic theorizing supported by rational argument grounded in a conception of truth-functional logic.

As we might expect, the "no concept of truth" thesis prompted a range of critical responses. Some critics have argued, in effect, that a concept of truth is foundational to reasoning and inquiry, and so, since early Chinese texts engage in inquiry and offer reasons for their views, they must be applying, directly or indirectly, at least a thin or implicit concept of truth.⁶ Others have pointed out that although pre-Hàn discourse may not employ terms with a conceptual role completely identical to that of "true," they clearly do use terms with similar functions, such as expressing endorsement of the semantic correctness of assertions.⁷ As Frank Saunders observes, in a nuanced, informative review and analysis of this long debate, the positions different writers take on the issue actually turn less on their different interpretations of pre-Hàn thought than they do on the particular account of concepts and of truth they adopt (2022, 16). Those who hold a looser account of what it is to "have a concept" and of what a concept of truth amounts to are likely to reject Hansen's or Hall and Ames's claims. Those who hold a narrower or stricter account are more likely to accept them at least partly. Since the nature of concepts and of truth are themselves deeply controversial topics, a resolution to the issue is likely to be elusive.

⁵ Hansen modifies and develops his stance in (Hansen, 1992).

⁶ For views along these lines, see Roetz (1993), Van Norden (2007), and McLeod (2016).

⁷ Writers who have defended related points include Graham (1989), Loy (2008), Robins (2010), Fraser (2012, 2020), and Leong (2015).

Hansen's original arguments were premised on a narrow, strongly holistic definition of "concept." He contended that concepts are individuated by their theoretical role, and so to have a concept is to hold a theory in which that concept has a certain role (1985, 392). On this approach, if early Chinese thinkers did not hold theories in which a concept played a conceptual role corresponding closely to that of truth in familiar Western approaches to semantics, they could be said to lack a concept of truth. But there are good reasons to resist this sort of strong holism in individuating concepts, especially in cross-cultural philosophical interpretation. If, in order to share a concept, speakers must share a theory—a systematic network of beliefs, assumptions, and perhaps definitions giving a coherent account of some topic—then speakers of different languages will frequently not share exactly the same concepts, because they are likely to have significantly different networks of beliefs or assumptions.⁸ This result is both unsurprising and trivial, since it is a commonplace that, as Graham remarked, the "metaphorical spread" of similar terms in different languages will often be different (1989, 396). The worry is that, if we adopt strong holism in individuating concepts, this familiar incongruity between concepts in different languages might hastily be taken to underwrite misleading declarations that speakers of another language lack seemingly obvious concepts, when actually, even allowing for significant differences, their beliefs and their use of a concept or a corresponding term might overlap extensively with ours. Graham's own example was that one might misguidedly contend that Chinese lacks a concept of sheep, since the Chinese word for sheep, *yáng* 羊, refers to both sheep and goats and thus has a different theoretical role from "sheep." On the other hand, if the roles of concepts in different languages or theoretical frameworks do diverge, as sheep and *yáng* do, then even if they are partly similar, it may be equally misleading to unqualifiedly identify them.

Indeed, when the roles of concepts embedded in different theories or different languages overlap partially but not completely, I suggest, it is uninformative to claim that users of one either do or do not have the same concept as users of the other. Rather than asking whether one group "has a concept" important to another, a more informative approach would be to give a substantive account of the beliefs, issues, theories, or discourses in question and to explain the roles of the concepts embedded in them. When we turn to such substantive accounts, however, the question of whether speakers or writers "have a concept" of one type or another is likely to become both equivocal and unproductive. In many cases we can expect to find diverse, partly overlapping concepts

⁸ Indeed, on this approach, even speakers of the same language often may not share the same concepts, as they may associate them with different beliefs. For example, since a theist and an atheist hold different theories about the deity, on this approach they would not share the same concept of God. On some construals, such strong holism risks rendering disagreement unintelligible, since it can be taken to imply that instead of disagreeing about the existence of God, the theist and atheist are merely endorsing the use of different concepts.

that are better explained as related by family resemblances than as equivalent or identical.⁹ Meanwhile, focusing on the narrow question of whether or not some concept is present tells us little about the broader issues, views, and discursive frameworks we seek to understand.

A simple example can help to illustrate these points. Consider the concept expressed in English by “cousin.” No one word in modern Chinese has a conceptual role identical to that of “cousin.” Instead, there are eight different words specifying the eight different relations of being the son or the daughter of one’s parents’ siblings who is older or younger than one and has the same or a different surname. A debate as to whether Chinese speakers have the concept of cousin or whether English speakers have the concept of *biǎo mèi* 表妹 (a daughter of either my father’s sister or my mother’s sibling who is younger than I) would be of little value. Using a narrow construal of what it is to “have a concept,” one could argue that Chinese speakers do not have a concept of cousin, *simpliciter*, since their “theory” of kinship relations has no concept with an equivalent role. But this stance would be difficult to defend, since of course they can easily grasp the concept of cousin by considering it the aggregate of the eight sorts of relations commonly referred to in their language. Conversely, a typical English speaker with no exposure to Chinese probably would never employ a concept equivalent to *biǎo mèi* and so arguably does not “have a concept” of *biǎo mèi*. But given that we can easily use concepts English speakers do possess to specify the relation of *biǎo mèi*, it seems inaccurate, or at least unilluminating, to claim they lack the concept. Either way, discussion of “having a concept” in this context seems uninformative. Arguably, it impedes rather than enhances understanding, since either a positive or a negative answer risks obscuring significant details of how kinship relations are identified on both sides. The more constructive course would be to set aside discussion of whether either side has or lacks a particular concept and focus instead on explaining the two languages’ or cultures’ different approaches to organizing and identifying kinship relations.

For these reasons, I see the controversy over whether early Chinese discourse “has a concept” of truth as an unfortunate distraction from the project of investigating the loose hypothesis, shared by Munro, Hansen, Hall and Ames, and Graham, that early Chinese philosophical discourse has a distinctive orientation shaped by the practical concerns embodied in the concept of *dào*. In pre-Hàn thought, I suggest, *dào* functions as a primitive concept referring to ways of proceeding along some course of activity. In some contexts, it is used normatively, for the way things should proceed. In others, it is used descriptively, for how they actually do proceed. A valuable, constructive kernel of Hansen’s discussion in particular—easily separable from claims about “having a

⁹ I borrow the Wittgensteinian concept of family resemblance here from Lin Ma and Jaap Van Brakel, who contend that instead of a purported universal concept of truth, in pre-Han thought we are likely to find a range of concepts that share various resemblances with truth (2019, I-4, 21–22).

concept” of truth—is that in this discourse, the core conception of “getting things right” is framed in terms of *dào*, and thus in terms of how to do something, rather than in terms of the semantic relations expressed by “is true,” which are typically associated with accuracy of description or representation.

This hypothesis is of vital importance, because if true, it helps to explain intriguing features of the approach to mind, language, knowledge, and agency found in pre-Hàn philosophical texts. In a discourse structured around *dào*, the core concern is practical performance according to an apt path rather than accurately representing how things stand. Accordingly, the action-guiding functions of language take priority over the descriptive or representational functions.¹⁰ Mind is understood primarily as a capacity for directing action rather than an inward, subjective arena in which we manipulate representations of the external world. The subject is understood primarily as an agent, engaged in performing *dào*, not a contemplative spectator. Knowledge is explained as a competence in distinguishing and responding to things according to norms of *dào*. As we will see, several of these themes are prominent in Xúnzǐ’s treatment of language, mind, and knowledge.¹¹

2. Truth in Xúnzǐ

An informative way to elucidate the fundamental place of *dào* in Xúnzian thought is by considering what a Xunzian account of truth might look like, given what the writings compiled in the *Xúnzǐ* say or imply about semantics. In fact, the *Xúnzǐ* does not explicitly address the question of what truth is or when an assertion is true. It does, however, give an account of the relation between “names” (*míng* 名, in effect, all words) and “objects” (*shí* 實, anything referred to by “names,” including objects, events, and situations) from which we can extract the outlines of a view of truth. What we find is that a Xúnzian account of the norms governing the use of “names”—and thus the norms that determine when an assertion is true—explains them by appeal to *dào*. Ultimately, then, on a Xúnzǐ-inspired approach, what makes an assertion true is that it conforms to norms understood to be part of *dào*. The reverse is not the case: what makes a norm or pattern of conduct conform to *dào* is not that it is true, but that it conforms to standards of conduct—including standards for the use of names—established by wise political leaders seeking to achieve and maintain an orderly, flourishing community. *Dào* is thus a distinct and more fundamental concern than truth.

One of the central roles of the concept of truth is to endorse or reject the semantic correctness of assertions. A speaker can quote or refer to one or more assertions and use “...is true” or “...is false” to express the attitude that they are correct or not. Provided the

¹⁰ Representational uses of language are addressed but are explained by appeal to the correct use of words according to social norms. For a detailed discussion, see Fraser (2021).

¹¹ For a recent study that develops these themes, see chapters 5 and 6 of Fraser (2023).

modality of correctness alluded to is semantic, rather than some other standard, this expressive function gives us a firm starting point from which to identify terms in pre-Hàn discourse that play a role similar to or overlapping that of “true.” In previous research, I have argued that at least three terms in classical Chinese have expressive roles that overlap in this way with that of truth: *dàng* 當 (“fitting,” “apt,” “on the mark”), *rán* 然 (“so,” “like this”), and *shì* 是 (“this,” “right”) (Fraser 2012, 2020).¹² A major difference between these terms and “true” is that none of them is used primarily to express semantic assessments. For example, *dàng* is commonly used to refer to the appropriateness of conduct, as judged by standards of prudence, etiquette, or *dào*. *Rán* and *shì* are often used to describe the features of objects as being similar to or different from a contextually specified exemplar. In some contexts, however, we have good reasons to interpret these terms as expressing evaluations of whether an assertion is semantically correct. For instance, the Mohist dialectical writings use *dàng* for the status of the winning assertion in a dispute concerning which of two contradictory general terms applies to an object. In one example, one party asserts that a particular animal is “ox,” while the other asserts it is “non-ox.” The winner is the side whose assertion is *dàng*, or “fits the object” (Fraser 2020b, 154, 161). Within the Mohist theoretical framework, this status of “fitting” is determined by whether the object is indeed relevantly “the same” as exemplars of animals deemed “ox,” and the pairing of the name “ox” with such exemplars is what determines the semantic content of “ox.” The examples used in the text—the names of animals such “ox,” “horse,” and “dog”—do not seem to allude to any modality of correctness other than semantic. So the basis for judging an assertion *dàng* seems purely semantic, and to deem what someone says “*dàng*” corresponds closely to deeming it “true.”

Arguably, *dàng* may also be used this way in several *Xúnzǐ* passages (candidate passages include 5/60 and 22/49).¹³ But more prominent examples of truth-like appraisals of assertions in *Xúnzǐ* employ *rán*. The *Xúnzǐ* writings offer numerous examples in which an opponent’s assertion is cited and rejected as “*bù rán* 不然,” or “not so,” in a context in which this evaluation can justifiably be interpreted as a counterpart of “not true.” A particularly clear example I have discussed previously (Fraser 2020a) is a passage that rejects the assertion, purportedly by Mencius, that “people who study, their nature is good” (23/10). The content of *Xúnzǐ*’s rebuttal strongly suggests that in this context, the appraisal “*shì bù rán* 是不然,” or “this is not so,” amounts to an evaluation that the assertion is not true. The rebuttal contends that the Mencian claim is mistaken because “it fails to understand people’s inherent nature (*xìng* 性)” and “fails to discern the distinction between nature and endeavor (*wèi* 偽)” (23/11). For *Xúnzǐ*, “inherent nature”

¹² These are the most commonly used terms for truth-like assessments. In certain contexts, other terms, such as *zhèng* 正 or *kě* 可, may also have expressive roles that overlap “true.”

¹³ References to the *Xúnzǐ* give chapter and line numbers in Hung (1966).

refers to what is bestowed on us by Heaven and cannot be attained through study or work. What we become capable of through study or achieve through work, on the other hand, is “endeavor.” Accordingly, if someone becomes good through study, this transformation is due to endeavor, not inherent nature. In giving grounds for rejecting this Mencian claim, then, Xúnzǐ cites norms for distinguishing different kinds (*lèi* 類) of things, namely nature (*xìng*) and endeavor (*wèi*). In the prevailing theories of naming at the time, such as those of the later Mohists and the Xúnzǐ essay on “Correct Names,” such norms explain the semantics of names.¹⁴ Objects distinguished as being of the same kind take the same name and, with respect to that name, count as “*rán*,” or “so.” Assertions that predicate that name of them are also considered “*rán*.” Against the backdrop of early theories of naming, then, Xúnzǐ’s argument against Mencius here gives a paradigmatically semantic explanation of why the Mencian claim is wrong, without appealing to other criteria, such as the norms of propriety, the traditions of the sage-kings, the conditions for good order, and so on. It is thus likely that in this context “*bù rán*” (not so) is a specifically semantic assessment, and that “*shì bù rán*” expresses the attitude that Mencius’s claim is not semantically correct—that is, it is not true.¹⁵

The distinctive features of Xúnzǐ’s stance emerge when we consider the Xúnzian explanation of what it is for an assertion to be *rán*, or true. *Rán* in classical Chinese is a contraction of “*rú zhī 如之*” (“like this,” “resembling it”) (Pulleyblank 1995: 10). To say something is *rán* is to say it is like or similar to some antecedently specified thing or has some antecedently specified feature. To say an assertion is *rán* is to say things are as the assertion claims—they are relevantly “like” what is asserted. In the context of early Chinese theories of names, things are as an assertion claims when they are relevantly “similar to” (*ruò 若*) or “the same as” (*tóng 同*) paradigms of the kinds of things associated with the names used in the assertion. Whether an assertion is *rán* or not is thus

¹⁴ For detailed expositions of these theories, see Fraser (2005) and (2016). For a more general treatment, see chapter 6 of Fraser (2023).

¹⁵ Regarding this claim, a critic might ask why we should take the Xúnzǐ to be at all concerned with truth rather than only a loose notion of “acceptability.” (I thank an anonymous referee for raising this point.) My suggestion is that the reasons the text itself gives for rejecting the Mencian claim here seem best explained by interpreting it as concerned with truth or a closely related normative status, rather than only with a broader notion of acceptability. The text itself focuses on semantic grounds for rejecting the claim that the nature of people who study is good. My contention is that in this and similar contexts, the expressive role of a notion of “being ‘so’ (*rán*) by standards of semantic acceptability” coincides with that of truth enough that we can defensibly interpret the text as addressing the truth of the Mencian claim. Analogously, in a particular context, we can interpret an English speaker who does not know the word *biǎomèi* as talking about her *biǎomèi* if, according to the best interpretation of what she is saying, she is talking about, for example, a daughter of her mother’s brother who is younger than she. Of course, in both the case of truth and that of *biǎomèi*, these interpretive claims do not commit us to attributing to the text or speaker a concern with an explicit concept of truth or *biǎomèi* or a theoretical interest in explaining the nature of truth or *biǎomèi*.

determined by norms for distinguishing whether the things it is about are indeed “the same” as the kinds of things that normally take the names used in it.

When we look at the Xúnzian account of these sameness relations and how they are associated with names, we find that the norms governing which names refer to which things are part of a social and political *dào* regulated by the sovereign who rules over the speech community. In emphasizing the sovereign’s role, Xúnzǐ is not suggesting that the ruler determines by fiat whether or not things count as “the same.” On the contrary, he explains that the basis for sameness relations lies in how humans tend to have similar perceptual responses to things. Members of a speech community can jointly identify things as the same or different because “the sense organs of creatures of the same kind, with the same characteristic features, detect things in the same way” (22/16). This coordination in our brute perceptual functioning enables us to form social conventions concerning which names refer to which objects (22/17). These conventions are where the sovereign enters the picture. Although the names may originate from various traditional sources or from the customs of the common folk (22/1), the conventions are ultimately established and regulated by the ruler as part of a project to “carry out *dào*” (22/7), resulting in “long-lasting accomplishments,” which are “the height of good order (*zhi*)” (22/10). The purpose of the conventions thus lies in pursuing an orderly, successful social-political *dào*, which is a more fundamental concern than truth, here understood in Xúnzǐ’s own terms as *rán*. Crucially, although the functioning of our sense organs determines whether we differentiate objects as “the same,” the naming conventions the sovereign controls are what determine which things we will name. Things may be similar or different in various respects. The naming conventions determine which similarities and differences are relevant and thus which utterances will be available as candidates for being *rán* or true. For Xúnzǐ, then, *dào* is more fundamental than truth specifically insofar as a Xúnzian account of the semantic correctness of assertions, understood as assessments of whether assertions are *rán*, explains them by appeal to norms for using names and drawing distinctions that are conceived of as aspects of *dào*.

This point complements Xúnzǐ’s well-known constructivist stance concerning normatively relevant distinctions between things.¹⁶ Xúnzǐ contends that the natural world in itself does not come to us already divided up into the various kinds of things that we name. “Heaven can produce things, but it cannot distinguish them” (19/78). Only through the activity of ethical-political sages are the myriad things “divided” (*fēn* 分) into the various action-guiding kinds we recognize in pursuing *dào*. The natural world produces various things, but the ethically exemplary “gentleman-prince” is the origin of the norms of propriety and duty by which we “organize” or “pattern” (*lǐ* 理) them in such a way as to achieve good order (9/64). Xúnzǐ’s approach to naming is an application of

¹⁶ For discussion, see Hansen (1992), Hagen (2007), Hutton (2007), Fraser (2016), Wong (2016), and Fraser (2023), chapter 1.

this general view that normatively relevant distinctions are culturally constructed through the process of adopting a *dào* with the aim of securing social order. The next section examines the links between *dào* and naming more closely.

3. “Correct Names” and *Dào*

To understand Xúnzǐ’s approach to names—and thus, indirectly, to truth—it is crucial to understand his aims in discussing language. Xúnzǐ is not seeking to offer a theory of meaning or of how language works, for instance. He is not attempting to give a general or thorough account of linguistic communication. His approach does not treat the intensions of words, because intensional aspects of language are not directly relevant to his project.¹⁷ Rather, Xúnzǐ’s interest in names is driven by the role of names in the practice of *dào*. Using names correctly is part of the performance of *dào*, and when correctly used, names guide us in following *dào*. Conversely, the incorrect use of names interferes with carrying out the right *dào*.

Xúnzǐ’s discussion of names was part of a wave of interest among third-century BC thinkers in the role of names in guiding and coordinating conduct.¹⁸ Of special concern was the use of names in action-guiding contexts such as commands, ethical teachings, and laws. To guide the community in following *dào*, political leaders must issue commands, for example, and for commands to be followed properly, those issuing and following them must associate the names they use with the same objects. A ruler’s command that officials with a certain rank perform a certain action can be carried out effectively only if all parties agree in identifying who holds that rank and what that action is. If the ruler establishes a law prohibiting *x*, members of society need to be able to identify what conduct corresponds to the name “*x*.”

Moreover, in discussing names (*míng*), thinkers of the period were often referring not only to nouns designating objects and situations but to job titles and the titles of social ranks. Jobs and ranks are associated with specific roles, responsibilities, and privileges. To be fully entitled to hold a certain job title or rank, it was widely thought, the bearer of the relevant name must fulfill the responsibilities attached to the associated role. Conversely, someone who had not officially been granted the privileges following from some job title or rank was not to be referred to by that name. To take the name “minister,” for example, an official must genuinely fulfill the duties of a minister. Conversely, someone who does not actually have the role and authority of a minister

¹⁷ This point emerges circuitously from Hutton’s (2021) somewhat Quixotic attempt to find an awareness of intensionality in Xúnzǐ. If we understand the purpose of Xúnzǐ’s discussion of names, it should be unsurprising that the text does not directly address the role of intensions in speech.

¹⁸ For an overview of this discourse, see Fraser (2023), chapter 6. The topic of “correcting names” is addressed in a range of texts, including the Confucian *Analec*s, the *Guānzǐ*, the *Book of Lord Shāng*, *Lǚ’s Annals*, and the *Xúnzǐ*.

must not be referred to as or arrogate the privileges associated with “minister.”

All of these issues drove interest in correcting names as a political doctrine. Holders of political power were urged to adopt a policy of publicly correcting the use of names by clarifying exactly which objects, situations, qualifications, responsibilities, and so forth various names referred to. Political control of the use of names was regarded as instrumental in maintaining effective governance and an orderly society.

The introductory remarks in the *Xúnzǐ* essay on names clearly express this practical, political focus, highlighting the concern with pursuing *dào* and following commands:

When the kings regulated names, names were fixed and objects distinguished, the *dào* was carried out and [the king’s] intentions were communicated, and then they carefully led the people to maintain unity in this....None of the people dared to commit themselves to deviant assertions that disrupted correct names, and so they were unified in conforming to the standards of *dào* and diligent in following commands. In this way, [the kings’] achievements were long-lasting. A king’s achievements being long-lasting and his work successful—this is the height of good order. (22/6–10)

In an informative analogy, *Xúnzǐ* explains that the great kings of old considered “splitting phrases” and “recklessly inventing new uses of names” to be “great vileness,” a crime of the same seriousness as tampering with tallies, weights, and measures (22/8). The implication is that names are tools for accomplishing practical tasks, analogous to units of weight and measure. Just as the sovereign must regulate standard weights and measures for use in commerce, engineering, and other fields, he must regulate the use of names.

In his own time, *Xúnzǐ* contends, the relations between names and objects have become disordered, such that normative, action-guiding distinctions between *shì* 是 and *fēi* 非—what is or is not the “right” kind of thing referred to by a name—have become unclear. The result is that even officials and scholars conscientious about following the proper standards and sequences have fallen into disorder (22/11). Were a new king to arise, he would surely attend to the need to manage names.

To regulate names appropriately, says *Xúnzǐ*, the first point a king needs to understand is the purpose of having names. *Xúnzǐ*’s account of this purpose is informative about his *dào*-centered approach to language. The primary purpose of names is not to state truths, but to clarify distinctions so that intentions for action can be communicated and practical affairs can be accomplished. More specifically, names “refer to objects” such that the distinctions between “noble and base” are clear and “similarities and differences” are distinguished. In this way, “intentions” (*zhì* 志) can be understood and “affairs” or “work” (*shì* 事) can be carried out smoothly (22/14–15). “Noble and base” here probably refer both to social roles of higher or lower rank and to the ethical status

of different sorts of conduct. So one aspect of correcting names is to clarify social roles and admirable versus despicable conduct. As we have seen, “similarities and differences” between objects are the basis for adjudicating whether assertions are *rán*, and thus true or false. Accordingly, regulating names so as to clarify the similarities and differences between things will facilitate determining what is true. But for Xúnzǐ this result is subordinate or instrumental to communicating intentions and carrying out practical tasks. In some contexts, the word for “intentions,” *zhì*, may refer generally to thoughts of various kinds. Here, however, the parallel phrasing pairing intentions with “affairs” or “work” suggests that the intentions in question are primarily intentions to carry out practical ends. When the reference of names is clear, those in authority can easily express to others their intentions for action, such that all understand what must be done to complete a task or project.

The aim of regulating names is to prevent “deviant assertions” (*qí cí* 奇辭) from disrupting the correct use of names. Such assertions include the signature philosophical doctrines of several of Xúnzǐ’s opponents. Among the examples the text gives are the peace activist Sòng Xíng’s teachings that “to be insulted is not disgraceful” and that “the characteristic desires are few”; the later Mohist claim that “killing robbers is not killing people”; the metaphysician Huì Shǐ’s claim that “mountains and abysses are level”; and the disputer Gōngsūn Lóng’s contention that “horses are not horses” (22/29–32).¹⁹ Although Xúnzǐ would agree that “deviant assertions” are *bù rán*, and thus untrue, his explanation of the problem with them is not framed in terms of truth. It is that they “diverge from the correct *dào*” (*lí zhèng dào* 離正道, 22/33). They misuse names and so disrupt the orderly, conventional use of names, thereby breeding confusion and litigation (22/8)—most likely, confusion about how to follow commands or laws and litigation arising from disagreements about how to interpret laws and contracts. Xúnzǐ’s complaint about his opponents’ doctrines, then, is not that they are false but that they are deviant and disruptive.

The underlying concern with *dào* explains why Xúnzǐ focuses on the correctness of names rather than the truth of assertions. Getting names “correct” is a matter of identifying and following the apt *dào*. If the use of names is correct, in Xúnzǐ’s terms, then most assertions will tend to be *rán*—and thus true, in our terms—because speakers

¹⁹ Sòng Xíng held that fighting could be prevented if people learned to regard insults as irrelevant to their social or moral status and that people could live a fulfilling life of equanimity if they recognized that their genuine or characteristic desires were few and easily satisfied. The later Mohist claim expresses their stance that capital punishment is distinct from murder. Huì Shǐ’s statement was likely intended to illustrate the relative or perspectival nature of similarities and differences. “Horses are not horses” appears to be an abbreviated version of Gōngsūn Lóng’s thesis that “white horses are not horses,” which turns on a deliberate equivocation between predication of a general term (the general term “horse” is predicatable of all white horses) and the relation of identity (the extension of “white horse” is not identical to that of “horse”). For further discussion, see Fraser (2016).

will assert the names only of objects that are indeed part of their extension. Conversely, when opponents propound claims Xúnzǐ disagrees with, he regards them as in effect behaving badly, rather than holding false beliefs. They are using names incorrectly and so failing to follow *dào*. His preferred response is not to rebut their claims but to have political authorities rectify their use of names so that “deviant assertions” simply cannot be uttered.

4. The Purpose of Disputation

A further point bearing on the relation between truth and *dào* in Xúnzǐ’s thought is his understanding of the purpose of *biàn* 辯, the classical Chinese label for what we think of as dialectics, disputation, debate, or, in its broadest sense, “discriminating inquiry.”

Xúnzǐ seems to have held that ideally, under the rule of a wise, virtuous sage-king, there would be no *biàn* in the sense of disputation or debate, because the correct use of names would be settled and enforced by political authorities (22/34–35). In the absence of such benevolent authoritarianism, he expects gentlemen to engage in *biàn*, partly for the chilling reason that they lack the political means to silence their opponents by coercion (22/36) and partly for the more admirable reason that they are fond of discussing what they consider good (5/42, 5/53).

In pre-Qín intellectual culture, discussion and inquiry into how to properly distinguish which objects go with which names fell under the rubric of *biàn*. In many contexts, *biàn* was a discursive, often agonistic activity in which two sides contended in a public debate over which of two opposing assertions applied to some object or situation. The Mohist dialectical texts articulate what was probably a widely shared conception of *biàn*. *Biàn* is “contending over opposing assertions,” such that “one side calls it ‘this’, the other calls it ‘not-this’, and the one that fits, wins”²⁰ (Fraser 2020b, 155, 161). Typically, as the Mohists explain, such distinction-drawing debates proceeded by analogical argumentation based on reference to precedents or paradigms. Disputers would propose “standards” or “models” (*fǎ* 法) for the correct use of some name and then argue that the case at hand was or was not relevantly “the same” as the model.

Construed in terms of truth, *biàn* can be regarded as a process of debating which of two contradictory assertions is true. So it is fascinating to note that Xúnzǐ frames the significance of *biàn* purely in terms of *dào*. He characterizes what he calls “disputation-and-explanation” (*biàn-shuō* 辨說)—disputing how to draw distinctions and giving explanations for one’s contentions—as a matter of using consistent names for objects “in

²⁰ In a well-formed *biàn*, the competing assertions are logically contradictory, so that by the law of excluded middle, one of them must “fit” (*dàng*) the object. The Mohists’ example is that arguing over whether something is an ox or not is a well-formed *biàn*: one of the two claims must stand. Arguing over whether something is an ox or a horse is not a proper *biàn*, as both terms could fail to fit the object, which could be something other than an ox or a horse.

order to express the *dào* of movement and stillness”—that is, the *dào* of what to do or not do (22/39). The function of “disputation-and-explanation” is to reach agreement on how things are named (22/40). Doing so enables us to use names as, in effect, signposts by which to direct listeners in following the *dào*. Accordingly, Xúnzǐ says that “disputation-and-explanation” are how the mind “presents” or “symbolizes” *dào* (22/40).

Since *biàn* was the prevailing concept of methodical, analytical inquiry, Xúnzǐ’s treatment implies that the predominant aim of inquiry is not truth but *dào*. When we turn to his epistemology, we find him making the complementary points that *dào* is the fundamental object of epistemic conscientiousness and the basis for developing epistemic competence.

5. Epistemic Competence

A final piece of the picture illustrating the primacy of *dào* in Xúnzǐ’s thought comes from Xúnzian epistemology, a field Xúnzǐ calls “the arts of the mind” (*xīn shù* 心術). Xúnzǐ’s epistemology is built around a conception of epistemic competence and conscientious epistemic agency. It is not concerned with the analysis of knowledge or the details of how we attain knowledge. Xúnzǐ takes knowledge to be unproblematic to understand—it is a reliable competence in drawing distinctions properly. “Deeming *shì* (this/right) what is *shì* and *fēi* (not/wrong) what is *fēi* is knowledge” (2/12). He assumes that agents of normal competence in typical perceptual circumstances whose sense organs are not interfered with will unproblematically possess knowledge. His central epistemological concern is not how to attain knowledge but how to avoid error, or what goes wrong when we fail to attain knowledge. His discussion highlights two main types of error: error in drawing distinctions properly according to appropriate norms and error in identifying the norms themselves. We can think of these as error in the performance of *dào* and error in identifying the correct *dào* to follow.²¹

In Xúnzǐ’s view, epistemic error is due mainly to various types of blindspots or biases, which he calls “blinkering” or “obstruction” (*bì* 蔽).²² Such biases cause error by leading agents to fix their attention narrowly on only part of the situation while remaining “in the dark as to the overall patterns” (21/1). Some blindspots arise due to a poor grasp of how overall conditions affect how we perceive things from our particular perspective. Viewed at dusk, a boulder by the path may indeed have a shape partly like that of a tiger, but only a fool would be “blinkered” by the poor light and take the boulder to be a tiger. The competent epistemic agent notes how the darkness obstructs perception and so temporarily refrains from judging whether the object is a tiger or not. Viewed from a hilltop, cows in the valley below may indeed be similar in shape to sheep,

²¹ For a detailed treatment of these themes in Xúnzǐ, see Fraser (2011).

²² Error due to bias was a widely discussed topic in early Chinese epistemology. See Fraser (2023), chapter 5.

but again only a fool would go down to herd the “sheep.” The competent agent notes that distance interferes with judging details of shape and so refrains from judging exactly what the animals are. Epistemic competence requires a reliable ability to follow norms for distinguishing similar from different objects while also grasping how overall conditions are likely to affect our performance.

Other biases arise from failure to follow the right *dào* and thus apply the right norms of judgment in distinguishing similar from different or *shì* (this/right) from *fēi* (not). A one-sided commitment to certain values, features, or criteria to the neglect of others leads to systematic error. Xúnzǐ contends that his major philosophical opponents are all guilty of such error (21/21–24). For example, according to Xúnzǐ, the consequentialist thinker Mòzǐ’s conception of *dào* is wholly devoted to material benefit. He is blinkered by utility and so fails to recognize the importance of cultural or aesthetic form in ethics and politics. Another example is that the Legalist thinker Shènzǐ’s conception of *dào* one-sidedly focuses on formal, technical measures in political administration. He is blinkered by laws and regulations and so fails to recognize the importance of moral character in achieving order and prosperity. The crux of Xúnzǐ’s criticisms of these and other rival schools of thought is not that their doctrines are false. In fact, he holds that their doctrines indeed embody some aspects of the correct *dào* and thus parts of their teachings are probably *rán*, and thus by our lights true. The problem is that they are one-sided, biased toward one value—one feature of *dào*—while neglecting others. They pursue only “one corner” of the *dào* rather than its diverse applications (21/24).

How can we avoid such systematic biases? Xúnzǐ claims that sages—exemplary, conscientious epistemic agents—understand the difficulties that arise in “the arts of the mind” and are aware of the problems caused by cognitive blinkering or obstruction. So they avoid bias by “laying out all the myriad things and weighing them against each other” to judge their relative “weight” or importance (21/28–29). To “weigh” various things in this way we need a “scale,” Xúnzǐ says—a set of criteria—and that scale is simply the correct *dào* (21/30)—the supposedly unbiased, comprehensive *dào* of the Ruist tradition that he endorses. Accordingly, the fundamental issue in Xúnzian epistemology is to recognize *dào* (21/30). This issue is a matter of identifying the right norms, patterns, and ways by which to conduct ourselves and organize society, not of pursuing the truth. Among the norms of *dào* will be norms by which to judge what is *rán* or true. However, the aim of seeking *dào* is not truth but “good order” (*zhì*). As Xúnzǐ says, “the key to good order lies in recognizing *dào*” (21/34).

For the purposes of this discussion, I will set aside Xúnzǐ’s suggestions about our means of recognizing *dào* and refrain from critically evaluating his claim about the status of the Ruist tradition as a comprehensive, unbiased *dào*. My aim here is only to show that whatever we may think of Xúnzǐ’s substantive views on these and other points, the organization of his discussion makes it clear that his core epistemic concern is with

recognizing *dào*, not truth, and that the status of the right *dào* is primarily intertwined with a conception of good order, not truth. Moreover, Xúnzǐ's treatment of the epistemic role of *dào* parallels—and is probably one application of—his treatment of it as an ethical or social path to follow. Having recognized *dào* as an epistemic “scale,” we are to “approve” (*kě* 可) it, and having approved it, we are to practice it, “maintaining *dào* and thereby putting a stop to what is not *dào*” (21/32). In Xúnzǐ's psychology, “approval” is the fundamental action-guiding attitude, a value judgment endorsing an end or a path of conduct (22/62). (It is “approval,” for example, not desire, that determines how we act.) So Xúnzǐ is calling on us to commit to *dào* as the basis for our overall way of life but also more specifically for what we might call our “epistemic way of life.” A value judgment—“approval”—endorsing this path or way of life underwrites the epistemic criteria we apply. An implication is that Xúnzǐ understands the competent exercise of epistemic agency as grounded in a normative commitment to *dào*.²³ This commitment to *dào* provides standards of semantic correctness and thus truth. But these are a by-product of Xúnzǐ's concerns, not his focus.

6. Concluding Reflections

Readers accustomed to thinking of “getting things right” in terms of truth might contend that despite Xúnzǐ's rhetoric about *dào*, he is still covertly appealing to truth as a fundamental explanation of what it is to be right about things. I suggest, however, that this response reflects a misunderstanding of the relation between *dào* and truth. A *dào* is a way of doing things, a set of practices. Prior to our adopting a *dào*, and thus adopting certain practices for interacting with and talking about things, there are no standards of truth by which to be right or wrong about things. There are various facts—features or aspects of how things stand—but no way to formulate these as assertions that can be true or false, nor any norms of correctness by which to evaluate such assertions. This point about the priority of *dào* is part of what Xúnzǐ is getting at when he claims that the natural world does not come to us prepackaged into an “organizing pattern” (*lǐ* 理). It is social and cultural leaders—Xúnzǐ's exemplary “gentlemen-princes”—who impose such patterns on the world (9/65–66, cited in section 2 above). Prior to our following such leaders in adopting some *dào*, he holds, we have no “organizing pattern” by which to interact with things and thus no way to express or evaluate assertions about them. Our *dào* provides the norms we follow in making assertions and evaluating whether they are correct. Accordingly, Xúnzǐ can plausibly maintain that the fundamental explanation of why an assertion is right or wrong is that it does or does not conform to *dào*. Conformity to *dào* then explains why we can also say that an assertion is, for him, *rán* or not, and, for us, true or not. So it is unsurprising that Xúnzǐ's core concern is with *dào*, not truth.

²³ For a more detailed discussion of Xúnzǐ's conception of epistemic agency and how it may tie together reliabilist and responsibilist themes in recent virtue epistemology, see Fraser (2022).

Might a focus on *dào* rather than truth raise the risk that a speech community could stray from the facts, such that speakers regularly or systematically get the world wrong? The gist of a Xúnzian response to this concern, I suggest, would be that no *dào* that is actually practiced can regularly or systematically “get the world wrong.” A *dào* is a set of practices, and any sustainable set of practices actually performed by some community will causally engage with the world in countless respects. These causal relations ensure that any practicable *dào* gets many things right. For example, different cultures may have a variety of *dào* for building carts or houses, but any practicable *dào* of cart- or house-building can be expected to succeed in producing carts that carry loads or houses that provide shelter. The question is whether, considering factors such as function, aesthetics, and cost, some *dào* of building carts or houses might meet our needs better than others—or, as Xúnzǐ might put it, be more effective in “ordering” or “managing” (*zhì*) the use of carts and dwellings. Analogously, the causal relations between names (*míng*) and objects (*shí*) implicated in the use of names to mark action-guiding distinctions and to direct action through teachings, commands, and laws ensure that every *dào* that is actually practiced includes norms for the use of names that will lead competent followers of that *dào* to produce assertions that are largely true. From a Xúnzian perspective, the worry that we might be getting the world wrong or holding beliefs that are massively false simply has no purchase. Every practicable *dào* is in touch with the world and unproblematically produces mostly true assertions. Mistaken *dào* are wrong not because they breed false beliefs but because they are biased or one-sided and thus poor guides to overall “good order.” For Xúnzǐ, then, the questions that most demand our attention are which *dào* to follow, what conception of “good order” to endorse, what features of the world to attend to, and how best to organize and respond to these features. These are primarily questions of value and culture, not truth.²⁴

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²⁴ I am grateful to two anonymous referees for thoughtful and constructive comments that prompted numerous revisions.

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