

“Like Loving a Lovely Sight”

Simile & Metaphor in Chinese Philosophy



Boston
University
Confucian
Association

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The Room of PHO 206
8 St. Mary's Street, Boston, MA 02215

Substantive metaphors contribute something of importance beyond an empty rhetorical flourish. There is considerable dispute, though, about what the “something” is. According to Donald Davidson, metaphors are like pictures or, more crudely, like a bonk on the head, in that they invite us to view the world in a certain way, but do not themselves convey any propositional content. In contrast, Stanley Cavell argued that metaphors can be paraphrased into propositions that can be true or false. In *Showing, Telling and Seeing: Metaphor and ‘Poetic’ Language*, Elisabeth Camp argues that each side in this debate captures part of the truth about metaphor: we can extract from a metaphor propositions that can be assessed as true or false. However, unpacking a substantive metaphor does not exhaust the function or the value of the metaphor: a metaphor also invites us to view something from a certain perspective, which is intrinsically open-ended. **In my talk, I want to look at a few seminal metaphors and similes in traditional Chinese philosophy in order to illustrate how they can be unpacked into specific propositional content, but also invite us to adopt a certain perspective, and thereby open up a potentially infinite range of further reflections. In particular, I shall focus on two examples from ancient Confucianism: the metaphor of Mengzi that humans have “sprouts” of virtue, and the simile from the Great Learning that being Sincere is “like loving a lovely sight.”**



Bryan W. Van Norden is author, editor, or translator of nine books on Chinese and comparative philosophy, including *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (2011), *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century* (2014, with Justin Tiwald), *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (2nd ed., 2005, with P.J. Ivanhoe), and the forthcoming *A Manifesto for Multicultural Philosophy* (Columbia University Press, expected 2017). A recipient of Fulbright and Mellon fellowships, Van Norden has been honored as one of The Best 300 Professors in the U.S. by *The Princeton Review*. Van Norden received his PhD from Stanford University and his BA from the University of Pennsylvania. He is currently a Professor in the Philosophy Department and the Department of Chinese & Japanese at Vassar College.