

CONSTRUCTIVE-ENGAGEMENT DIALOGUE:
THE PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUE OF TRUTH

AUTHOR MEETS CRITIC:

**A UNIFYING PLURALIST ACCOUNT OF TRUTH AND THE
CASE OF CHINESE PHILOSOPHY EXAMINED FROM THE
CROSS-TRADITION ENGAGING VANTAGE POINT:
REPLY TO CHENYANG LI**

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Chenyang Li presents a very thoughtful and stimulating commentary essay (Li 2021) on some of the central ideas in my recent monograph book, *Semantic-Truth Approaches in Chinese Philosophy: A Unifying Pluralist Account* (Mou 2019). I consider this an extraordinarily valuable opportunity for my further learning and constructively engaging discussion on the jointly concerned philosophical issue of truth. Li raises philosophical interesting questions and offers his valuable engaging views on the addressed sub-issues: <1> a general issue of how to understand the identity and nature of the truth concern in Chinese philosophy; <2> a specific issue of how to understand and characterize Xun Zi's relevant approach, which I give a case analysis in the book. In this "reply" article, my strategy is this. In Part 1, I focus on Li's view on the general topic of truth in Chinese philosophy, especially concerning the identity and nature of the truth concern in Chinese philosophy; in so doing, I reiterate some central points of my suggested unifying pluralist account of truth and also examine how part of Li's suggested *cheng*-style conception of pragmatic *truth* can be explained as one "perspective" elaboration of semantic *truth* (as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of *truth*). In Part 2, I respond to Li's commentary on my account of Xun Zi's approach, giving further explanation of my interpretation and commenting on his alternative interpretation; I also make some general methodological remarks concerning philosophical interpretation on (ancient and modern) thinkers' texts.

1. ON HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE IDENTITY AND NATURE OF
TRUTH CONCERN IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

In this part, in response to Chenyang Li's general remarks on the philosophical

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concern of truth in Chinese philosophy, in Section 1.1, I first make several explanatory remarks on Li's summary presentation of my basic approach in the book; in Section 1.2, I then make an examination of Li's view on the identity of the truth concern in Chinese philosophy; in Section 1.3, I explain how part of Li's *cheng*-style conception of pragmatic *truth* can be explained as one "perspective" elaboration of semantic *truth* (as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of *truth*) in the framework of the unifying pluralist account of truth as explained in my book.

1.1 WHAT A UNIFYING PLURALIST ACCOUNT OF TRUTH CONSISTS IN

Let me start with an examination of Li's summary presentation of my attitude to the addressed four variations of views in the "positive" camp in answering the question of Chinese notion of truth" (Li 2021, 140-141):

...Mou's attitude towards these four views, however, is a mixed one. On the one hand, he thinks that some of these accounts can contribute to our understanding of truth. On the other, he detects a truth-denying elements in these accounts and disagrees with their "revisionist" attitude towards people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding. I take his view to be that these accounts, "positive" as they are, nevertheless deny Chinese philosophy of its truth element that can be identified with mainstream Western epistemological theories. In other words, Mou advances a stronger claim, that Chinese philosophy also contains notions of truth that would be accepted as authentic in mainstream Western philosophy, such as semantic truth."

Li's characterization here is partially right and, I am afraid, partially inaccurate. On the one hand, it is partially right that I think "some of these accounts can contribute to our understanding of truth" in some ways as briefly specified in the book¹: they can and need to be placed where they should be, instead of being mis-located where they do not belong. Roughly, they might constitute distinct perspective elaborations of people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth *in some other projects, such as the justification project concerning probable truth regarding the epistemological dimension, than those projects regarding the truth-nature dimension of the philosophical concern with truth*. As one engaging background for this evaluation and its understanding, in the previous section of the book,² I present and explain a systematic characterization of various dimensions of the philosophical concern with truth and their respectively related projects regarding truth in philosophy. For example, I briefly but explicitly indicate where the first "truth-as-pragmatic-notion" variant (such as the Hall-Ames Approach) and the fourth "truth-as-coherence-notion" variant (such as David Wong's approach) actually belong in a comprehensive account of the philosophical concern with truth. In his commentary essay, with further clarification, Li explicitly identifies his own approach essentially in line with the first "truth-as-pragmatic-notion" variant to this extent: Li takes it that "the main orientation of Chinese philosophy on truth is

¹ Especially see Mou 2019, 28-9, and 186.

² That is, Section 1.2, Mou 2019. For its earlier version, see Mou 2009, Section 1.2.

pragmatic, in that the concept of truth is understood and functions in the context of the human condition; the nature and the value of truth lies with its service towards the good life” (Li 2021, 135); what primarily distinguishes his pragmatic-truth account from, say, the Hall-Ames pragmatic-truth approach is this: Li frames such “pragmatic” truth “on the ontological ground of being” (*op.cit.*, 142) via *cheng*, treating it as “a way of one’s being who she is and what she is” (*ibid.*), which I will make further examination in the subsequent sub-sections in this part.

On the other hand, I am afraid that some of the characterizations in Li’s account are partially inaccurate or have some difficulties in the following four connections. First, the truth concern and truth elements in (early) Chinese philosophy are eventually and fundamentally identified with *people’s pre-theoretic “way-things-are-capturing” understanding of truth* as one normative basis on which the philosophical concern with truth needs to be based,³ rather than with “mainstream Western epistemological theories”. This is one of the central points in the book concerning the normative basis on which to identify what truth (truth nature) is and the truth concerns in Chinese philosophy, as highlighted at the outset of the “introduction” chapter and explained in Section 1.1 – let me cite them here:

This monograph explores a distinctive pluralist account of truth in order to unify various representative and philosophically interesting truth concern approaches in early Chinese philosophy that are concerned with capturing the way things are.⁴ By ‘semantic-truth approaches’ or ‘semantic-truth-concern approach’, I mean distinct approaches addressing or treating the philosophical concern with truth, as conceived in people’s pre-theoretic “ways-things-are-capturing” understanding of truth, which is often characterized in academic terms as ‘semantic truth’ or ‘semantic truth concern’ when the phrase is understood to concern the fundamental relation between language, thought, and reality. (Mou 2019, xix, in the “intro” chapter)

At the outset of the whole book, I intend to first identify and emphasize what this investigation is about. With the effective distinction between “use” and “mention,” in this work, my primary purpose is not to “mention” the term ‘truth’, or its alleged counterpart(s) in Chinese, to talk about such linguistic expressions concerning how, historically and descriptively, peoples in early China used the Chinese counterpart(s), if any, of the term ‘true’ and its cognates in English (or its counterparts in other phonetic languages such as Greek) and how people actually proposed various accounts in the name of ‘truth’, although I do address the issue of how people’s pre-theoretic “way-things-are-capturing” understanding of truth is delivered in distinctive linguistic ways in the Chinese ideographic language and in the Western phonetic language (in Section 1.4 of this chapter). To avoid mere verbal disagreement and thus the mess of

³ See footnote 15 below about this.

⁴ As I emphatically note here in the book, “[i]n this and next beginning statements, by using the italicized “*truth*” and “*of truth*,” I intend to highlight two things. First, I emphasize one of the central engaging points of this book: what is talked about is truth as conceived in people’s pre-theoretic “ways-things-are-capturing” understanding of truth (one normative basis of the philosophical concern with truth, as explained in the beginning section of Chapter 1), rather than something else. Second, I thus stress the substantial content of the engaging discussion of truth, to avoid mere verbal disagreement that is not or less philosophically interesting and engaging in this context of exploration.

verbal-disagreement discussion without real engagement, let me put it straight out at the beginning of this exploration: it is about non-linguistic truth as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth; it is what I use the term 'truth' to talk about, rather than something else. I contend and explain why people's pre-theoretic understanding of truth is one normative basis, as a "root", on which the philosophical concern with truth should be based, if such a concern is about truth, instead of something else. (*op.cit.*, 2-3)

Second, given the foregoing point, it is inaccurate to identify or conflate *people's cross-tradition pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth* with "mainstream *Western* epistemological theories". <1> As explained in the book, people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth are widely shared at folk level by ordinary people in a cross-tradition way, rather than by the local "Western" people only, not to mention just "mainstream Western...theories"; <2> the former is pre-theoretic or pre-philosophical, while the latter is theoretic: they are not located at the same level and are different regarding normative status and explanatory power.

Third, I note that Li uses the phrase '*Western epistemological theories*' here (my highlight in italics in the above citation). Both conceptually and in view of reflective practice in philosophy, I am afraid that it is not on the right track to conflate "epistemological" theories of truth and "semantic" truth, especially when *truth* is addressed in both cases in the same sense (i.e., when it is understood on the same normative basis of people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth). Theories of semantic truth and epistemological theories of truth are related but regarding substantially different dimensions of the philosophical concern with truth: the former is about truth nature (what truth is) which is independently of how people can justifiably achieve probable truth; in other words, it is regarding *non-epistemic* truth (in the sense that capturing the way *things are* is substantially different from capturing the way *how an epistemic agent think things are*);⁵ in contrast, the latter is about truth criterion (or truth means) which is to give us a test or evidence by means of which the (probable) truth and falsity of a truth bearer can be justifiably judged.⁶ Actually, more generally speaking, this is one substantial problem or difficulty with the epistemologically identified "pragmatist" approach to truth: it systematically conflates the epistemological, on the one hand, and the metaphysical and the semantic, on the

⁵ For a more complete explanation of the non-epistemic character of truth as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth, see Section 1.1.3 of Mou 2019. The point is not that the way some objects in the world cannot result from human creations but that, given an object of study (with its certain identity and characteristics), there is a way that the object objectively is such that it is not the case that "anything goes" but that we can all talk about the same object even though we many say about it differently and that whether our distinct sayings or judgments about this same object is true or false is determined by whether the distinct sayings or judgments capture the addressed ways the object is (as the truth maker), rather than by whether the judgment makers (as the epistemic agents) think so. It is also noted that the notion of an "given" object of study here does not imply that this object of study must be an absolutely fixed one without its dynamic development or its "becoming" aspect.

⁶ See my further discussion of distinct dimensions of the philosophical concern with truth and of their associated distinct projects in Section 1.2 of Mou 2019.

other hand.⁷

Fourth, last but not least, though seemingly a bit tricky but sophisticated – also related to the foregoing first point above. It seems that Li emphatically uses the term ‘Western’ in such phrases as ‘*Western* epistemological theories’ (my highlight in italics) in identifying what this book addresses on truth; in view of his subsequent remarks on the “Chinese” way of understanding truth, his emphatic usage of ‘Western’ to identify what this book addresses on truth seems to suggest that here he uses ‘Western’ in a sense that it is treated as something that belongs to the “Western” (primarily, if not only), rather than the “Chinese”. What I intend to emphasize here is this: generally speaking, there is the significant distinction between what is *only historically* related to a philosophical tradition and what is *intrinsically* related to that philosophical tradition; the fact that some resources were historically put forwarded by certain thinkers in a tradition does not imply that these resources must be intrinsically related or belong to that tradition alone. Depending on in which sense one uses the term ‘Western’, one might mean the former or the latter. It seems that Li essentially means the latter by his emphatic usage of the term ‘Western’ here, in contrast to identifying *truth* in a cross-tradition way as conceived in people’s pre-theoretic “ways-things-are-capturing” understanding of *truth*.

1.2 A COMMENTARY ON LI’S VIEW ON THE IDENTITY OF TRUTH IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY

In the following, I make several “reply” comments on Li’s positive explanation of his own approach which is highlighted in his following explanatory line (Li 2021,141-142):

My account takes into consideration these observations:

(1) In ancient China, philosophy was not divided into subareas such as metaphysics and epistemology, as in modern philosophy. Truth-related matters were studied as an aspect of philosophy rather than a subarea of philosophy. I define their difference as that, relatively speaking, a subarea can be studied independently of other subareas (as

⁷ Following the usual usage in the literature, I use the term ‘pragmatic’ in a neutral way to denote a possibly eligible perspective in an object of study, which is intended to point to and capture the “pragmatic” aspect of the object of study; in contrast, the term ‘pragmatist’/‘pragmatism’ is used to denote an *ad hoc* philosophical position which also includes a certain guiding principle regarding the nature and status of a pragmatic perspective and its relation with other perspectives. In this way, there is the substantial distinction between the “pragmatic” perspective, which can be “eligible” in treating some objects of study, and the “pragmatist” guiding principle concerning how to look at the relation between the “pragmatic” perspective and other “eligible” perspective(s) regarding an object of study (typically, treating the “pragmatic” perspective as *par excellence*, or being absolutely superior to other eligible perspectives). See the discussion of this in Section 3.4.3 of Mou 2020 in a wider setting of philosophical interpretation.

For the conceptual and explanatory resources concerning the distinction among three methodological things (the methodological *perspective*, methodological *instruments*, and the methodological *guiding principle*) and their associated lexical distinctions (the one between *eligible* and *ineligible* perspectives, and the one between *adequate* and *inadequate* guiding principles, among others), see Mou 2001.

one can study logic or epistemology without studying ethics) whereas an aspect has to be studied along with other aspects of the whole subject area.

(2) The primary concern of ancient Chinese philosophy was on how to live a good life and how to establish a good society. Consequently, truth-related matters were considered in close connections to this central theme and aimed to address questions connected to this primary concern.

(3) There was not a single term for truth in ancient Chinese philosophy. This phenomenon can be explained by the observations in (1) and (2).

(4) When terms were used in discussing truth-related matters as well as other aspect(s) of philosophy, it is likely that these have been connected in ancient thinkers' overall philosophical conceptualizations.

We can read the above as an inductive argument with (4) as the conclusion that is supported by the three preceding statements. The argument does not imply that there is not semantic truth in ancient Chinese philosophy; it does suggest, however, that our interpretations of its semantic truth should be formulated in the context of ancient thinkers' primary concerns and that semantic truth is likely to have been subsumed in their primary concerns, even though not totally overlooked.

On the basis of the above observations, my account of the conception of truth in ancient Chinese philosophy can be roughly summarized as follows⁸:

The primary concern of ancient Chinese thinkers was how to live a good life. As an indispensable aspect of their conceptions of the good life, matters related to truth are explored and construed primarily in terms of what truth-related matters contribute to the good life. Truth, consequently, is a matter of how a person understands things in the world and how one acts appropriately in conducting one's life. Acting appropriately is a way of being. Truth is about being-true in living in the world.

Let us take Confucianism as an example. The closest concept to truth in Confucian philosophy is probably "*cheng* 诚". In Confucian philosophy, *cheng* has various meanings. One of these meanings is trueness or truth. In this sense, to be *cheng* means being true to oneself, to other people, and to the world. Being true is a matter of truth. This meaning encompasses sincerity (i.e., *being* sincere) as it is often interpreted, but it is framed on the ontological ground of being. When understood as a person's internal state, sincerity is not purely a mental property; it is also a way of one's being who she is and what she is. In this sense *cheng* suggests authenticity. A sincere person is a true or truthful and authentic person.

If what Li maintains would be only that "truth" is a way of being in the sense of the term 'truth' that he partially phrases and that one strategic goal of Chinese philosophy is also to *pursue* "truth" (thus bringing about the fundamental relation between language/thought, on one hand, and reality (objects or the world), on the other hand, to which the "semantic" relation between the truth maker and the truth bearer) points, then what is at issue seems a mere verbal disagreement *to the following extent*: given <1> that the saying 'a way of being' is just another variant of the saying 'the way things are' (part of the folk saying 'the way things are' that delivers people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth),

⁸ Li makes a note here in this citation (Li 2021, 142): "For detailed account, please see Li 1999, Chapter 2, 'Truth'."

whose meaning is inclusive covering a variety of the way different types of things in the world (as a whole of which humans are parts) are, rather than being *restricted to humans*’ “acting appropriately in living in the world” only, and <2> that *pursuing* “truth” in the sense of the term ‘truth’ that Li partially specifies would be a variant (or an innocent or non-substantial revision) of the saying ‘capturing the way things are’ that delivers people’s pre-theoretic ‘way-things-are-capturing’ understanding of truth (the real point and the normative basis of what is reflectively and academically labeled ‘semantic truth’ as addressed before). Furthermore, it is also important to note that a perspective *per se* that addresses and focuses on *acting appropriately* as one “way of being” (through its being “framed on the ontological ground of being”), which as well be called ‘pragmatic-truth’ perspective,⁹ can be *eligible* in the sense that it does capture one dimension of a variety of the way different types of things in the world (as a whole of which humans are parts) are and thus that the “pragmatic-truth” perspective *per er* can be one eligible perspective, focusing on capturing humans’ acting appropriately, among various eligible perspectives to capture a variety of the way things in the world as a whole are (as generally delivered by people’s pre-theoretic ‘way-things-are-capturing’ understanding of truth). The “pragmatic-truth” perspective *per se* can be associated (in different specific accounts that take this perspective type via their variant tokens) with different guiding principles for the sake of (adequately or inadequately) guiding how to look at the relation between a “pragmatic-truth” perspective and other eligible perspectives. To the extent as addressed in the foregoing two connections, his partial sayings about *truth* can be (at least partially) compatible with an account of semantic *truth* as conceived in people’s pre-theoretic ‘way-things-are-capturing’ understanding of *truth*.

However, what Li maintains is substantially more than that: more accurately speaking, some of his ideas in the “guiding-principle” dimension of his “practice-truth” approach which evaluates the nature and status of the “pragmatic-truth” perspective. <1> Generally speaking, Li seems to “subsume” or reduce semantic truth to pragmatic truth by restricting “a way of being” to humans’ acting appropriately or at least treats one’s “act[ing] appropriately in conducting one’s life” as one necessary constituent of truth. <2> Specifically speaking, Li takes pragmatic truth understood in the above way to be the case in ancient Chinese philosophy, stating that “the main orientation of Chinese philosophy on truth is pragmatic”, because “[t]he primary concern of ancient Chinese thinkers was how to live a good life” (*op.cit.*, 141) and “the nature and the value of truth lies with its service towards the good life” (*op.cit.*, 135).

In my opinion, there are several substantial difficulties with Li’s view here. First, in view of the relationship between semantic truth and pragmatic truth (given that

⁹ Given a quite classical or standard characterization of the basic point of the “pragmatic method” (as one methodological perspective) to the effect that “the pragmatic method...is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences” (James 1907, 39), it might as well be assumed that, when Li renders truth “pragmatic”, what the term ‘pragmatic’ means include the following sense: the addressed human acting intrinsically involves practical consequences. For my commentary on James’ implicit distinction between the “pragmatic” method (as one methodological perspective) and the more radical “pragmatist” attitude (as one methodological guiding principle) which is also relevant to my analysis here, see Endnote 38 of Chapter 3 of Mou 2020, 190-191.

both address *truth* instead of something else),¹⁰ semantic *truth* as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "ways-things-are-capturing" understanding of *truth* is primary and foundational while pragmatic *truth* is secondary and derivative in the following senses and connections. <1> "Metaphysically" speaking concerning the truth nature, given that we talk about the same world as a whole, humans together with their activities are parts of this natural world as a whole, humans' way of being is one of a variety of the way things (of the world as a whole) are, and human's appropriate (or morally good) way (or their "*cheng*" way, in Li's terms) is part of a variety of humans' way; the point here is not trivial: humans' way of being is not merely conditioned by the environment for human lives but also (if performed appropriately, instead of "anything goes" or being just in chaos) has to be in accordance with the across-the-board fundamental principle of this natural world as a whole;¹¹ pragmatic truth in Li's sense is one manifestation of more fundamental semantic truth, rather than the reverse. <2> "Epistemologically" speaking, in view of the <1> above, one's own or some other's recognizing, understanding and evaluating one's capturing pragmatic truth in Li's sense or one's acting appropriately needs to be based on and presuppose capturing (recognizing and understanding) the way many relevant and related things in this natural world as a whole (of which humans together with their ways are parts) are, whether or not, or no matter to what extent, one explicitly or directly realizes this when one practices pragmatic truth. <3> As far as the fundamental explanatory direction between them is concerned, in view of both <1> and <2> above, the fundamental explanatory direction between semantic *truth* and pragmatic *truth*, if both address "truth" (as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth) instead of something else, is to explain pragmatic truth eventually on the basis of semantic truth, rather than the reverse; pragmatic truth is thus one type of manifestation of semantic truth regarding humans' "acting appropriately". I can agree to Li's statement that "our interpretations of ...semantic truth [in ancient

¹⁰ It is important to note that the issue of the relation between semantic *truth* and pragmatic *truth* is related to but substantially distinguishes itself from the more general issue between the semantic and the pragmatic as explored in the philosophy of language: <1> the term 'semantic' in the former in the current context of examining the philosophical concern with truth is used to denote the fundamental relation between language/thought and reality (or objects and the world), and the compound phrase 'semantic truth' is used as a quasi-theoretic label that means the semantic notion of truth as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth; <2> the phrase 'pragmatic truth' is about the same *truth* as what the phrase 'semantic *truth*' is about, rather than something else (thus no engagement but merely verbal disagreement).

¹¹ The point is highlighted by some major thinkers in different major movements of thought in ancient Chinese philosophy, such as in Lao Zi's terms in Chapter 25 of the Daoist text *Dao-De-Jing*: 人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然 *ren-fa-di, di-fa-tian, tian-fa-dao, dao-fa-zi-ran* [Humans model themselves upon Earth; Earth models itself upon Heaven; Heaven models itself upon the *Dao*; the *Dao* models itself upon what is natural (or naturalness)]; the same or similar point is also made by some major thinkers in Confucianism via the insight of *tian-dao* 天道 (as explained in Chapter 5, Mou 2019). Though different movements of thought might have their distinct elaborations of the structure and content of what counts as the fundamental principle of this inclusive natural world, it is arguably right that one common or shared insight or sentiment is that the addressed *dao*-like fundamental principle, rather than a specific recipe, is to maintain, regulate and enhance healthy, constructive, non-excessive or complementary development of things in the inclusive natural world in a unifying and coordinate way.

Chinese philosophy] should be *formulated* in the context of ancient thinkers' primary concerns" to this extent: it is true that semantic truth can manifest itself in distinct ways in different contexts of human activities with their results and thus can be "formulated" in distinct terms and in view of distinct types of "being" (as the inclusive world): such as doing math and thus bringing about or approaching math truths, doing scientific investigation in physics and thus bringing about or approaching truths about the physical world, acting appropriately in a "*cheng*" way and thus bring about or approaching "pragmatic" truths in Li's sense, etc. However, that does not amount to saying that semantic truth should be "subsumed" into, or reduced to, pragmatic truth; rather, in the foregoing senses of <1> and <2>, pragmatic truth is to be eventually explained and evaluated on the basis of semantic truth (as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth).

To illustrate the point here, let us look at how Li defines or characterizes *cheng*, which he treats more or less as the Confucian concept of truth (in his words, "[t]he closest concept to truth in Confucian philosophy is probably '*cheng*'"): in the "trueness or truth" sense of *cheng*, "to be *cheng* meanings being *true* to oneself, to other people, and to the world". Now given Li's previous characterization of truth in terms of "a way of being" as "acting appropriately", it is unclear what the term '*cheng*' exactly means here: if it means acting appropriately to oneself, to other people, and to the world, it is unclear what 'acting appropriately to oneself, to other people, and to the world' exactly means and what counts as "acting appropriately". However, if 'true' here just delivers its pre-theoretic basic meaning as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth, it would become much clear and make much sense to treat "*cheng*" as "pragmatic" *truth* based on "semantic" *truth* as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of *truth*: it would mean *capturing* the way oneself really is, the way other people really is, and the way things in the world (as a whole of which humans are parts) really are, plus a further elaborated meaning of the term '*capturing* the way things are' in the addressed moral context of pursuing "how to live a good life and how to establish a good society": *sincerely capturing* (understanding, appreciating, and participating in building up) the way oneself is (especially, the way of how one's moral character is or should be cultivated), the way other people really is (especially, the way of how one does or should constructively work with other people to establish a good society), and the way things in the world really are (especially, the way of how oneself as one good moral agent, oneself and other people in a good society, and other relevant things in the world are or should fundamentally related in accordance with the fundamental way of the natural world as a whole of which humans together with their activities are parts). I will go back to this elaboration in the next section of this part to examine how such an elaboration of *cheng* as pragmatic *truth* can be one "perspective" elaboration of semantic *truth* as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of *truth* in the framework of the suggested unifying pluralist account of truth in my book.

Second, I am afraid that it is incorrect or at least inaccurate to say that "*the* primary concern of *ancient Chinese philosophy* was on how to live a good life and

how to establish a good society” for the following considerations. <1> It is historically not true to say that “the primary concern of” all schools or movements of thought in ancient Chinese philosophy, as shown in their relevant classical texts, “was on how to live a good life and how to establish a good society”. Let us just consider the cases of the *Yi-Jing* text in its classical sense (not including the largely Confucian commentary part, the *Yi-Zhuang*), Gongsun Long’s account regarding philosophy of language, and the later Mohist account regarding logic, among others. <2> Also historically speaking, the concern “how to live a good life and how to establish a good society” is not the *exclusive* primary concern in some major movements of thought in ancient Chinese philosophy, such as the case of philosophical Daoism (as one of the two major movements of thoughts in ancient Chinese philosophy), as shown in the important classical text *Dao-De-Jing*. Furthermore, it is arguably correct to say that, at least in one important sense, in the *Dao-De-Jing*, the fundamental concern with the relationship between language, thought and the inclusive natural world of which humans are parts (and thus the fundamental semantic-truth concern and pursuit) is primary while its concern with “how to live a good life and how to establish a good society” is secondary. <3> Even for Confucianism that is taken to determine “the primary” concern of ancient Chinese philosophy, although the surface or manifest level of the primary concern of Confucianism as a whole can be characterized in terms of “how to live a good life and how to establish a good society”, its primary concern as a whole is not a *single-layer concern* with only its surface or manifest layer of “how to live a good life” but fundamentally a *multiple-layer* philosophical concern: at least for those significant figures like Confucius, Xun Zi, Wang Chong, Zhang Zai, the concern with “how to live a good life and how to establish a good society” does not constitute the *exclusive* layer of their primary concern, which consists of its fundamental layer concerning the relationship between language, thought and reality (the natural world as a whole of which humans are parts).¹²

The distinct and diverse primary concerns of different movements of thought in ancient Chinese philosophy, at different (manifest and recessive) levels and during

¹² It is noted that the Emperor Wu (漢武帝 156-87 BCE) of Han Dynasty’ imposed interruption of the “natural” development of ancient Chinese philosophy via the policy of “罷黜百家獨尊儒術” (all the other schools of thoughts were dismissed while only Confucianism was respected), as advocated by Dong Zhongshu (董仲舒, 179-104 BCE), substantially contributed to the dominant status of Confucianism both as the state ideology and as one movement of thought during the period from the Han Dynasty to the Qing Dynasty; to this extent, the dominant status of Confucianism during that period of ancient Chinese history did not result from the “natural” development of the earlier stages of ancient Chinese philosophy, especially the stage from the Spring-Autumn Period to the Warring-States period when all “hundred schools of thought” were in bloom. This historical fact is not irrelevant to the evaluation of the nature and intrinsic character of ancient Chinese philosophy and the identity and structure of its primary concerns. It is also arguably correct that, as far as the depth and width of *philosophical* thinking is concerned, the most representative stage throughout the long history and dynamic development of ancient Chinese philosophy is the aforementioned stage during the period from the Spring-Autumn Period to the Warring-States period when all “hundred schools of thought” were in bloom. [Though the policy slogan “罷黜百家，獨尊儒術” is widely used to denote the addressed historical situation, Dong Zhongshu’s actual words are ‘推明孔氏，抑黜百家’ (advocating Confucian ideology while restraining the other hundred schools of thought), which was rephrased by 易白沙 (1886-1921) as ‘罷黜百家，獨尊儒術’.]

various stages of the multiple-thousand-year long history of its development, and their resulting extensive resources in different areas of philosophy have been well covered and evidenced by the current available scholarship in the literature of studies of ancient Chinese philosophy. Now it has been widely recognized that valuable resources in ancient Chinese philosophy are not restricted to its parts concerning moral, social and political philosophy but also in its parts (in whatever reflective way to label them, either ‘aspects’ or ‘sub-areas’, instead of sticking to a “historical-descriptive” way) concerning metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, etc.¹³

Third, as for Li’s first specific “observation” on the case of ancient Chinese philosophy, my view is this. It is known that there is no historical separation of philosophy, religion, and literature in Chinese ancient thoughts; rather, the former parts are distinct dimensions or aspects of the latter as a historical whole; however, that does not imply that, with the primary goal of exploring how the relevant resources in Chinese ancient thoughts can contribute to the contemporary development of philosophy, one cannot separately focus on one of them, i.e., its philosophical dimension. By the same token, the fact that “[i]n ancient China, philosophy was not divided into [separate] subareas such as metaphysics and epistemology” [my emphasis in italics] does not imply that, due to a certain purpose in its philosophical studies other than a purely historical-description purpose, we as philosophers cannot focus on one aspect/layer of ancient Chinese philosophy. Indeed, “truth-related matters” can be focused on, especially for the sake of the constructive-engagement purpose in exploring how relevant truth concern resources can contribute to our understanding and treatment of the philosophical issue of truth. It is interesting to note that Li uses ‘were’ in his statement “[t]ruth-related matters were studied as an aspect of philosophy rather than a subarea of philosophy”; it seems that it points to a historical fact that in ancient time truth-related matters (what that would mean put aside) were studied as an aspect of philosophy”; however, the question is why this historical fact should block our philosophical interpretation for some other purpose and focus than a mere historical-description purpose? It is here that Li seems to presuppose one guiding principle to the effect that, if historically the truth matter was looked at together with other parts of Chinese philosophy [Chinese thought], then, indiscriminately, we as contemporary philosophers in studying Chinese philosophy cannot focus on the truth concern resources separately. I think that this guiding principle is not justified. The point made here regarding Li’s first specific observation on the case of ancient Chinese philosophy can be further strengthened by the points made respectively on the relationship between semantic truth and pragmatic truth and on the distinct identity of the primary concerns of ancient Chinese philosophy (as shown in different movements of

¹³ This has been substantially shown in the rich and diverse contents of a recent multiple-volume reference book on studies of philosophically valuable and significant resources in ancient Chinese philosophy, *Chinese Philosophy: Critical Concepts in Philosophy*, edited by this author for Routledge’s “Critical Concepts in Philosophy” reference book series (Mou 2018): Volume I: *Identities, Methodologies, Unity of Truth, Good and Beauty*; Volume II: *Moral, Social and Political Philosophy*; Volume III: *Metaphysics, Epistemology, Reflection on Science*; Volume IV: *Philosophy of Language, Mind and Logic*.

thought and at distinct reflection levels and distinct dimensions of the same movements of thought) as discussed above.

Fourth, as the concern with “how to live a good life” is neither the exclusive concern nor the exclusive level of primary concern in all movements of thought in ancient Chinese philosophy, given that all these other concerns are also associated with their strategic “truth-pursuit” goal, there is another substantial difficulty with Li’s “pragmatic-truth” characterization of the truth concerns in ancient Chinese philosophy: how could such a “pragmatic-truth” characterization provide a unifying account in treating various truth concerns in different movements of thought in Chinese philosophy, especially those semantic-truth approaches that are taken either in a manifest way (as explained in chapters 2, 3, 4 and 6 of Mou 2019) or in an recessive way (even within Confucianism, as explained in chapter 5 of Mou 2019), if it would not be intended to stop at just claiming diverse truth types without one common normative basis or one unifying joint root? I am not sure whether Li’s account is intended to go with this ending result. If so, talking about these alleged different “truth” types would simply talk about different objects of study; some of them are not really about “truth” as conceived in people’s pre-theoretic “way-things-are-capturing” understanding of truth but substantially revise it into something else, although their advocates might still intend to use the linguistic label ‘truth’ to name them.

In this connection, the suggested account of truth in the book has its explanatory potency which endeavors to explicitly provide a unifying pluralist account with people’s pre-theoretic “way-things-are-capturing” understanding of truth as one common normative basis, on which all *truth* approaches are jointly rooted. As indicated before, to a certain extent as explained above, Li’s partial sayings about truth can be (at least partially) compatible with an account of semantic truth as conceived in people’s pre-theoretic understanding of truth; as for his concept of *cheng*, in my opinion, it would become much clear and make much sense to treat “*cheng*” as “pragmatic” *truth* based on “semantic” *truth* as conceived in people’s pre-theoretic “way-things-are-capturing” understanding of *truth*.

1.3 HOW LI’S “CHENG”-STYLE PRAGMATI-TRUTH PERSPECTIVE CAN BE EXPLAINED IN THE SEMANTIC-TRUTH-BASED UNIFYING PLURALIST ACCOUNT OF TRUTH

In this ending section of Part 1, in view of the foregoing discussions, more constructively, I intend to briefly explain how part of Li’s *cheng*-style pragmatic-*truth* approach can be explained as one “perspective” elaboration of semantic *truth* (as conceived in people’s pre-theoretic “way-things-are-capturing” understanding of *truth*) in the framework of the unifying pluralist account of truth as suggested and explained in my book.

The suggested unifying pluralist account of truth, *jointly rooted perspectivism* (‘JRP’ for short), consist of its theory of truth, *jointly rooted perspectivist theory of*

truth ('JRPT' for short) and the surrounding remarks on behalf of the adequacy of the theory.¹⁴

Let me start with the core part of JRTP, which consists of an account of the truth-concern normative basis and the perspective-elaboration guiding principle, JRTP0, and an account of truth-nature perspective elaborations, JRTP1, which has its open-ended character and in which one is entitled to include any eligible truth-nature-elaboration perspectives being sensitive to one's purpose and focus.

<1> The account of the truth-concern normative basis and the perspective-elaboration guiding principle, JRTP0, consists of:

<1.1> one primary axiomatic thesis of the nature of (non-linguistic) truth, among others:

(ATNT) The nature of truth (of the truth bearer) consists in (the truth bearer's) capturing the (due) way things are.

(ATNT) is a reflective formulation of people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth as one normative basis of the philosophical concern with truth.¹⁵

¹⁴ For an outline of the basic structure and content of JRTP, see Section 1.7 of Mou 2019; for the content of one basic version of JRTP especially regarding the truth-concern approaches in early Chinese philosophy, see chapter 7 of Mou 2019; for a more inclusive version of JRTP which includes more representative perspective elaborations (also covering some representative perspective elaborations as historically suggested in the Western tradition and in contemporary philosophy, such as the Tarskian-style thesis of the truth-definition-adequacy elaboration perspective, the Davidson-style thesis of truth centrality as explanatory basis in the explanatory-role account, and those perspective elaborations in the truth-predicate account), see Appendix 5 in Mou 2019. For the part on behalf of the adequacy of JRPT, see the examinations on its normative basis, engaging backgrounds, and methodology in chapter 1 and the subsequent case-analysis chapters in Mou 2019.

¹⁵ As for why people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth needs to be treated as one normative basis of the philosophical concern with truth, let me reiterate its basic methodological considerations and reasons (as explained in Section 1.12 of Mou 2019). <1> Generally speaking, given a subject/issue/topic in philosophical examination, as for the relation between the theoretic work on the subject and people's pre-theoretic understanding on the subject, there are two general methodological attitudes towards the pre-theoretic or pre-philosophical understanding (if any) of an object under philosophical examination: the non-revisionist attitude and the revisionist attitude. The non-revisionist attitude is conceptually related to a general non-revisionist attitude in philosophy to the effect that philosophy should not be theoretically revisionary of people's folk or pre-theoretic understanding about the matters in question *unless* there are very strong theoretical or practical reasons in favor of revision. The revisionist attitude in philosophy asserts otherwise. The non-revisionist attitude is supported by the following general methodological principle: if there are two conflicting alternative theoretical approaches to an issue under examination, and if one of them is more intelligible from a point of view of people's pre-theoretic understanding on the issue than the other, then the burden of proof is on the latter to show that there is something wrong with such a pre-theoretic understanding; if such a proof cannot be given, our theoretic model should preserve as many contents of our pre-theoretic understanding about the issue as possible. <2> Whether or not the above general non-revisionist attitude and its associated general methodological principle should be *generally* adopted in philosophical inquiries, it seems to be reasonable to take it as one basic methodological strategy in treating the philosophical concern with *truth*, especially the issue of the truth nature (concerning what truth is). For one thing, different from some folk understandings on other issues, people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding *per se*, as indicated before, is neither something whose basic point needs experimental

<1.2> the perspective-sensitivity thesis concerning the philosophical concern with truth with its distinct aspects:

With (ATNT) as the primary reflective-elaboration-guiding axiomatic basis, when taking philosophical concern with truth, one needs to be sensitive to one's purpose and focus while recognizing the eligibility of available perspectives that really point to distinct aspects of the philosophical concern with truth and thus their limits and complementarity for a complete understanding.

<2> The account of truth-nature-elaboration perspectives, JRTP1, consists of a basic normative schema thesis of truth-nature-elaboration perspectives, (STNEP), as given below, and an open collection of principles or theses that formulate some representative or philosophically interesting and significant perspective:

(STNEP) With (ATNT) as the primary elaboration-guiding axiomatic basis, for the sake of the purpose *P*, the understanding of truth nature can be elaborated in *E*, where *P* is replaced by a certain purpose and *E* is replaced by a certain statement or formulation that gives the elaboration of (ATNT) for the sake of *P*.

With the foregoing primary axiomatic thesis of the nature of truth, (ATNT), and its associated basic normative schema thesis of truth-nature-elaboration, (STNEP), Li's *cheng*-style pragmatic-*truth* perspective can be explained as one "perspective" elaboration of people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth via the foregoing (STNEP) schema:

The "cheng"-sensitivity thesis ("CS thesis" for short) concerning the human-morality truth condition:

With (ATNT) as the primary elaboration-guiding axiomatic basis, for the sake of capturing *the (due) way the human morality is to be* (the truth pursuit concerning the human morality), the understanding of truth nature via the

demographic-difference tests nor a kind of seemingly-thing-judging "intuition"; rather, it is fundamentally and intrinsically *presupposed* or *imbedded* in human beings' basic mental lives: it is fundamentally and intrinsically *presupposed* or *imbedded* in people's understanding (or the notion) of what counts as the human agent's believing (as one rudimentary mental activity of human beings). For another thing, it is known that people's pre-theoretic understanding of truth plays a most fundamental explanatory role in people's folk and reflective lives and that the notion of truth is one of the most basic and across-the-board conceptual foundations for philosophical inquiry and any other reflective intellectual pursuits that are intended to capture "how things are". Due to such a fundamental and indispensable explanatory role played by the pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth in our folk and reflective lives, there seem to be no strong theoretical or practical reasons in favor of fundamental revision concerning the truth nature as conceived in people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth. <3> In this way, as far as the reflective exploration of truth is concerned, people's pre-theoretic "way-things-are-capturing" understanding of truth needs to be treated as one normative basis of the philosophical concern with *truth*.

perspective elaboration of (ATNT) concerning the “*cheng*”-related human-morality can be elaborated into the following “*cheng*”-sensitivity thesis concerning the truth-making basis for human moral truth:

In capturing the (due) way the human *cheng* morality is to be (in the pursuit of moral truth), a moral agent who prescriptively pursues the *cheng* moral character should achieve “*cheng*”-related virtues and fulfill the “*cheng*”-related (personal, family and social) duties with a (more or less) holistic understanding of how oneself as one good moral agent, oneself and other people in a good society, and other relevant things in the world are fundamentally related in accordance with the fundamental way of the natural world as a whole of which humans are parts [that is, in view of Li’s own words ‘to be *cheng* means being *true* to oneself, to other people, and to the world’ with the modification and elaboration given before.¹⁶ one sincerely captures (via understanding, appreciating, and participating in building up) the way oneself is (especially, the way of how one’s moral character is cultivated), the way other people really is (especially, the way of how one does (can and should) constructively work with other people to establish a good society), and the way things in the world really are (especially, the way of how oneself as one good moral agent, oneself and other people in a good society, and other relevant things in the world are fundamentally related in accordance with the fundamental way of the natural world as a whole of which humans are parts)]. A moral evaluative statement, which asserts that one has the “*cheng*”-related virtues and fulfills the “*cheng*”-related duties with the foregoing holistic understanding of the relation between oneself, other people, and other relevant things in the world, is true exactly because (is made true by the following due way the human morality is to be): the alleged “*cheng*” agent (the moral agent as a whole is talked about while her addressed specific *cheng*-virtue part is focus on at the same time) does possess the *cheng* virtue (i.e., a collection of “*cheng*”-related virtues that are shown by her fulfilled the “*cheng*”-related duties) as her specific-part referent.

It is noted that, in view of his interpretation of Xun Zi’s relevant approach given in his commentary essay, Li might disagree to my added elaboration of the part ‘being true...to the world’ in his saying ‘to be *cheng* means being *true* to oneself, to other people, and to the world’ in terms of “with a (more or less) holistic understanding of how oneself as one good moral agent, oneself and other people in a good society, and other relevant things in the world are fundamentally related in accordance with the fundamental way of the natural world as a whole of which humans are parts”.

¹⁶ As highlighted in the preceding discussion on the relationship between semantic truth and pragmatic truth. Notice that, in view of his interpretation of Xun Zi’s relevant approach given in his commentary essay, Li might disagree to my added elaboration of the part ‘being true...to the world’ in his saying ‘to be *cheng* means being *true* to oneself, to other people, and to the world’ in terms of ‘a holistic understanding of how oneself as one good moral agent, oneself and other people in a good society, and other relevant things in the world are fundamentally related in accordance with the fundamental way of the natural world as a whole of which humans are parts’. But this elaboration is not related to how to interpret Xun Zi but an independent reflection on “how things (in the world as a whole of which humans are parts) are, with which Li’s cited words can be compatible.

Nevertheless, this elaboration is not related to how to interpret Xun Zi but an independent reflection on “how things in the world (of which humans are parts) are”, with which the cited words from Li’s foregoing statement can be compatible. Indeed, it does matter whether a moral agent can have such a holistic understanding: if otherwise, there would remain a serious issue of what constitutes the basis and criterion for the addressed *cheng*-related virtues and the *cheng*-related duties as the moral specific-part referent: i.e., would they result from the moral sages’ or the sage kings’ inventions or conventions or be based on something more fundamental? In my view, one significant vision of Xun Zi’s truth-concern approach can play its crucial role in identifying the due basis for human morality: being in accordance with, and thus capturing, the *tian-ming* or *tian-dao* as the fundamental principle in the natural world (of which humans are parts) is the ultimate foundation of human morality.

At this point, let me move on to the topic of the next part, Part 2, in this “reply” article: I will respond to Li’s commentary on my account of Xun Zi’s approach on the addressed issue, giving further explanation of my suggested account and also make some general methodological remarks on philosophical interpretation of (ancient and modern) thinkers’ texts when a cross-tradition engaging project in philosophy is carried out.

2. ON HOW TO UNDERSTAND AND CHARACTERIZE XUN ZI’S RELEVANT APPROACH AND A METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF TEXTS

In this part, I respond to Li’s commentary on my interpretative account of Xun Zi’s approach to the addressed issue. With consideration of the concern and interest of the general philosophy readership of this journal, and for the sake of exploring a philosophically engaging and constructive way in treating distinct interpretative approaches, instead of responding to Li’s distinct interpretative translations of those cited passages from the text *Xun-Zi* piece by piece, I first focus on several representative sources from which Li’s and my distinct interpretive translations result; and then I make some general methodological remarks on philosophical interpretation of ancient and modern thinkers’ texts when a cross-tradition engaging project in philosophy like this book is carried out.

To more clearly and effectively understand, presenting and evaluating an interpretative approach to an ancient or modern thinker’s text, with the aid of the introduced conceptual and explanatory resources regarding distinct but related methodological things (among others, methodological perspectives and guiding principles) and their associated lexical distinctions,¹⁷ the basic structure of an interpretative approach as a whole can be refined into its “perspective” dimension and its “guiding-principle” dimension: the former gives an interpretative perspective that is intended to point to and capture a certain aspect/layer of the meaning of a text and can be “eligible” (if it does capture the addressed aspect/layer or “ineligible” (if otherwise), while the latter gives the guiding principle is

¹⁷ As indicated in footnote 7, for the addressed conceptual and explanatory resources, see Mou 2001. Also see Section 0.2.3 in Mou 2020 for a more recent presentation of them.

presupposed explicitly or implicitly by an interpretation maker to guide his/her to present a certain interpretative perspective by setting his/her purpose and focus, judging the status of the adopted interpretative perspective, evaluating the relation between this interpretative perspective and some other interpretative perspective(s) including judging the status of the other interpretative perspective(s); there is the distinction between adequate and inadequate methodological guiding principles (in distinct connections). In the following discussion, in Section 2.1, my “reply” to Li’s interpretative approach focuses on its “guiding-principle” dimension by examining several points in Li’s commentary that more or less reveal his guiding-principle ideas in his interpretative approach in evaluating my interpretative perspective (or the ‘perspective’ dimension of my interpretative approach) on Xun Zi’s approach to the addressed issue; in Section 2.2, I present and explain some of my general methodological ideas on philosophical interpretation of (ancient and modern) thinkers’ texts, which constitute the meta-methodological part of the “guiding-principle” dimension of my interpretative approach to Xun Zi’s approach.

2.1 DISTINCT INTERPRETATIVE APPROACHES TO XUN ZI’S TEXT

It has been a controversial issue of how to understand and interpret Xun Zi’s thoughts on the relation between human morality and its metaphysical foundation as delivered in the classical text *Xun-Zi*. Li’s commentary in the part on Xun Zi’s relevant resources is thoughtful and valuable, giving his reflectively interesting alternative interpretation. For the sake of argument, in view of the principle of charity in reading and understanding of others’ texts, and with consideration of the emphasis of my “reply” in this part as explained above, I assume that the “perspective” dimension of Li’s interpretative approach is “eligible” in the sense that Li’s interpretative perspective as explicitly presented in his interpretative approach does capture a certain aspect and layer of the meaning of the classical text *Xun-Zi*; my focus is rather on Li’s several treatments in his interpretative approach which more or less reveal his guiding-principle ideas in evaluating my interpretative perspective on Xun Zi’s approach. The addressed points in Li’s commentary in this connections are related respectively to the following three representative sources which can bring about distinct interpretative perspectives under different guiding-principle ideas: <1> whether the degree of the importance and relevancy of the idea that is represented by a certain (key) term in a text is determined by the use frequency of the term in the text; <2> some words, phrases or passages in a text can be interpreted in different ways being sensitive to how a relevant holistic understanding can be taken; <3> there are some unclear (key) passages in a text that are open distinct interpretations, which would be more or less influenced by distinct interpreters’ own substantial ideas (more or less adequate) in the “guiding-principle” dimensions of their distinct interpretative approaches as a whole, instead of being determined by the textual evidence *per se*.

Before moving on to my “reply” commentary on these addressed treatment in Li’s commentary in this connection, for the reader’s holistic understanding, let me first briefly highlight the relevant background of the debate some of which has yet to be addressed in Li’s brief introduction in his essay. The scholars in both sides of

the debate agree that Xun Zi thinks that goodness is the result of conscious activity (rather than being based on humans' original moral nature) and that one's conscious efforts can transform oneself by diligently applying oneself to the Confucian rites, those guiding rule-like principles created and embodied by the past moral sages; the sages can transform one's nature in the sense that the sages arouse one to make conscious efforts by the sages' examples and guiding principles.¹⁸ Now what is at issue is this: where do those moral guiding principles eventually come from? In other words, what is the basis for human morality? Given the Confucian rites and the guiding principles created and embodied by the past sages, the question remains: what were the past sages based on to create those moral principles? One can give a conventionalist interpretation of Xun Zi's account on the issue; however, then the further question is this: what were such conventions based on when they were created? Would there be a kind of *dao*-like fundamental principle, rather than a specific recipe, which is to maintain and regulate constructive, non-excessive or complementary development of all things in the inclusive natural world (of which humans are parts) in a natural, unifying and coordinate way? In a fundamentally different direction of interpretation, David Nivison explores this issue with his significant insight.¹⁹ After citing the following passage from the *Xun-Zi*:

天地者，生之始也；禮儀者，治之始也；君子者，禮儀之始也。
Heaven and earth are beginning of life, rites and norms are the beginning of order,
and the gentleman is the beginning of rites and norms.²⁰

Nivison makes these interpretative comments on it:

[Xun Zi's] vision is that the human world, centrally man's world of institutions, ideals, and norms, is the flowering of what is most fundamental in the entire world of nature, and is deserving of just that savoring, admiration, and reverence that the Daoist accords to his *Dao*, the order of nature and all its manifestations;... The most interesting, and to us the most puzzling, aspect of this vision is the way it leads one to see value and obligation as natural "facts",... The viewpoint is simply blind to the "facts-values" dichotomy....²¹

Nivison makes the same point in a subsequent writing:

...one can begin with the question how morally gets going: how one can reason one's way to there being some things that are really right or good, given where we seem to have to start, i.e., with some things that we just want, and then seeing that certain ways of acting are more or less useful for attaining what we want.... In a natural world, how can we (and how did Xunzi, if he did) justify our intuition that some things and qualities are really good, and some ways really right. And how do we... come to have believed this: come to have traditional rules and standards, and come to appropriate them subjectively through education? How is our moral life possible, and what is its basis, if

¹⁸ See the *Xun-Zi*, Chapter 23 "*Xing-Er*" (<<性惡>>).

¹⁹ Nivison 1991 and 1996.

²⁰ The *Xun-Zi*, Chapter 9 "*Wang-Zhi*" (<王制>) (translation by Watson 1963, 44).

²¹ Nivison 1991, 140-142.

it has one?...the rules are not going to be respected just because they are rules; they must have a basis, and that must be respected....the problem of explaining how the sage could ever have lift themselves (and the rest of us) off the ‘moral ground’What [the sages] did was in essence the only thing they could do, to meet the needs of the human situation given by the natural order of things, metaphorically by “heaven”....the explicit *Dao* of man has as its basis the implicit *Dao* of Heaven.²²

This is an insightful and significant line of interpreting Xun Zi on where to seek the due basis for human morality, though Nivison does not give further examination of the issue of exactly how the natural order of things constitutes the fundamental basis for human morality. What I intend to do in the part on Xun Zi’s relevant approach in the book is this: essentially in line with Nivison’s insight on the direction of interpreting Xun Zi on the issue of the due basis for human morality, I endeavor to further explain Xun Zi’s relevant resources from the truth-concern strategic point of view in three connections: <1> with the “due-way-things-are-capturing” truth-concern resources in Xun Zi’s texts, and starting from where Nivison ends, I further discuss how these truth-concern resources play an important or even vital role in Xun Zi’s exploration of the basis for human morality; <2> I re-examine some relevant parts of Xun Zi’s texts and give my interpretative explanations, which I hope can enhance our understanding of Xun Zi’s relevant points; <3> in an extensive context of examining the philosophical concern with truth in Chinese philosophy, I explain how Xun Zi’s truth-concern approach on this issue can significantly contribute to our understanding and treatment of the issue of human-morality foundation and how a Xun Zi-style naturalist non-relativist approach can thus engage with some other naturalist but relativist approach.

With the foregoing background knowledge, let me now move on to my “reply” commentary on Li’s three commentary points which are related respectively to three representative sources which can singly or jointly bring about distinct interpretative perspectives can result under different guiding-principle ideas.

First, a text interpreter’s guiding-principle attitude toward the issue of whether or how the degree of the importance and relevancy of the idea that is represented by a certain (key) term in a text is determined by the use frequency of the term in the text would bear on his/her reading and understanding of the meaning of the text and thus the scope and content of his/her own interpretative perspective and his/her evaluating the status of other interpretative perspectives. Li’s commentary on my talk about Xun Zi’s concept of *tian-ming* goes with this guiding-principle-involved judgment: “I do not believe that “*tian-ming*” is such an important concept in Xun Zi [in the text *Xun-Zi*] as Mou has made it appear to be”, as “[t]he compound term “*tian-ming*” appears only once in the entire *Xun-Zi*.... If *tian-ming* had been an important concept in the *Xun Zi*, one would expect it [the term that is used to express it] to occur more than once in the book” (Li 2021, 145; the paraphrasing words within bracket parentheses are mine). My view is this. Xun Zi’s conception of *tian*

²² Nivison 1996, 326-330.

天 (the inclusive Heaven as the natural world²³) naturally and normatively points to the natural world *with its own unifying fundamental (constant) way (tian-you-chang-dao 天有常道, 17.7)* or *its fundamental mandate-like principle (tian-ming 天命, 17.13)* ('the fundamental way of *tian*' for short in the following), *rather than a world in chaos*. In this sense and to this extent, when normatively using the term '*tian*' to talk about the natural world *of which humans are parts*, Xun Zi designates the natural world *with its fundamental way that underlies and unifies due ways all things of the natural world go (or are to go)*. In this holistic and normative context, when addressing the fundamental way of *tian* (the natural world), Xun Zi need not explicitly use such phrases as '*tian-dao*' and '*tian-ming*' but can just use the term '*tian*' in its normative way, as shown in many uses of '*tian*' in the text *Xun-Zi* (especially, in its chapter 17 "*Tian-Lun*", the term '*tian*' is used 55 time), even though the phrase '*tian-ming*' is used only once (in 17.13) and the term '*dao*' in the sense of '*tian-dao*' is use only several times. In this way, it is important to note two points here: <1> whether Xun Zi addresses the fundamental way of *tian* is not determined by how often (even whether) he explicitly uses such phrases as '*tian-dao*' and '*tian-ming*' but by his normative use of the term '*tian*' as explained above; <2> from the vantage of point of philosophical interpretation, whether Xun Zi's concept of *tian-ming* or *tian-dao* is important in the text *Xun-Zi* as a whole needs to be examined also in view of the deep level of the meaning of the *Xun-Zi*: the deep level of its meaning distinguishes itself from the lexical level of the text and includes the due implications of the lexical words in the whole context.

Second, it is important to note that some words, phrases or passages in a text, even though their lexical senses seem clear, can be interpreted in different ways, which is sensitive to how a relevant holistic understanding is taken and what specific purpose and focus in an interpretative project on the text is assumed. Let me illustrate the point by examining the meaning of Xun Zi's statement "明於天人之分" part of the ending statement of the first paragraph in Chapter "*Tian-Lun*" which I cite, translate and further interpret (Mou 2019, 166-168): I respectively give its translation and also its implied point under philosophical interpretation in the context. My translation of it is not cited in Li's commentary; it is this: "... one's really capturing how the Heaven distinguishes from the human affairs [while the human affairs are parts of the natural world]" (Mou 2019, 167). In this translation, it is not the case that "Mou is saying that the need to *distinguish (fen 分)* here is about the distinction between two kinds of human activities, namely activities that capture/follow Heaven's fundamental principle and activities that violate this principle" (Li 2021, 147; my italics); what Li cites above is my further interpretation of its implied point in the whole context. What is at issue is whether the point of human affairs capturing (in the sense of "being in accordance with") the fundamental way of *tian* is consistent with what Xun Zi states immediately after the cited first paragraph, whose central statement is this:

²³ As presented in a philosophical interpretation, the coverage and boundary of this natural world is not restricted to what Xun Zi as an ancient thinker was actually aware of but what the inclusive and dynamic natural world naturally covers.

“天有其時，地有其財，人有其治，夫是之謂能參。舍其所以參，而願其所參，則惑矣。”

Li cites Eric Hutton’s partial translation (the “天有其時，地有其財，人有其治，夫是之謂能參” part, with his own modification of the translation “夫是之謂能參”) of this passage (Li 2021, 147), whose complete translation by Hutton is this:

“Heaven has its proper seasons, Earth has its proper resources, and humankind has its proper order—this is called being able to form a triad [the note by this author: the last statement is paraphrased by Li into ‘When they each perform *their own respective roles*, they form a triad’ (my italics)]. To neglect that whereby we form a triad and wish instead for those things to which we stand as the third is a state of confusion.” (Hutton 2014, 176)

My translation of his whole passage is this:

“Heaven has its way of movement and development; Earth has its way of material resources; and humans have their way of governing. This is called what enable them being in accordance with each other. If one neglects and gives up such [fundamental] parallel “accordance” relation by virtue of which [whereby] human affairs can form a triad in accordance but wish only for parts of the triad that one would like to see, that would bring about the confusion.”

At this moment, I emphasize two points: <1> there is no inconsistency but complementarity between the first paragraph and this immediately following paragraph in Chapter “*Tian-Lun*” of the *Xun-Zi*, if we look at the Chinese originals of these two paragraphs, as shown in my translation and interpretation as given above; <2> as for Hutton’s translation of ‘願其所參’, it is unclear why “to wish...for those things to which we stand as the third” would become part of “confusion”; in my translation of it, it would become clear why it is so: “wish only for parts of the triad that one would like to see” would be problematic, because failing to recognize that there is a fundamental “in accordance” relation between humans and this natural world (Heaven) of which humans are parts would bring about the confusion. In this way, one guiding-principle-involved point in philosophical interpretation of a text is this: sensitive to distinct holistic understandings, specific purposes and focuses in carrying out an interpretative project on a text, some words, phrases or passages in the text can be interpreted in different ways (via distinct interpretative perspectives); consequently, an interpreter who takes a certain interpretative perspective on the text is expected to be sensitive to distinct holistic understandings, specific purposes and focuses involved in distinct interpretative projects on the text when evaluating another interpretative perspective on the text.

Third, it is also important to note that there are some unclear (key) passages in a text that are open distinct interpretations, which would be more or less influenced by distinct interpreters’ own substantial ideas (adequate or inadequate in some connections) in the “guiding-principle” dimensions of their distinct interpretative approaches, instead of being determined by the textual evidence *per se*. In the

current case, Li recognizes that the meaning of at least some textual passages (event some crucial passages he cited in his article) in the *Xun-Zi* “is not entirely clear” (Li 2021, 149); he himself makes a quite straightforward distinction between “direct” and indirect meanings of these passages and raises such questions as “Could one read more into it?” (*op.cit.*, 150). What is at issue here is what such further “indirect” meanings (or the due implications included in the deep level of the textual meaning) would be. Li’s reply to this question by giving his reading this way: “Could Xun Zi suggest that *tian* provides...the metaphysical basis for ritual as a moral instrument? I think that, even if we grant such an interpretation, we still cannot draw a conclusion that Xun Zi..holds [that] morality is about acting in accordance with the way that *tian* operates.” Why? Li sets out to support his reading in two lines: <1> according to Li, because “For Xun Zi, morality has to do with establishing and maintaining social order, and social order depends on sages, not on *tian*” (150); <2> Li cites another scholar’s conclusive claim: Xun Zi’s account “does not assume that there is an underlying order (*nomos*)... Thus, ritual does not celebrate or sanctify a preexisting, discovered order; ritual itself creates this order even as it sacralizes it. One celebrates not only the order itself but also the ongoing creating and sustaining of it in ritual activity” (see its citation reference info in Li 2021). I intend to address three things from the points of view of philosophical justification and philosophical interpretation. (1) These two supporting lines are not given as the textual evidence but from somewhere else. (2) As for Li’s first supporting line, whether the meaning of the *Xun-Zi* text includes the point that human morality together with social order should be eventually and fundamentally in accordance with the fundamental principle of the natural world (of which humans are parts), *tian-dao* (the *Dao* of Heaven) or *tian* as a whole with its natural order, or the point that human morality together with social order depends just on sages or sages’ conventions is exactly what is at issue between the addressed two interpretative perspectives; just citing this controversial conclusion in his side’s argument as its own premise would lead to “begging the question”. (3) As for Li’s second supporting line, it is an argument from citing a credible or “apt” expert (a variant of “resorting to the authority”); however, there seem three difficulties with the content of this short citation: <1> it is essentially just one claim without its own explanation of why it is so; <2> this claim includes parts that seem to be inconsistent with each other: on the one hand, the citation author says that “ritual [the ritual-performing agent] *does not celebrate* a preexisting, discovered order”; on the other hand, he says that “one [the ritual-performing agent] celebrates not only the order itself [that is, the agent *does celebrate* that order] but also the ongoing creating and sustaining of it in ritual activity”; <3> it seems that the “pre-existing, discovered” aspect/layer of the “order” (the “order” as the fundamental way/principle of the natural world in accordance of which all things in the inclusive natural word of which humans together with their ongoing creating activities are parts) and its “ongoing creating and sustaining” aspect/layer are rendered in opposing conflict rather than somehow complementary [say, the former and the latter (as the ongoing developing part and manifestation of the “order”) make their joint contributions to the identity of the “order”].

The point made in the preceding examination is this: for some unclear (key)

passages in a text that are open distinct interpretations, these distinct interpretation would be (more or less) influenced by their interpreters' own substantial ideas in the "guiding-principle" dimensions of their distinct interpretative approaches, instead of being determined by the textual evidence *per se*; what is expected for an interpreter in such situations is to make efforts to maintain "adequate" guiding-principle ideas and provide convincing explanations for a certain evaluation concerning the status of his/her interpretative perspective and its relation with other interpretative perspectives while avoiding less adequate or less convincing ones.

As indicated at the outset of this section, for the sake of argument, in view of the principle of charity in reading and understanding of others' texts, and with consideration of the emphasis of my "reply" in this section, I assume that the "perspective" dimension of Li's interpretative approach is "eligible" in the sense that Li's interpretative perspective as explicitly presented in his interpretative approach does capture a certain aspect and layer of the whole meaning of the classical text *Xun-Zi*; my foregoing engaging discussion focuses rather on some of Li's ideas from the "guiding-principle" dimension of his interpretative approach, which are either explicitly given or implicitly revealed in Li's commentary evaluation of my interpretative perspective on Xun Zi's approach.

2.2 A METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION OF TEXTS

Indeed, in the preceding section, when making my "reply" commentary on some of Li's ideas from the "guiding-principle" dimension of his interpretative approach as a whole on Xun Zi's view of the addressed issue, I hold certain ideas from the "guiding-principle" dimension of my interpretative approach as a whole on Xun Zi's view of the addressed issue; these ideas are based on my more general methodological considerations concerning the issue of how to adequately carry out philosophical interpretation. In this section, in a schematic way, I present and explain some of my general methodological ideas on philosophical interpretation of (ancient and modern) thinkers' texts. These ideas result from an extension of some basic points of the previously suggested meta-methodological framework (as highlighted in Section 1.5 of Mou 2019) to treating the issue of how to look at distinct interpretative approaches to ancient thinkers' texts in textual analysis and philosophy interpretation.

First, an ancient thinker's text like the *Xun-Zi* might be open to distinct interpretations both in its "horizontal" connection and in its "vertical" connection (or at these distinct levels of the textual meaning of the text) to be explained below. In its "horizontal" connection, a figure like Xun Zi, who had his comprehensive coverage of distinct subjects and various focuses on distinct aspects of one subject, might present his distinct (local) perspectives with distinct emphases in different stages of his life journey or in different volumes of the *Xun-Zi* text as a whole, each of which was given either in the form of perspective simplex (i.e., one single perspective) and/or in the form of perspective complex (a multiple-perspective complex or a guiding-principle-associated perspective complex).²⁴ In its "vertical"

²⁴ For the conceptual/explanatory resources related to this distinction, see Section 0.2.3 of Mou 2019.

connection, there are distinct layers of the *Xun-Zi* text, including both manifest layers delivered by literal senses (of the lexical words) of the linguistic expressions of the text and deep layers some of which might be not explicitly realized by the thinker him/herself, but which are genuinely implied by the manifest layers of the text.²⁵

Second, with the principle of charity, those textual meanings of a text articulated in the horizontal connection (can) form up a coherent context in which they are compatible or complementary, while those textual meanings implied at the deep vertical connection (can) also form up their coherent context in which they are compatible or complementary; both of them can form up a holistic coherent context as a whole in which they jointly contribute to the meaning of the text as a whole in a complementary way. These textual meanings constitute distinct aspects/layers of the whole meaning of the text, which constitutes the text object under textual analysis in philosophical interpretation.²⁶

Third, there is the need to distinguish the “perspective” dimension of an interpretive approach to the text and its “guiding-principle” dimension. <1> The “perspective” dimension of an interpretive approach to the text is intended to point to and capture a certain aspect/layer of the textual meaning (either in its horizontal connection or in its vertical connection); if it does capture an aspect really possessed by the textual meaning (supported by the textual evidence), the “perspective” dimension of the interpretive approach is rendered “eligible”; if otherwise it is rendered “ineligible”. <2> The “guiding-principle” dimension of an interpretive approach to the text is to regulate and guide the agent of interpretation to set his/her specific purpose and focus, appraise the status of his/her interpretive perspective, and evaluate the relationship between his/her own interpretive perspective and other interpretive perspectives (i.e., the “perspective” dimensions of other interpretive approaches to the text), adequate or inadequate; for example,

²⁵ Let me employ one imagined case, easily understood, for illustration of the point here. Assume that an ancient mathematician X worked out and wrote down a set of math axioms for a math system (X’s text); but X cannot actually realized all the (significant) theorems that can be legitimately inferred from the set of axioms (the text) during his/her lifetime because, say, some of them involve very long and complicated calculations that can be done only by an advanced computer, which was unavailable to X during his/her lifetime but is now available to modern mathematicians; now also assume that some of these theorems are inferred by a modern mathematician by means of a modern computer. Now the question is whether or not these theorems belong to X’s set of axioms (X’s text)? The reasonable answer is affirmative. Would they belong to X? The answer is “Yes” or “No”: if X is treated as a figure who speaks for the thoughts delivered (explicitly or implicitly) by the text (at distinct levels of the textual meaning), the answer is “Yes”; however, if what is asked is a purely historical question (whether X actually realized them during his/her life), the answer is “No”. The point here concerning philosophical interpretation of a text in this connection is this: what is primarily pursued is to understand and capture the thoughts of the text, rather than merely purely historical matters.

²⁶ A thinker him/herself as a historical figure might present inconsistent ideas at different stages of his/her life journey or even have different ideas in tension at the same time or might be not clear enough about some of his/her ideas, either because he/she had yet to think thoroughly about the issues under examination or was unable to clearly present his/her ideas due to the lack of conceptual and explanatory resources in need during his/her time. Such elements might contribute to some textual passages’ unclear, inconsistent or paradoxical appearances. The principle of charity demands a careful evaluation of them to maximize coherence of the textual meaning as a whole.

if its “guiding principle” dimension celebrates only its own “perspective” dimension (given that it is eligible) while indiscriminately dismissing other distinct (eligible) interpretative perspectives (or the distinct but eligible “perspective” dimensions of other interpretative approaches to the text), it would be inadequate.

Fourth, when saying that a text is open to distinct interpretations, it primarily means that it is open to distinct eligible interpretative perspectives (or the distinct “eligible” “perspective” dimensions of distinct interpretative approaches to the text), rather than also indiscriminately open to their associated distinct “guiding-principle” ideas, which might be adequate or inadequate. Generally speaking, the merit, status, and function of an interpretative perspective (i.e., the “perspective” dimension) *per se* of an interpretative approach to the text can be evaluated independently of its “guiding-principle” dimension that the agent of interpretation might presuppose in his/her actual adoption of that interpretative perspective. One’s reflective practice *per se* of taking a certain eligible interpretative perspective as a working perspective is philosophically positive and innocent in the following senses, whether or not it is associated with or guided by some adequate or inadequate guiding principle(s) in some connections in one’s application of that interpretative perspective. On the one hand, it is philosophically positive insofar as that perspective really points to or captures a certain aspect/layer of the text meaning as a whole and is thus eligible; on the other hand, it is philosophically innocent insofar as one’s reflective practice *per se* of taking that interpretative perspective amounts neither to one’s losing sight of other genuine aspects/layers of the textual meaning nor to one’s rejecting other eligible interpretative perspectives in one’s background thinking, nor to one’s presupposing an inadequate guiding principle that would render ineligible other eligible interpretative perspectives (if any). In this way, even if the “guiding-principle” dimension of one’s interpretative approach to the text is inadequate in his/her taking a certain eligible interpretative perspective, the eligibility of the interpretative perspective still needs to be recognized, and his/her reflective practice *per se* of taking that interpretative perspective still has its due value in philosophical inquiry.

Fifth, however, it is indeed important for the agent of an interpretative approach to a text to have an adequate guiding principle, which the agent is expected to hold or presuppose in evaluating the status of his/her interpretative perspective and its relationship with other (eligible) interpretative perspectives. For it does matter whether one’s taking a certain interpretative perspective is regulated by an adequate or inadequate guiding principle, especially for the sake of a complete understanding of the textual meaning both in its horizontal connection and its vertical connection (as explained above). When one’s application of an eligible interpretative perspective as one’s current working perspective on a text is guided by some adequate guiding principle, it would contribute to a comprehensive outlook for the sake of a complete account of the textual meaning of the text under examination.

Sixth, in the “concluding” chapter of my recent monograph book (Mou 2020), I have suggested and explained a set of “adequacy” conditions for maintaining adequate methodological guiding principles concerning how to adequately look at distinct approaches in philosophy; whether and how this set of “adequacy” conditions can be appropriately applied in or extended to treating the current issue

of adequately looking at distinct interpretative approaches on a text in philosophical interpretation would be a good testing case for its explanatory potency.

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