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Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer 2002), pp. 803-824

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/341235>

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Did Philosophers Have to Become Fixated on Truth?

François Jullien

Translated by Janet Lloyd

1. Philosophy undoubtedly was fixated on truth. In the first place it was formally tied to it and explicitly attached the highest value to it. But also, once its insistence was recognized, it stayed with truth and never freed itself from it. From then on it never ceased to set its sights on truth, never shifted. It was in the “plain of truth,” where principles and forms lurk, unchanging, that philosophy continued to “graze.”¹ There, it proceeded tirelessly to build upon foundations of theory towering constructions from which the truth could be “contemplated”; and there it delved, following the subterranean paths of reflection in search of hidden deposits. Higher and higher it soared to discover the truth, and deeper and deeper it dug for it, never abandoning that objective, never clearing a different path for thought to follow.

But China, it seems, did open up an alternative path, and reminds us of another possibility. Or rather, as seen from China, it is Western philosophy that, moving away from the omnipresent, haloed figure of the legendary sage at the dawn of the great civilizations, appears to branch off from the way of wisdom, bent solely on pursuing the truth. For although Chinese thought encountered the possibility of philosophy as debate developed among different schools it never became altogether committed to it, never fastened exclusively upon the pursuit of truth, never made this a total—global—concept, never turned it into the Truth. Chinese thought was always on the move, always variable. It never came to a complete halt in order to build or to delve. Its aim was not so much to convey knowledge as to promote realization, not so much to discover or prove as to reveal coherences (*li* in Chinese). Nietzsche asked, Why have we wanted truth rather

1. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), p. 479 (248b).

“Did Philosophers Have to Become Fixated on Truth?” is a translation of chapter 8 of *Une Sage est sans idée* by François Jullien © Editions du Seuil. Published with permission.

than nontruth (or uncertainty, or ignorance)? His question was intended to be radical, supremely so, but still it was conceived from within the European tradition, even if it turned this upside down. It made so bold as to question the value of truth, but did so without venturing outside its field of reference, remaining focused upon it and never doubting its monopoly on thought. From the point of view of wisdom, the question would seem to be, How did thought come to be fixated on truth—and should it have done so? What if it was not a matter of wisdom failing to accede to philosophy, but rather of philosophy, in Greece, fastening upon truth and thereby missing out on wisdom, like an excrescence that, once it appeared, never stopped growing? There would be a history and even progress in thought, but purely as an aberration of it.

If that is so, the parting of the ways is not really between China on the one hand and Greece on the other. It is not limited to those particular cases, nor is it a matter of history—for neither culture knew anything about the other—but rather of theory. It is a split that recurs whenever thought, fastening upon truth, turns into philosophy. And once one goes back to that crossroads the quest for truth, far from seeming a necessary outcome for the human mind, as has been claimed and generally believed, instead once more becomes a strange phenomenon. By virtue of its obstinacy, from its own point of view, or of its obsessiveness, as seen from outside, it once more seems an astonishing or even aberrant adventure—albeit undeniably a fascinating one. And the fact that, as a result of being exported worldwide, it has by now become universalized, or rather standardized, in no way alters its quite exceptional genealogical origin.

2. In order to understand how the demand for truth arose in the West

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or, rather, the need for what has now culturally developed into the Truth, historians of thought have repeatedly returned to the phase of Western history that saw the emergence of reason (see in particular the works of Vernant, Lloyd, Détienné, and Pucci); in opposition to the ambiguity of mythical accounts, and to escape from it, logos was set up as the rigorous discourse of truth. Initially this happened in Greece, between the archaic and the classical periods, but it was a process that has been endlessly repeated and is never-ending, for behind the clarity of logos the shadows of myth constantly gather; and despite the critique of reason, their hold does not slacken. In fact reason, which initially distanced itself from myth, later leads back to it. So in different forms, in particular that of the classic opposition between reason and faith, the debate has continued, its tension nurturing the intellectual evolution of Europe.

Were it not possible to take a different view, the history of the advent of reason would seem altogether necessary. In Greece as elsewhere, the world of myths is said to be fundamentally ambivalent, a world of twofold powers that are at once true and false. At the time of the Masters of Truth, as described by Détienné, a time of mages, bards, and diviners, the power of divination was exercised with a measure of deception. The king who pronounced justice was also an enigmatic god. Apollo was called the Shining One but sometimes also the Dark One. He was sometimes said to be straight but was also recognized to be crooked. In the world of *muthos*, the one was constantly confused with the other, everything was duplicated by its contrary or overlapped the latter. But, as thought developed, this ambivalence was increasingly (even as early as Hesiod) felt to be an ambiguity, an ambiguity that, as time passed, seemed less and less tolerable. Philosophy was born from a desire to clarify this entanglement of the true and the false. Making its first appearance in Parmenides, then theorized by Aristotle and based upon a logic of identity, the principle of contradiction cut through the ambiguity according to which a being could be at once one thing and also its contrary. From being complementary, or potentially complementary, contraries became contradictory and thought became exclusive—a thing was either true or false (either being or nonbeing). The shifting world of mythical powers, in which even the surest of attributes were liable to be reversed, was succeeded by a stable, clear-cut world that was dichotomous or even antinomic. It was a world in which European reason prospered.

Of course this did not happen without exceptions and reservations, as is shown by the example of Heraclitus. He maintained that “all things [even opposites] are one” and was to remain marginalized in the history of philosophy. For instead of separating contraries from each other, he showed that there could not be one without the other: no beauty without ugliness,

no justice without injustice, and so on. Of Hesiod, the poet of cosmogonies, he said “he . . . continually failed to recognize <even> day and night <for what they are>! For they are one.”² Even the idea of coordination was excessive: “God is day night, winter summer, war peace, satiation hunger.” Even so, Heraclitus was still a philosopher (but a philosopher of paradox), for there was one exception to this complementarity of contraries: what is true is not the same as what is false; all is one, but true discourse is not the same as its contradictory (see the work of Marcel Conche). For that is the condition that renders discourse possible. Even though he accepts that no being ever remains the same and that everything dissolves in the process of becoming, Heraclitus nevertheless maintains the principle that discourse, inasmuch as it is *logos*, is for always. By separating discourse from the all that is the world, he maintains the exclusive status of truth.

Schematic though they are, the above remarks should suffice to establish a contrast with China. In fact, China even validates the schematic nature of this genealogy by illuminating it in a back-to-front fashion. For not only is there no epic in China, there are no mythical accounts at the origins of its civilization, for such accounts as there are do not form a corpus, and all that remain are a few scattered references to them. The Chinese world contains virtually no traces of chaos or cosmogonies. So, given that it never was constituted on a mythical basis, Chinese thought never needed to construct itself philosophically (in the mode of *logos*). Given that it never drew (dramatic) attention to any ambiguity, it had no need of truth to dissipate any contradictions. Furthermore, as soon as one steps aside from a perspective that focuses upon the identity of the subject, such as was developed in the West, and instead adopts that of a continuous process, as the Chinese do, the unity and complementarity of contraries, far from being problematic, become notions that constitute the very principle upon which the onward march of things is based. The fact that the one contains the other, that the one is the other, is what makes the whole process possible. There must always be two, opposed and complementary, poles, *yin* and *yang*. We are by now familiar with the formulae that express this process founded upon the interdependence of contraries, the coherence of which China was constantly elucidating: not only does the one engender the other (“what is” engenders “what is not,” and *vice versa*), but, as the *Laozi* tells us, the one already is the other.³ Or, “if *yin*, then *yang*,” “both *yin* and *yang*”: that is the

2. Heraclitus, *Fragments*, trans. T. M. Robinson (Toronto, 1987), frag. 57, p. 38.

3. *Laozi*, para. 2: “Everyone recognizes the beautiful inasmuch as it is beautiful,” so (already), “it is ugly”; “everyone recognizes the good inasmuch as it is good,” so (already) “it is not-good.” See *Lao-Tzu’s ‘Te-Tao Ching’*, trans. Robert G. Hendricks (New York, 1989).

way, or *dao*, we are told in the *Book of Changes*.⁴ Here, again, the same conjunction expresses both the opposition between the one and the other (*yin*, “but at the same time” *yang*) and also the transition from the one to the other (the same formula can mean the *yin* “ending up” as the *yang*). Because Chinese thought regards contraries as intrinsically, that is to say functionally, complementary, it does not need to resort to the decision of the truth. It has no need to dissipate “mythical” contradiction any more than to exclude “logical” contradiction.

This is what restores a logical basis—albeit a different kind of logic, a logic without logos—to wisdom as opposed to philosophy (a basis that wisdom in the West always lacked and, as a result, became no more than a weak kind of philosophy). Philosophy thinks in terms of exclusion (true/false, being/nonbeing) and then proceeds to its major task of setting up a dialectic between those opposite terms (hence the history of philosophy). Wisdom, in contrast, thinks along the lines of equal recognition (accepting both the one and the other on an equal footing; not either one or the other, but both at once). There can be no history of wisdom, for wisdom involves no progress, but progress does have to be made in order to reach that stage of wisdom (and it was through just such a process of apprenticeship that Chinese thought always developed; see the first pronouncement in Confucius’s *Annals*). Wisdom has no history, but every sage certainly does; a sage (or, rather, whoever has become a sage) is one who has passed beyond contradictions, one who no longer excludes anything. In its weakest and most banal form this is a concept of which even we have an inkling. For according to the wisdom shared across the world the sage is he who does not choose either the one or the other, but appreciates the one within the other (not because such a person proceeds by reducing everything to an average level but because he knows that overall there can be no one without the other, that both operate together and complement each other). By reflecting on Chinese thought, we can restore theoretical rigor to this concept.

3. This genealogy may also be read backwards. Rational discourse may separate itself from mythical accounts, but it nevertheless carries on from where they left off. Even as he distances himself from the Master of Truth, the philosopher remains his heir (as Louis Gernet already noted). Seen from inside the tradition, what was most striking was the break between, on the one hand, the truth that was proclaimed and inspired and that belonged to the masters of archaic Greece and, on the other, the truth that was deduced, proven, and reasoned—the truth that became logical—which was to char-

4. *I Ching*, “Great Commentary,” A, 5. See *The I Ching: The Book of Changes*, trans. James Legge (1899; New York, 1969).

acterize philosophical discourse. But one function was common to both periods: to speak the truth. The nature of the truth changed, but it continued to be told.

Right at the beginning of Hesiod's poem, in the archaic period, the muses lay claim to the privilege of "speak[ing] what is true."⁵ It is they who will reveal the origin of the world and the generations of the gods. Similarly, at the beginning of Parmenides' poem, the goddess "speaks" to the initiate who has reached the end of his journey. She will show him the ways of truth and opinion and will tell him about being and nonbeing. I know that Greek scholars today believe that this staging of the speech of truth was even then a reinterpretation by Parmenides and that he was not simply repeating Hesiod. All the same, the discourse of mythology passed on the function of revelation to philosophy, which then retained it or at least kept the same tone. But, above all, from then on it was accepted without question that there were things (the truth) that should be told—not whether or not it was possible to tell them, which was a matter of debate among philosophers, but, more radically, that it was useful to tell them or, more simply, that there was something to be told.

One day Confucius told his disciples, "I should like not to speak at all." And as they began to worry that, in that case, they would no longer have anything to record, Confucius added, "Does heaven speak? The seasons follow their course and all that exists prospers: why would heaven ever need to speak?"⁶ In short, he said, the logic of regulation suffices, as does the regulated course of the seasons from which life never ceases to be engendered. There is no need for a supplement of revelation—neither from heaven, nor from the sage; no lesson or message is necessary. For speaking interrupts, speaking obstructs ("that" which never ceases to come to be). Whereas speech maintains a relation of transcendence vis-à-vis the world upon which it pronounces (by speaking about it and taking it as its object), silence enables immanence to be seen, allows it through. By keeping silent, the sage makes what is evident emanate. It is by keeping silent that one allows things "to be realized" (A, VII, 2). That is why Confucius now aspires to silence. It is not that he mistrusts speech or reckons reality to be ineffable; it is simply that speech is redundant, it adds nothing—or rather it adds where there is nothing to be added—so it would be better to do without it. In fact, that is why, throughout the *Analects*, what he says never really amounts to discourse but rates merely as a sequence of indications or re-

5. Hesiod, *The Theogony*, in *The Works of Hesiod, Callimachus, and Theognis*, trans. J. Banks (London, 1901), p. 3.

6. Confucius, *Analects*, XVI, 19; hereafter abbreviated A. See Confucius, *Confucian Analects*, in *The Chinese Classics*, trans. and ed. Legge, 7 vols. (Hong Kong, 1861), 1:1–219.

marks of a marginal nature—remarks that are not really statements (so that whoever reads them expecting statements invariably finds them disappointing). Confucius is content simply to point things out as he goes along, to attract the attention of whoever is there.

Once again, what we have always known about wisdom is spelled out and justified; whereas philosophy speaks (to tell the truth), needs to speak—and there are no philosophers without words—a sage does not speak, or speaks hardly at all, or as little as possible. He avoids speaking. He does not plunge into an obstinate silence that would be the reverse of speech and hence its equivalent; his silence is not ascetic (to enable him to concentrate better); nor is it mystical (to enable him to communicate better). His silence is not religious; he is not meditating. Nor is it a deprivation (which sets him apart); nor does it inspire him. If he keeps quiet it is because there is nothing to say (not because he has nothing to say); whatever there is requires no words. His reserve is a no comment. On the other hand, this, to our astonishment, allows us to discover for ourselves what philosophy, for its part, has never ceased to drum into us, namely, that there might be something to be said about things.

4. The contrast between wisdom and philosophy becomes even more striking thanks to the fact that, in China, we find none of the rifts and interactions that, in Greece, underpinned the concept of truth and helped to impose it—none of the separate levels that antedated the era of concepts and from which the notion emerged, none of the conceptual combinations upon which it was founded and that gave it substance. For we must move on from considering these cultural “areas” from a spatial point of view (China/Greece seen as separate surfaces) and dig deeper through the outer husk of their thought; we must move on from geography, or what Deleuze called geophilosophy, to geology—from a study of the constitution of the “territory” to a study of the composition of the land. The question then becomes, How (in the geological sense, that is, through what kind of structure and what kind of evolution) did Greek thought come to constitute a land—or “plain”—of truth? And why did Chinese thought not do so, despite the fact that it too evolved?

In particular, the conflict between opinion and truth (*doxa* versus *aletheia*), which is so fundamental to Greek thought, never developed in China. Here, we do not find on the one hand the kind of knowledge of that which is changeable, ambiguous, and contingent and, on the other, the understanding of that which is unchanging, that which “is” absolutely. In Greece, as we know, thought never became divided along that rift. Parmenides’ goddess immediately distinguishes between the two separate paths. On the one hand, rhetoric and sophistry appropriate the ambiguity inherited from an-

cient *muthos* and, transferring this to the shifting world of politics, in the intermediate zone of being and nonbeing, turn it into an effective instrument for making speech persuasive and getting it to triumph in the city. On the other hand, philosophy, armed with the principle of contradiction, ostensibly cuts itself off from that ambiguity, but then, so as to restore contact with the world, it engineers a subsidiary place to accommodate the unstable knowledge of that which is inexact, constituted by “opinion.” Wisdom, in contrast, neither merges with opinion nor opposes it. It neither cuts itself off from the world nor owes it allegiance. For it makes no separation between that which is stable and that which is unstable, or between the world and Truth. Given that it has no dreams of any stability apart from that of regulation (that of the way or the *dao*), it is not even conscious of the instability of things, or at any rate it is unaffected by their shifting nature. Thus, while the sage is not impervious to opportunity or the right moment, neither is he held in thrall by it (as by a *kairos* that it is imperative to exploit). His thought embraces both what is possible (which is, according to Confucius, also what is legitimate) and the right moment. When he “can” take on a responsibility (because it suits him), he does so, and when he “can” withdraw from it (equally because it suits him, given that the world is too disturbed), he does so.⁷ His responses are neither purely circumstantial (opportunistic), as in sophistry, nor do they rest upon ideal principles that need to be embodied, as laid down by philosophy. In fact, it is precisely from this nonseparation that he derives his wisdom.

As is well known, philosophy turned to that which is stable and unchangeable in its quest for truth; that which is true only became absolute truth when it became linked with being (in other words, philosophy only emerged by becoming ontological). It is even possible to identify the point at which it did so. In lines 3–4 of the second fragment of Parmenides, philosophy emerges from its religious context and declares itself to be the understanding of being qua being; and the path according to which “[it] is, and that [it] cannot not be” is the path that “attends upon truth.”⁸ Now, China confirms that link between being and truth by illuminating it *a contrario*. Because it did not conceive of the existential sense of being (the verb *to be*, in that sense, does not even exist in classical Chinese), it had no concept of truth. Greece did have a concept of becoming, but this was always overshadowed by that of being. China, in contrast, conceived solely of becoming. However, the Chinese becoming is not quite the same as the Greek

7. Mencius, II A 2; trans. Legge, under the title *The Works of Mencius*, in *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 2; hereafter abbreviated *M*.

8. Parmenides of Elea, *Fragments*, trans. David Gallop (Toronto, 1984), frag. 2, ll. 3, 4, p. 55.

becoming because, given that it no longer implies being (which is defined, precisely, as that which does not become), our European concept is too narrow. Rather, the Chinese becoming is the “way,” the *dao* by which the world constantly renews itself and reality is in constant progress.

In fact, this is precisely what prevents the Mohist thinkers from arriving at the concept of truth by moving on from their notion of an objective fittingness (*dang*): a name can only relate temporarily to its object, can only “pause on it,” the Mohists say, because that object is always transitory.⁹ As described in the *Book of Changes*, fittingness is always conceived on the basis of the situation and the moment.¹⁰ Whereas in Greece substance served as the basis for truth, in China there was no such concept (hence, too, the difficulty, in China, of conceiving of attributes).¹¹ Thus in Chinese “physics,” *yin* and *yang* are not matter, but polar opposites. Similarly, the “five agents” are not primordial elements, in the Greek manner, but rather factors, both concurrent and successive, in a process of renewal.

Likewise, with no conception of substance, the Chinese had no conception of appearance. The notion did not exist (at any rate in pre-Buddhist China; and, of course, Buddhism emerged from an Indo-European basis). The Mohists were aware of the limits of perceptible cognition to the extent that such cognition does not “last” once one is no longer in the presence of the object.¹² It may be prolonged by intellectual knowledge, but that does not mean that one must mistrust what is perceptible (and postulate an intelligible world). The Chinese were unfamiliar with the skeptics’ experiment involving the stick plunged into water that then appears to be broken; and they never envisaged an opposition between appearance and reality, between the phenomenon and the thing-in-itself. In contrast, as is well known, it was in opposition to the deceitfulness of appearances, and initially in Greece, that Western thought conceived of truth.

To monopolize thought as it did, “truth” had to do two things: both isolate itself by means of a separation of levels and, at the same time, become a point of convergence for thought. Truth was thus caught up within this general configuration, but we can see (from its absence in China) that it is quite exceptional. This raises doubts as to its legitimacy—not so much on the score of its right (as in Nietzsche) but rather with regard to its very

9. See *Mo-tsu*, A 44, 50; trans. A. C. Graham, under the title *Canons and Explanations*, in Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science* (Beijing, 1978), pp. 295, 298.

10. See *I Ching*, “Grand Commentary,” B 10.

11. See *Mo-tsu*, B 37, which shows that the notion of *cun*, “to exist,” in the sense of “to be in,” which nowadays serves to translate the Western notion of ontology, is not developed in that direction.

12. *Mo-tsu*, A 5, B 6.

possibility, for China, for its part, makes us aware of its impossibility. The Chinese worked out modalities of harmony and congruence ranging from Confucius's idea of "that which is possible" to the Mohists' "fittingness." They defended the coherence of these ideas but without being led on to develop a concept of truth. The congruous, that which perfectly suits a given situation, seems to have been the substitute, everywhere implicit but never thought of in isolation, which freed the Chinese from becoming fixated upon "truth" and which made wisdom meaningful.

So it is that, from a Chinese vantage point, it is easier to see how truth became rooted in metaphysics and, in particular, how, in the West, it flourished in the fields of representation, of the thing-in-itself, and of Ideas. For although the Mohists certainly conceived of an idea as that which is implied by a definition (it is the idea of a column that tells me in advance that it is round) they did not conceive of it in the form of a Platonic idea or as an intelligible essence.¹³ And, as is well known, it was the latter kind of idea that governed the theoretical development of our Western conception of truth. So if a sage is without ideas, he also does not interpret reality on the basis of Ideas. As Heidegger remarked of the "Western philosopher" in his essay entitled "Plato's Doctrine on the Truth," the gaze of a sage "is not raised up toward Ideas."¹⁴

5. However, our enquiry can certainly not halt there, with our gaze raised up toward ideas. We must resume it from much further back, even from beyond thought, for, as can be imagined, more than purely philosophical reasons are needed to explain how it was that the notion of truth came to take on such importance in Greek philosophy. More than ever, a whole heap of reasons are relevant here, a growing mass of them, as the notion of truth involves so very many different levels, piling one upon another. The conceptual configuration at the heart of which that notion is positioned is itself a crossroads, and its context has no boundary, for the notion is not just intellectual but also or, rather, primarily social and political. In the first place the emergence of the function of truth seems impossible to understand independently of the emergence of the city. Here, again, China illuminates the problem by its very difference, encouraging us to seek to fathom the background(s) against which—or all the layers from beneath which—the opposition between the sage and the philosopher was conceptualized. The first or most immediate layer is constituted by the procedures—contemporary with or even earlier than the philosophical demonstration of

13. See *Mo-tsi*, B 57.

14. See Martin Heidegger, "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," trans. Thomas Sheehan, *Pathmarks*, trans. Sheehan et al., ed. William McNeill (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 155–82.

truth, which in Greece served (both in the legal and the mathematical domains)—to establish proof (*pistis*). In archaic Greece, truth was already associated with justice even before the institution of courts of law. It was called the most just of things (in the *dike-aletheia* relationship). Yet China no more thought of justice, in an ideal mode, as the rule of law than it instituted a proper judicial system. Even if laws were promulgated or, rather, codes of prohibitions and prescriptions were drawn up they were applied in a summary, authoritarian manner and occasioned no procedures of demonstration or pleading. In China, the institution of law remained embryonic; in fact the very notion of such a thing never evolved, as is apparent enough even today. Similarly, although we find Mohists taking an interest in geometry and defining geometrical concepts, they are the only Chinese thinkers to do so, and geometry never acquired the function of a model as mathematics did for Greek philosophy. A Chinese thinker was not required to be a geometrician—the very idea never occurred to anyone. In Greece, in contrast, Pythagoras was credited both with establishing the rule of numbers and also, according to the Platonists (but no more than symbolically), with inventing the term *philosophos*. Furthermore, even if, as A. C. Graham has shown, the Mohists do seem to have conceived of geometrical demonstration, they did not develop proof in a Euclidian fashion.¹⁵ (This is a field that has been considerably illuminated by recent sinology, particularly in the work of K. Chemla). In short, in Greece the whole intellectual context inclined the latecomer philosophy toward demonstration of the truth, but that was not how it was in China. But then it is true that a sage was not interested in proof, so of course he did not engage in demonstration.

We know that in Greece the social and political structure of the city served as the framework for the secularization of speech. In at least two ways this left its imprint upon the notion of truth and favored its rise. It did so first in an antagonistic mode, in which the truth was asserted by dint of opposition, in arguments pro and contra (double arguments, as in anti-logic); and it also did so in the mode of dialogue, in which truth was submitted to the judgement of an interlocutor and the latter's assent to it was required. The two modes were complementary, despite their apparent contradiction. Together, *agòn* and *agora* structured the truth and contributed to its institutionalization.

In its law courts, its councils, its assembly, and even its theater, the city constructed itself on the basis of face-to-face discourse; and philosophy did likewise (in particular where Protagoras was concerned). Whereas a single speech can only assert its version of the truth unilaterally, two antithetical

15. See Graham, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science*, p. 35.

speeches can seize upon the truth more closely. Through the comparison and refutation of the arguments advanced by each side, the truth is illuminated and carries conviction. China, for its part, was certainly not unacquainted with controversy (particularly among thinkers of the fourth and third centuries, such as Xunzi and Han Fei). But it was far less developed than in Greece because it never became systematized in the way that it was bound to be within the framework of the Greek city. As can be imagined, in a prince's court discourse was far more oblique. Instead of being confrontationally explicit, it was insinuating and allusive. Its obliqueness was designed not so much to convince its addressee by the force of the argument but rather to win him over by "manipulating" him.¹⁶ It did not set out to adopt an openly confrontational position in opposition to an adversary. In contrast, in Greece open competitiveness lay at the very heart of the city, as in the confrontations celebrated in the games (consider Pindar and Heraclitus on the value of *eris*). Since philosophers engaged in rivalry over the truth, philosophy constituted a series of jousting matches. A sage, on the other hand, never competed, never aimed to win. It has often been said (for example, by Foucault and, following him, Deleuze) that, to be fully a philosopher you had to think otherwise. A sage, for his part, does not seek to think otherwise. In fact, he tries to do precisely the contrary, as now needs to be explained. He does not try to be original so as to differentiate his point of view from that of others. Rather, he wants his own thought to include and reconcile all other points of view.

The Greek city, for its part, was based upon the idea of equal speech. The *agora* was a place where each individual stood in a reciprocal and reversible relationship vis-à-vis every other individual (consider the notions of *isegoria* and *isonomia*). Whether in a court of law or in the assembly, to get a truth recognized and accepted you had to win over your interlocutor—the judge or some third party—and elicit his agreement. Truth was something that was public and common to all. Similarly, in mathematical or philosophical demonstration (for example, in Plato's dialogues), whatever is admitted by the opposite party is held to be true. One's opponent's ratification is both necessary and sufficient. Wisdom, on the other hand, expects no validation from anyone. It is not communicated directly; in fact, it is not communicated at all, strictly speaking. Rather, it only indicates indirectly through incidental remarks, for it remains part of an invariably personal progress that cannot be fulfilled by anybody else. Another person may make me understand something (the truth, for instance) simply by stating or

16. See François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York, 1995), pp. 219–58.

showing it, but only within myself and through myself is it possible for me to realize it. In itself, a chronological account of the education of a sage has no more than a suggestive value (see Confucius: “at the age of fifteen,” “at thirty,” “at forty,” “at seventy,” “at fifteen I began to study and by seventy, I was able to follow my desires without transgressing the rule”; that is to say, he had succeeded in conforming spontaneously to the way that things are regulated [A, II, 4]). Stemming as it does from individual experience, wisdom, in its very principle, is self-referential—just as is the self-rule of a sovereign. It does not seek approval from others, for it is self-approving and self-sufficient.

Finally, as is well known, a Greek city functions on the basis of a clear-cut choice made between two mutually exclusive opposites (one party opposes another; you vote either for the one or for the other). Similarly, philosophy adopts a position either for or against; its truth is exclusive (true or false). But, as we have seen, wisdom is careful never to exclude (in China, people never voted). Not only does wisdom avoid adopting a position that is either for or against and entering into an antagonistic relationship, but, furthermore, it corresponds to every position, depending upon the circumstances, placing them all on an equal footing. (In China, the position of the sovereign is conceived as a pivot that controls the entire functioning of society). In short, wisdom stands in contrast to philosophy in the following distinctive ways: whereas philosophy sets out to be eristic (agonistic), wisdom declares itself to be eirenic and avoids all confrontation. Whereas philosophy operates through dialogue, seeking the approval of others, wisdom communes solely with itself, is a soliloquy; in fact, it is keen to avoid debate and sidesteps dialogue. Finally, whereas philosophy is exclusive, for the truth forces it to be so, wisdom is comprehensive and right from the start encompasses opposed points of view (without entering into dialectics).

6. Those three characteristics are interdependent. The reason why wisdom rejects opposition (characteristic 1; see the list of characteristics at the end of this essay) is that it refuses to be reduced to one particular and, hence, exclusive position, a position into which it would be forced reciprocally by whatever it opposed (characteristic 3). The logic of wisdom, which establishes it as antiphilosophical, is to refuse to operate on the basis of the principle of contradiction. It does not challenge this but simply rules it out completely, right from the start. It declines to fall into that trap. Given that if you take one side, you cannot at the same time take the other, in order not to deprive itself of either position, wisdom adopts neither. Or, to put that the other way round, if wisdom insists on taking neither side, it is because it knows that whoever takes sides inevitably becomes partial; he no longer sees any other point of view but is restricted to a single one (his own);

he has lost the globality of the way. Philosophy reckons that choosing between what is true and what is false leads to a discrimination that is illuminating, and accordingly it aims to operate in this way. Wisdom, on the contrary, reckons that that choice entails a loss. As wisdom sees it, it is from that very loss that the—endless—history of philosophy stems. For what philosophy rejects and casts to one side (excluding it on the grounds that it is false), it subsequently strives ceaselessly to recover and incorporate within philosophy itself, as one philosopher succeeds another, no longer relegating it to that false side. Indeed, this loss seems to constitute the very essence of philosophy, taking the shape of a desire for and aspiration toward wisdom (imagined as something all-embracing). Philosophy seems to be thought permeated by the lack of what it initially rejected and negated by swinging over to one side rather than the other. Thereafter, as it proceeds it constantly strives to recover what has been lost, but now it seeks it on the opposite side. Tacking to and fro between the two sides, as philosophy thus does, it is forced always to move forward, condemned to progress.

In contrast, the notion of a position that is positionless and so incorporates all opposed positions is one that is already familiar to us—at least as it is expressed in Confucian terms; it is the notion of *zhong*, the true middle. This is not a middle that is equidistant from opposites, for that too would constitute a particular position and so would be just as limited as any other. Rather, as we have seen, it is a middle that makes it possible to respond equally to both those opposites (the middle lies in that equal possibility). We should remember Mencius, who remarks that there are on the one hand the supporters of egoism, on the other the supporters of altruism; Zimo, midway between the two, would be “closer” to the mark. But if he comes to a halt in the middle, he promotes only one possibility (in between, halfway between) and so misses “a hundred others” (that range all the way from one extreme to the other), and he thus “obstructs the way” (*M*, VII A 26). The true middle, that of wisdom, is a variable middle that because it can oscillate between two opposites can always coincide with the case that currently obtains (depending on whether the “balance” inclines to the one side or the other). This is the true middle of congruence, which, as such, is never fixed, stabilized, and defined once and for all (any more than reality is) and which, in a way, is always unprecedented; it can never be the (one and only) truth.

Whoever does not hold to that true middle which is constantly in balance with the way that things are regulated and so enables us always to incline to the right side, whichever it may be, at the right moment, must necessarily stand at either one or the other fixed extremity (see *A*, II, 16). We should not refute that extremity fixed in its position directly, as that would, at a

stroke, fix us in the contrary position, which would be just as partial as its opposite. All we need do is allow full play to the confrontation between it and its opposite in such a way that each shows up the partiality of the other. In China, wisdom will always adopt the same tactic; we should not clash with our adversary in a bid to refute him and, as a result, find ourselves trapped, fixed in our own position, every bit as partial as he is and resorting to arguments that match his own. Rather, we should turn that adversary against another, rearranging their positions in such a way that, through their opposition, each reveals through the other what is lacking to himself. It is not that, when the adversaries are sent packing in this way, their respective positions are both demolished through their respective reasoning (for that would lead us back to the antilogic of the Greeks). Rather, purely as a result of their opposition, each is shown to be on one side or the other (whereas we, for our part, stand neither on one side nor on the other). This is exactly how Mencius operates; instead of replying to the naturalist thinkers of the day, who tear the ancient moralism to shreds (for example, Yang Zhu), he sets them in conflict with the Mohists (representing the naturalists as “egoists,” as opposed to the Mohists, who are “altruists”). Purely by doing so, and not through discussion, he himself is able to occupy the true middle between them, at the heart of this topology. When necessary, he is as much an egoist as the naturalists; when necessary, equally as much an altruist as the Mohists. Let us avoid conflict, Mencius urges; all we need do is allow those who have moved to one side (for example, to that of Mohism, since one is at first inclined to want at all costs to do good in the world) to oscillate naturally to the other, the opposite side, that of Yang Zhu’s naturalism where, having lost one’s illusions, one falls back on one’s own egoism, so that they subsequently come of their own accord to rest in the position of the true middle, which is the scholars’ position. Of their own accord—in other words, through the logic of achieving a balance between the opposed positions (see *M*, VII B 26). Compared to that logic, dispute is a useless superfluity that obstructs the immanent regulating force. “Those who enter into dispute with the Egoists or the Mohists are like those who chase a pig that has escaped and who, once it is restored to its sty, proceed, quite unnecessarily, to hobble its legs” (*M*, VII B 26). Later on, the neo-Confucians often adopted the same tactic. Obligated as they were to react to Buddhism, rather than refute it they engineered a confrontation between the Buddhists and the daoists in which, with each party adopting the opposite position to the other’s, each drew attention to the other’s partiality. And because both seemed to have strayed off course either to one side or to the other, it fell once again to Confucianism to embody the way of the true middle, which never becomes bogged down on either side.

Thus, the contrary to wisdom is not the false but the partial. In wisdom, the true middle way of congruence takes the place held by truth in philosophy; and, similarly, partiality takes on the major role that philosophy ascribes to error. Mencius insists that “to understand the discourse” of others and to denounce their antagonistic positions in the dispute between the different schools is not to show that their theories are false but rather to draw attention to their shortcomings and show how far they have strayed off course (*M*, II A 2, III B 9). This is borne out even by Xunzi (third century B.C.E.), a contemporary of the Mohists, who was very conscious of the logical rigor of argument. He, better than anyone in ancient China, developed the practice of refutation (see his dissertation on the “evil nature” of man, which is a refutation of Mencius).¹⁷ Xunzi certainly stresses the “sovereign” role of the mind (it “gives orders and takes none”) and its pure function of understanding, and he recognizes the mind to be autonomous (“of itself it forbids or encourages, ravishes or chooses, exerts itself or stops”) and the faculty of assent to be free (“it cannot be forced to change its opinion”; “if it considers something to be just, it accepts it, if false, it rejects it”; and “necessity is something that it recognizes on its own”). However, this thinker, who remains a Confucian, nevertheless classifies the vice that threatens thought in the category of partiality, not that of the false. He starts off as follows: “The misfortune of men generally stems from the fact that their minds are blinded by one particular aspect of things and so they leave the overall logic in the shadows.” As they focus on a single point, the overall dimension of reality eludes them. Not, strictly speaking, that they are mistaken, for that single point is also true, but they do allow it to cloud their vision. It is this that gives rise to dissensions in society and disorder in thought. And what is the cause of that partiality? It arises because each individual, “becoming personally attached to what he himself has accumulated” (such as experience, which, in itself, is effective) and then becoming “dependent” upon it, “fears nothing more than to hear others speak slightly of it” and proceeds “constantly to justify himself.” From that point on, one pays attention only to one aspect of things, neglecting all others. One can no longer see beyond one’s own “desires” or “aversions”; one sees only the “beginning” or else the “end” of things, and so on. Seeing one side, one no longer sees the other; and “given that everything is different from everything else, one thing always hides another, and vice-versa.”¹⁸

The same is true where debates among the various schools of thought

17. See also Jullien, *Fonder la morale: Dialogue de Mencius avec un philosophe des lumières* (Paris, 1995), chap. 5.

18. Xunzi, *Jie bi*, chap. 21. See Xunzi, “Dispelling Blindness,” *A Translation and Study of the Complete Works*, trans. John Knoblock, 3 vols. (Stanford, Calif., 1994), 3:88–112.

are concerned. The Mohists' minds are blinded by that which is "useful" and are no longer aware of that which is "cultural." The mind of a pacifist (Song Xing) is blinded by the reduction of desires and loses sight of their satisfaction; the mind of a "legalist" (Shen Dao) is blinded by the general norm and loses sight of personal value; the mind of another legalist (Shen Buhai) is blinded by authority and loses sight of the need to be enlightened; the mind of a "sophist" (Hui Shi) is blinded by words and a taste for paradoxes and loses sight of reality; and the mind of a daoist (Zhangzi) is blinded by that which is "natural" and loses sight of the human domain. All of them are right, but only from one particular point of view. None of them are wrong, but they are all reductionists. They do not think that what is false is true, but they do think that that one single "corner" is the whole. In every instance, their minds "are limited" by one single aspect of things, whereas the "way," for its part, in the constancy of its regulations, "goes all the way" in each of those different aspects, which constitute so many possible "variations" of it. Thus, because they only see one aspect, none of those thinkers is truly able "to appreciate" the way in all the fullness that constitutes its plenitude. Each of them is content to "embellish" the aspect of it to which he has become attached. In contrast to them all and altogether exceptionally, Confucius refuses to be blinded by whatever he has accumulated in the way of personal experiences and so accedes to the "globality" of the way. For he does not fasten upon anything: neither upon his desires nor upon his aversions, neither upon the beginning nor upon the end of things, and so on. He "deploys all existing things at the same time," always making them "coincide" with the "balance" (the true middle of congruence). As a result, "the different aspects of things no longer conceal one another" and "balance is the way."¹⁹

7. One might have expected thinking to be unanimous on this theme of the way. Given that it is to be found in all cultures, might it not be seen as a bridge between them? At the beginning of Parmenides' poem, which is also the beginning of philosophy, the way, "much-speaking route of the goddess," is the one that leads to the goddess who will teach the truth of "all things," the truth about Being. For, far from the well-beaten paths of opinion, it leads toward "the light."²⁰ And we may compare the biblical tradition; for even though such a comparison between the Hebraic and the Greek may seem surprising from within either tradition, it is justified if one can find something common seen from outside both. For, in the Bible, too, the way is associated with the truth (Psalm 86), while in the New Testament it is

19. Ibid.

20. Parmenides of Elea, *Fragments*, frag. 1, ll. 2–3, 28, 9, pp. 49, 53, 49.

represented not so much as conforming with the Law but rather as leading to revelation: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6—*hodos, altheia, zòe*). Whether the way and truth are believed to lead to (eternal) life (Ambrose), or the way is supposed to lead to both truth and life (Clement of Alexandria, Augustine), or truth and life are simply embodiments of the way, the way in question is invariably conceived in relation to its ultimate destination: it is the path that leads to the Father; and “no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6).

However, although wisdom also resorts to the image of the way—in fact, in the Chinese tradition, it makes this its principal notion, the *dao*—the notion is given a different slant. Or, rather, it is not given a slant at all. However different the philosophical and the religious way, whether Greek or biblical, may be, it leads to God or truth (as the case may be); the way recommended by wisdom leads to nothing. No truth—revealed or discovered—constitutes its destination. As wisdom sees it, the essential quality of the way is that it is viable. It does not lead to any goal, but one can pass along it, one always can pass along it, so one can always move on (instead of becoming bogged down or finding one’s path blocked). It is a practicable way, the “way of heaven” along which reality never ceases to pass, constantly in harmony so never straying away from it, so that the course of things continues endlessly to be renewed (see A, XVII, 19: “the seasons follow their course and all the myriad things prosper”). The way of man is the way along which it is always possible to pass, but you have to keep to the true middle. In this fashion, you never fall into partiality in your behavior or, consequently, your character; so you never become definitively either intransigent or accommodating or, in accordance with the classic alternative, committed or withdrawn (which is to say that you can always be either the one or the other, depending on whether the moment demands that you pass by way of the one or by that of the other). Nor do you fall into partiality in your thinking; you never become attached to a particular idea, get blocked into a dogmatic position, trapped within a particular identity. The *Zhong yong* states: “The true middle is the basis of the world, harmony is the way of the world.” There is but one alternative: if the world “follows the way,” it is “in order”; if it does not follow the way, it is “in disorder.”²¹ The course of the world and that of human behavior are conceived in similar fashion; because that course never swerves to either side it can advance, the process can proceed.

So the only outcome of this way of wisdom can be its own renewal. It

21. Tsze-sze, *Zhong yong*, par. 1; trans. Legge, under the title *The Doctrine of the Mean*, 1:246–98.

knows nothing of finality or, rather, is completely indifferent to it. With its sights set on neither absolute knowledge nor salvation, it is not a way that leads to revelation but one through which regulation operates (regulation being an ongoing harmony constantly in the process of transformation). It is not a way toward but a way by which (balance is maintained). It is the way by which things go along, by which they are possible, viable—the way by which the course of one's conduct, like that of the world, is constantly in harmony with whatever reality each moment demands. This way does not lead to truth; instead, through it, congruence can be realized. As we have seen, its image is that of a balance, and that image conveys two simultaneous messages. One is that the balance of the scales has no fixed position, it varies according to what is to be weighed, and the equilibrium is always particular (and, similarly, congruence is an immanent conformity to the situation and is always limited to that context). The other message is that the balance pivots one way or the other; with no fixed position, it is as likely to swing to one side as to the other. Its amplitude is always complete; thus it is possible for congruence to operate in every instance. Likewise, the way of wisdom is a way that never comes to a halt on one side or the other but always keeps all possibilities wide open, maintaining them all on an equal footing. Through it, everything remains open. So the question that remains for wisdom is this: how to maintain that absolute openness of both behavior and thought, how to maintain not Truth but openness, which makes it possible never to lose any aspect of anything and to be closed to nothing (in any respect)?

This logic of nonexclusion, which leaves aside no side and makes it possible to have opposed points of view coexist, may be further explored by considering the thinkers of the way (the *dao*), namely, the daoists. Even so, the contrast between the thinking of ancient China and that of ancient Greece cannot be painted in black and white. In particular, China did not dismiss the theme of a celestial journey, pursued along a solitary path, in quest of a deity—the very theme that lies behind Parmenides' poem. For China too looked deep into the figure and world of the shaman (consider Qu Yuan, third century B. C. E., particularly in the *Li Sao*). This text contains much to delight comparativists. Here at least the theme appears to be the same. The setting hardly alters: the mares of Parmenides become dragons of jade; here, too, a chariot soars into the air and a doorway appears in the sky.²² But in the Chinese poem this door opens to nothing, gives access to no revelation, for the vision fades at its threshold. It is the same as the

22. See Parmenides of Elea, *Fragments*, frag. 1, ll. 11–21; Qu Yuan, *Li Sao*, verse 205; and John 10:9: “I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved.”

door to a court that remains inexorably closed, to shut out slanderous talk, and preventing the minister in love with purity from reaching his prince. Ancient shamanistic sources are known in China, at least on its borders (in the south, the land of Chu and Wu, as exemplified by Qu Yuan and Zhuangzi). But all that was retained from them in the final analysis was a political version of these ideas. They never gave rise to metaphysics.

By stepping back from our own thought—in this instance via a Chinese digression—we can perhaps better detect the major influences that inspired it. Positioned within a culture, one is more aware of the tensions at work there and, consequently, of the breaks by which it is marked (see Foucault); whereas, as Lévi-Strauss has showed, from outside and standing back it is easier to see even the implicit coherences that have persistently pervaded it. When, having shifted to China, we turn back toward the thought that we have left behind and begin to see it set out before us like a landscape that we ourselves no longer quite inhabit, we are suddenly struck by the path that we perceive crossing the whole picture and opening it up at its horizon to its further perspective—a path that has oriented our thought all along, the path that we have followed in an endless quest for meaning. For Meaning has taken over from Truth, has become the modern question. (We seem, for instance, to have moved on from metaphysics to hermeneutics, from ontology to axiology, and so on). Nowadays we ask, What is the meaning of life? It is a question that we cannot fail to raise, but from the vantage point of China we can see (now that the metaphysics of meaning has taken the place of the metaphysics of truth) that it stems from a particular choice and seems to lose its relevance (how could it even be translated into Chinese? Of course, one can always translate—a fact that must comfort linguists—but what does the translated expression manage to convey?). When considered from the standpoint of China, that question of the meaning of life, which seemed unavoidable, no longer seems meaningful—it no longer touches us. As seen by wisdom, the question of the meaning of life loses its meaning. A sage will no more fix upon that than he will upon the truth.

In conclusion, then: a sage is someone who no longer asks about Meaning (as unconcerned by the alternative between mystery and absurdity as by the alternative between that which is true and that which is false). A sage is someone who takes the world and life for granted, someone who is content (so no longer needs) to say, That is how things are. Not, So be it, as religion, in its desire for acquiescence declares, nor, Why is it so? as philosophy, with a jolt of amazement, asks. Neither accepting nor questioning, the sage simply says, That is how it is. A sage is one who reaches the realization that it is so.

Philosophy

1. Becoming attached to an idea
2. Philosophy is historical
3. Progress is made through explanation (demonstration)
4. Generalization
5. A level of immanence (cutting through chaos)
6. Discourse (definition)
7. Meaning
8. Hidden because concealed
9. To know
10. Revelation
11. Saying
12. Truth
13. The category of Being and of the subject
14. Freedom
15. Error
16. The way leads to Truth

Wisdom

1. Having no particularly valued idea, no definitive position, no particular identity, treating all ideas on the same footing
2. Wisdom has no history (it is not possible to write a history of wisdom)
3. Pronouncements vary (wisdom needs to be mulled over, "savored")
4. Globalization (every pronouncement of a sage always says everything that wisdom can produce, but from a different angle each time)
5. A store of immanence
6. Remarks (suggestion)
7. The manifest
8. Hidden because manifest
9. To realize: to become aware of what one sees and what one knows
10. Regulation
11. There is nothing to say
12. Congruence (the congruent is whatever is perfectly fitted to a particular situation)
13. The category of process (the course of the world, the course of behavior)

14. Spontaneity (*sponte sua*)
15. Partiality (when blinded by one aspect of things, one no longer sees any other; one only sees one corner, instead of the overall picture)
16. The way is viability (the way things go along, the way they are possible).