

# Postscript: Reply to McLeod

Lajos Brons (mail@lajosbrons.net)  
 Department of Philosophy, Nihon University, and  
 Lakeland University, Japan Campus, Tokyo, Japan

This is the pre-publication version of my reply to McLeod's reply (2015a) to my (2015) paper commenting on his (2011) interpretation of Wang Chong 王充 as an alethic pluralist. The whole discussion (consisting of McLeod's original paper, Bo Mou's and my responses, McLeod's reply to those responses, as well as two new replies to the latter by Bo Mou and me) is published in:

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The text below is – as far as I know – identical to the published version. Numbers (664~370) are page numbers in the printed version.

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“Philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday” wrote Wittgenstein (1953: §38). In philosophical debates about truth it is certainly the case that if we pay insufficient attention to what exactly we are discussing we create more philosophical problems than we solve. Hoping to avoid that – or to not exacerbate existing confusions at least – there are a few terminological clarifications I want to make before (re-)turning to McLeod's interpretation of Wang Chong.

Concepts, terms, properties, definitions, and theories of truth need to be carefully distinguished, even if they are all closely related. The/a *concept* of TRUTH is a psychological entity. It is our understanding of the notion that we refer to with the term “truth” (or related expressions). Having the concept of TRUTH is being able to understand the difference between what is the case and what isn't and consequently, one cannot have the concept of truth without having a number of adjacent concepts such as OBJECTIVITY, JUSTIFICATION, FALSEHOOD, and MISTAKE. As I argued elsewhere (see Brons 2016), virtually every human being over the age of 2 has the/a concept of truth.

Having the/a concept of TRUTH does not require having a word or term to express that concept, however. *Truth terms* are the linguistic expressions – words or phrases – that are used in some language (and some context) to express TRUTH. In English, this includes expressions such as “is a fact that” and “is the case that”. In Classical Chinese 然 *ran* often functions as a truth term, but – as in English – there are other options as well. Sometimes it is useful to distinguish truth terms from truth predicates. A *truth predicate* is a truth term as grammatical and/or logical predicate.

A *truth property* is a property a truthbearer (proposition, statement, belief, etc.) must have to be true – that is, a property that makes it true, or by virtue of which it is true. Philosophers disagree about the number and nature of such truth properties. According to correspondentists, something like “correspondence with a fact” is the property that makes a truthbearer true, for example, and pluralists claim that there are multiple truth properties, while deflationists and primitivists maintain that there are none. Confusingly, the term “truth

property” can also refer to the *thin* property of being true itself. If one assumes that there are (non-thin) truthmaking properties, then a truthbearer has the thin property of being true (*i.e.* is true) if and only if it has the truthmaking property or properties.

A *theory of truth* is a theory about the number and nature of truth properties, but often also includes or entails a *definition of truth*. The latter notion

is ambiguous, however, and that ambiguity is a further source of confusion. Usually, a definition of truth is assumed to be a *substantive* definition – that is, a specification of what all truths necessarily share and all falsehoods lack, and thus of the truth (-making) property or properties. Hence, a substantive definition of truth is a theory of truth. There are other kinds of definitions, however. A *lexical* definition of truth describes how truth terms are used by the speakers of some language, and thus captures what is sometimes called a “pre-theoretical understanding” of truth. Bo Mou’s (ATNT) is an example of a lexical definition of truth.<sup>1</sup> And a *functional* definition of truth specifies the semantic function of a truth term or predicate.<sup>2</sup> Tarski’s T-schema – “*p*” is true if and only if *p*, or something relevantly similar – is the paradigmatic example of a functional definition of truth. It captures the *disquotational* character of the thin truth property, and is accepted by virtually all participants in philosophical debates about truth. It implies that truth terms are disquotational, and that a term that is not disquotational is not a truth term (Brons 2016).

As mentioned above, having the concept of TRUTH implies having a number of adjacent concepts including JUSTIFICATION, but this does not imply that those adjacent concepts are really the same concept, as any serious attempt to come up with lexical definitions will immediately reveal. Nevertheless, TRUTH and JUSTIFICATION are easy to confuse and this is a further source of confusion, and it cannot be emphasized enough that a theory of justification is *not* a theory of truth. A theory about when one is justified to believe that something is true is not a theory of truth, but a theory of justification – and thus, epistemology. Similarly, a theory about the reliability of reports – that is, when to take those for truth – is an epistemological theory and not a theory of truth. There is a lot of epistemology in classical Chinese thought, but I haven’t seen a theory of truth yet, and I doubt there is one.<sup>3</sup>

A further (albeit not wholly unrelated) complication is that theories of truth are not necessarily explicitly endorsed, but may also be implicitly assumed. Much (recent) Western philosophy is implicitly correspondentist, for

- 1 (ATNT) states that “The nature of truth (or the truth bearer) consists in (the truth bearer’s) capturing the (due) way things are.” (Mou 2015: 151). On (ATNT), see also below.
- 2 Deflationists and primitivists sometimes claim that truth cannot be defined, but this only means that there can be no *substantive* definition of truth (because there are no non-thin truth properties). It does not imply that there are no lexical and functional definitions.
- 3 On the point made in this paragraph, and more on how to distinguish theories of truth from theories of justification, see Brons 2016.

example. There do not seem to be explicit theories of truth in classical Chinese philosophy, but that does not necessarily imply that there are no implicit theories either. Some thinker would be an implicit substantivist (*i.e.* a correspondentist, coherentist, pluralist, *etc.*) if she is implicitly committed to the existence of some truth property or properties (as roughly defined above) – that is, if she is committed to there being something by virtue of which some “things” are true while others are not. However, lacking such a commitment is not the same as being committed to the lack of a truth (-making) property, and it is the latter that (partially) defines primitivism and deflationism, and for that reason, implicit primitivism or implicit deflationism is unlikely (and probably even incoherent).<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, if a relevant body of thought lacks any ontological commitment to truth (-making) properties and lacks any suggestion of (the possibility of) a substantive definition of truth, then in that body of thought TRUTH is a *de facto* primitive, and that body of thought could, therefore, be considered “*de facto* primitivist”. Such *de facto* primitivism is probably rather widespread, but it should not be confused with implicit primitivism,<sup>5</sup> and neither should it be mistaken for a theory of truth – a *de facto* primitivist has no (explicit or implicit) theory of truth.

These clarifications should put us in a better position to assess Wang Chong’s views related to truth and McLeod’s interpretation thereof, but let’s start with my own suggestion of quasi-pluralism. Essentially, quasi-pluralism is (explicit) primitivism about truth combined with pluralism about justification. However, considering that there is no inherent link between these two -isms, combining them under a single heading is unwarranted at best and probably even misleading. Furthermore, pluralism about justification does not entail much more than the rather pedestrian idea that the justification of normative claims is (subtly) different from the justification of factual claims. Hence, quasi-pluralism was not a very good idea. Moreover, it cannot possibly be attributed to Wang Chong because there is insufficient textual evidence to attribute any theory of justification to him, and because Wang Chong was not a primitivist. (He may have been a *de facto* primitivist, but that is insufficient here.)

In response to my first objection to his pluralist reading of Wang Chong, McLeod rejects my characterization of alethic pluralism summarized in (TP) as  $\forall p[T(p) \leftrightarrow \exists A[A(p) \wedge \Phi(A)]]$ , but fails to offer an alternative characterization (or at least one that would allow falsification of its attribution). He is right, however, that there is a problem with (TP), but it isn’t the problem he perceives. The problem is that two of the predicates in (TP) – namely T and A – explicitly refer to domains, while pluralism does not necessarily have to involve domain-relativity (even if most pluralisms do). This mistake is easily fixed by changing the descriptions of these two predicate symbols: T is a general truth predicate and A is a non-

4 An implicit primitivist/deflationist would be implicitly committed to the non-existence of truth properties, and I doubt that the notion of an implicit commitment to the non-existence of something makes sense. If *such* an implicit commitment is impossible indeed, then primitivism and deflationism cannot be implicit.

5 See previous footnote.

general truth predicate (and  $\Phi$  is the method or criterion of identification of A as a truth predicate).

All of the pluralisms mentioned by McLeod in his reply (including those in other texts he mentions) fit (TP) understood as such, and it is unlikely that a theory of truth that doesn't can be meaningfully called "pluralist". Indeed, McLeod's theory also fits (TP) perfectly, even if he denies that himself. McLeod thinks that his theory doesn't fit (TP) because *shi* 是 and *ran* 然 "are the same way of fitting *shi* 實" (2015a: 172), but that is confusing A with  $\Phi$  in (TP). "The way of fitting" is the method of identification of certain predicates as truth predicates, but that way of identification is not identical to those predicates itself. Although McLeod's reading of Wang Chong is somewhat obscured by related confusions of thin properties, truthmaking properties, predicates, and concepts of truth, it is clear enough that he claims that *shi* 實 is general truth T, that *shi* 是 and *ran* 然 are two different cases of A, and that the criterion  $\Phi$  for identifying the latter as truth predicates is having "the properties we do and should seek when appraising sentences" (2015b: 162).

McLeod isn't worried about my first objection (symmetry concerns about *shi/xu* 實虛), and I now think this isn't a serious objection indeed. If pluralism isn't necessarily domain-relative, then my fourth objection (about the fuzzy domain boundaries in Wang Chong) shouldn't be a major concern either. That leaves my second and third objections.

Unfortunately, McLeod misses the point of my second objection. That objection is that his pluralist reading depends on a particular translation of Wang Chong. If *shi* 實 is translated as "objective" rather than as "true" (and alternative translations of the other key terms are adopted as well), then the case for pluralism evaporates. McLeod responds to this objection by charging that I didn't offer a definition of "objective", but neither does he offer a definition of "truth" (*i.e.* of his preferred translation). Even more peculiar is his suggestion that OBJECTIVITY may be the same as TRUTH. More important, however, is that the point of my objection is not that the translation as "objective" would be

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better than the translation as "true" (although it very well may be)<sup>6</sup> – rather, the point is that McLeod's interpretation depends on the correctness of one particular translation, and that he offers no argument why that translation should be chosen over alternatives.

My third objection was that there is nothing in Wang Chong's writings that suggests that he was committed to the existence of (non-thin) truth properties or to the possibility of substantive definitions of truth. Because pluralism is partially defined by such commitments, Wang Chong cannot be charitably interpreted as a pluralist. Rather than directly responding to this objection, McLeod makes two evasive moves. First he considerably lowers the bar. He is merely offering "one possible interpretation" of Wang Chong and does not claim that his interpretation is "the only possible one consistent with the text" (175). What justifies his interpretation is that it is "more interesting or illuminating" (*id.*). I'll respond to this move below.<sup>7</sup>

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6 One possible reason to prefer my "alternative" translation is that neither *shi* 實 nor *shi* 是 appears to be disquotational, which would imply that they are not truth terms at all, and thus that translating them as such is misleading.

7 But I can't resist remarking here that this methodological evasion maneuver reminds me a bit too

McLeod's second evasive move is a rather dubious one. He justifies his attribution of a substantive theory of truth to Wang Chong by suggesting that even if there is no textual justification to attribute a substantive theory to some thinker, we are justified to make that attribution anyway, because otherwise we would be attributing primitivism. Apparently, that substantivism is more or less the default in Western philosophy is sufficient ground for McLeod to assume that – lacking contrary evidence – classical Chinese thinkers were substantivists as well. I reject this suggestion, but I also reject the idea that the alternative to attributing substantivism is attributing primitivism. It isn't, for reasons mentioned above – rather, the alternative is attributing *de facto* primitivism, and it may indeed be the case that very many philosophers (especially outside the Western tradition) and the vast majority of non-philosophers were and are *de facto* primitivists.

McLeod claims that his reading of Wang Chong is just one possible interpretation, and that – in the first place – interpretations should be interesting or illuminating. So, is his interpretation a *possible* interpretation of Wang Chong indeed? And is it interesting or illuminating? The answer to the first question depends on how liberal one wishes to be about what is considered possible. McLeod's reading is probably consistent with the textual evidence, but that's

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mostly because that textual evidence is silent on much of the issue, and string theory (in physics) is consistent with Wang Chong's writings in the same sense. It is debatable whether consistency with available textual evidence in this thin sense is sufficient for an interpretation to be considered "possible", but I'm inclined to say that it isn't. Textual evidence must support the interpretation, and McLeod's reading fails on that account. The textual evidence does not support a substantivist reading of McLeod. In fact, there is nothing suggesting that Wang Chong held any *theory* of truth at all, either explicitly or implicitly.<sup>8</sup>

To be interesting or illuminating a theory needs to be minimally plausible at least, but McLeod's theory fails on this account as well. Recall that the criterion  $\Phi$  that identifies some predicate as a truth predicate is having "the properties we do and should seek when appraising sentences" (2015b: 162). However, that certainly cannot be a sufficient condition, and it probably isn't even a necessary condition. Being grammatically correct, being understandable, being aesthetically pleasing, being arousing, and a host of other properties are all "properties we do and should seek when appraising sentences" in at least some contexts, and none of those are plausible identifiers of a truth predicate. And it isn't too hard to imagine cases and circumstances in which being true is a property that we should *not* seek. Hence, the centerpiece of McLeod's pluralism is seriously (and obviously) flawed.

McLeod reads a one-concept-multiple-properties pluralism into Wang Chong's writings, but it is unlikely that Wang Chong had any beliefs with regards to truth properties at all. It is commonly assumed that there is only one concept of TRUTH, so that aspect of McLeod's pluralism received little attention, but what if that assumption is wrong? If *shi* 是 and *ran* 然

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much of the "flowery falsehoods" (華虛) that "astound the hearers and move their minds" (驚耳動心), which Wang Chong argued against (*Duizuo* 對作 §2).

8 Consequently, I also reject my own previous suggestion (in Brons 2015) that Wang Chong had an implicit theory of truth.

are both truth terms indeed,<sup>9</sup> they could be associated with different concepts rather than different properties.

There is an ambiguity about truth that is made explicit in Mou's (ATNT) by means of his bracketing of the word "due", and one may wonder whether there really are two concepts of TRUTH – one with that word and one without it. If we say that it is true that Mt. Fuji is 3776m high, then what we mean is that the world is such that Mt. Fuji has that height indeed. But if we say that it is true that torturing children is wrong, I'm not so sure that what we mean is that the world is such that torturing children is wrong indeed. Rather, it seems to me that such normative truths are irreducibly normative (and I take Mou's bracketed "due" to capture that normativity). However, if normative truths are

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inherently normative and factual truths are not – or not in the same sense, at least – then we have two concepts of TRUTH.

Wang Chong cannot be charitably interpreted as an alethic pluralist. His silence on (non-thin) properties and definitions of truth implies that he was a *de facto* primitivist, but *if* he had multiple truth terms and one of those stands for an inherently normative concept of truth, while another does not, then he had two concepts of TRUTH indeed.

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9 But see footnote 6.