

Looking across languages: Anglocentrism, cross-linguistic experimental philosophy, and the future of inquiry about truth

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KO TE TANGATA
FOR THE PEOPLE



Truth and analytic philosophy

- Truth has been a focal topic in analytic philosophy since the late 19th Century
- Analytic theories of truth are conceptually diverse
 - They invoke notions ranging from correspondence to fact, verifiability, and superwarrant to transparency, prosentences, pretence, and replacement



Anglocentrism



- However: analytic debates about truth have been largely homogenous along another crucial dimension
- When supporting their own theories of truth or criticising opposing theories, analytic philosophers tend to make heavy use of their own intuitions
 - These intuitions are expressed in English and are often about how certain English expressions (e.g. ‘true’ and ‘truth’) are ordinarily used
 - Analytic philosophers use such intuitions to assess theories of e.g. ‘the concept of truth,’ ‘the meaning of the truth predicate,’ and ‘the nature of truth’

Anglocentrism



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- In short:
 - Analytic philosophers have tended to debate theories of truth that are framed in *universal* terms
 - By contrast: the intuitions that inform these debates are articulated exclusively in and are solely about English
- We can call this overall tendency *Anglocentrism*

Plan for the talk



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- *Our aims:* to argue that this Anglocentric model for inquiring about truth is outmoded and to point towards an improved methodology
- A key component of the improved methodology: *cross-linguistic experimental philosophy* (experimental philosophy involving studies that pertain to two or more languages)

Plan for the talk



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- To start: we will offer a brief overview of three major analytic debates about truth
- We'll then describe how experimental findings have been applied in two of these debates
- Lastly, we'll explain why cross-linguistic experimental philosophy is indispensable to all of these debates

Three debates about truth



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- The analytic debates about truth that we will discuss respectively concern:
 - i. The concept TRUTH
 - ii. The meaning of *alethic vocabulary* such as ‘true’ and ‘truth,’ and
 - iii. The nature of the property/relation *truth*

Debates about TRUTH



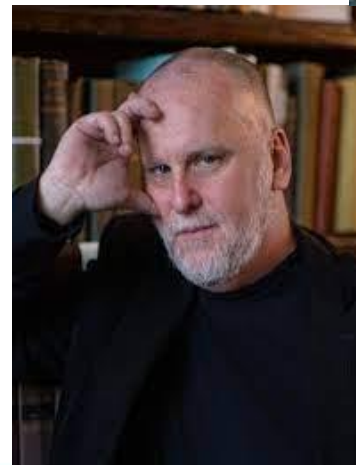
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- Many analytic philosophers have speculated about how we think about truth and why we think about truth as we do
 - These speculations are often framed in terms of the concept TRUTH
 - In developing theories of TRUTH, analytic philosophers have put forward different views about the sort of entity that TRUTH is

Debates about TRUTH



- *Three examples:*
 - Alston (2002): TRUTH is the meaning of the word ‘true’ when it is used in a particular range of cases (e.g. in an assertive use of the sentence “The proposition that Algeria is in North Africa is true”)
 - Lynch (2009): our “folk concept” TRUTH is “the way we tacitly think about [truth] in ordinary life”
 - Asay (2021): TRUTH is the ability to have propositional thoughts such as beliefs, hopes, or desires



Debates about TRUTH



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- For present purposes: we will adopt a basic, *coarse-grained* conception of TRUTH
- According to this conception, TRUTH is a mental entity of some sort that thinkers deploy whenever they have thoughts involving truth
 - For instance: if Eric wonders whether the last statement that he read on Wikipedia is true, then he deploys the concept TRUTH
 - Likewise, if Patrice is convinced that her mechanic's claims about her carburettor aren't true, then she deploys the concept TRUTH

Debates about alethic vocabulary



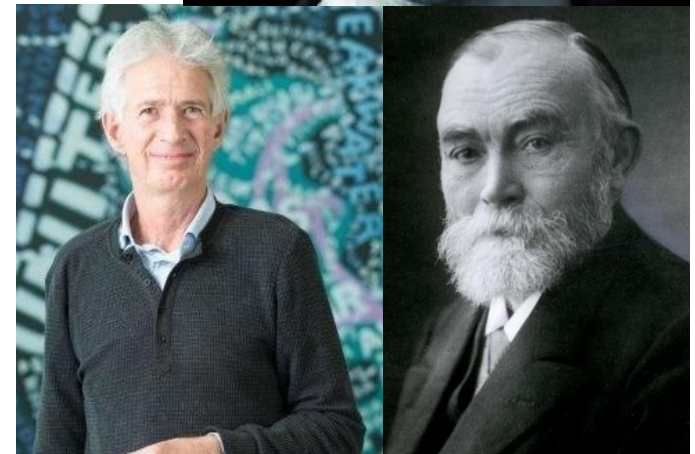
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- Analytic philosophers have also produced many theories concerning the meaning of truth-related, or *alethic, vocabulary*
 - In English: alethic vocabulary includes ‘true’ and ‘truth’
 - It also includes ‘correct’ and ‘right,’ when the latter are used in certain sentences, e.g. ‘Harold believes that the Earth is flat, but his belief is wrong/incorrect, since the Earth isn’t flat’ (see Moltmann (2015, 2021) and Mizumoto (2022))

Debates about alethic vocabulary



- *Three examples:*
 - Frege (1918): “it is probable that the content of the word ‘true’ is unique and indefinable”
 - Horwich (1998, 2010): the meaning of ‘true’ is fixed by our disposition to accept the instances of the schema:
 - (ES) The proposition that p is true iff p
 - Kölbel (2008): ‘true’ is ambiguous between two meanings, one of which is the meaning that Horwich identifies



Debates about alethic vocabulary



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- We will also adopt a coarse-grained, *translational conception* of alethic vocabulary that is compatible with all extant theories of alethic vocabulary
 - According to this conception, a linguistic expression e of language L is a piece of alethic vocabulary iff:
 - e is ‘true,’ ‘false,’ ‘right,’ ‘wrong,’ ‘correct,’ or ‘incorrect,’ where these adjectives are used to speak about (a) sentences, mental states, or the contents of either, or (b) entities (such as theories) that are composed of sentences, mental states, or the contents of either;
 - e is a standard translation of one of these adjectives, as used in (i);
 - e is a grammatical variant of one of these adjectives (e.g. ‘truth’ or ‘truly’), where this variant is similarly used; or
 - e is a standard translation of one of these grammatical variants

Debates about *truth*



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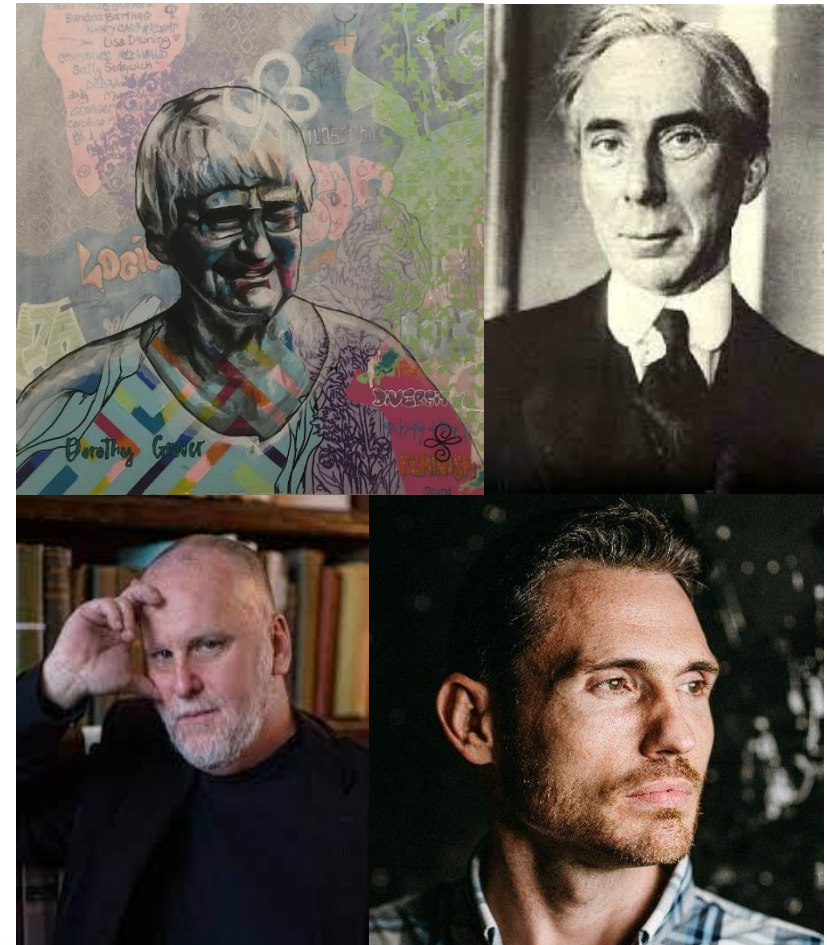
- Analytic philosophers have also been concerned to identify the nature of the property/relation *truth*

Debates about *truth*



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- *Four examples:*
 - Rasmussen (2014): a proposition's having *truth* consists in its corresponding to an 'arrangement'
 - Lynch (2009): *truth* is 'manifested' by different properties in different domains
 - The early Russell (1904): while *truth* does exist, it is a primitive, indefinable property
 - Certain deflationists, e.g. Grover (1992) and Brandom (1994): *truth* doesn't exist at all



Debates about *truth*



- In what follows: we will also use a coarse-grained conception of the property *truth*
- Described in this way: *truth* is just the property that is possessed by all and only the true truth-bearers
 - For instance: since the statement that Oslo is the most populous city in Norway is true, it possesses *truth*
 - By contrast: since the statement that Bergen is the most populous city in Norway isn't true, it fails to possess *truth*

Extant experimental research on truth



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- Thus far: experimental philosophers have shown that experimental inquiry can inform debates about TRUTH and debates about alethic vocabulary
- *Example:* Reuter and Brun (2022)



Extant experimental research on truth



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- Reuter and Brun (R&B) tested two hypotheses regarding the ordinary meaning of ‘true,’ when this word is applied to empirical statements (e.g. ‘Jill is at the party,’ ‘I have a 1990 Rolex Submariner in my safe’):
 - *Hypothesis 1 (correspondentism)*: Laypeople consider an empirical statement S of person P to be true or false depending on whether S corresponds with reality, and regardless of S ’s coherence with other relevant beliefs of $[P]$
 - *Hypothesis 2 (coherentism)*: Laypeople consider an empirical statement S of person P to be true or false depending on whether S coheres with other relevant beliefs of $[P]$, and regardless of S ’s correspondence with reality

Extant experimental research on truth



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- R&B evaluated these hypotheses using:
 - i. A vignette in which the protagonist's belief coheres with other relevant beliefs that they have but fails to correspond with reality and
 - ii. A vignette in which the protagonist's belief corresponds to reality but fails to cohere with other relevant beliefs that they have
- Their main proposal:

“[T]he variation we found indicates that ‘true’ is ambiguous since the responses were in fact divided between answers in line with coherentist predictions and answers in line with correspondentist predictions.” (p. 509)

Extant experimental research on truth



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- R&B's experiments produced evidence that within the empirical domain, 'true' is ambiguous between a correspondence-style reading and a coherence-style reading
 - This evidence is highly relevant to debates about the meaning of alethic vocabulary (recall e.g. Kölbel (2008))

Extant experimental research on truth



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- It also bears on debates about TRUTH
 - Our ordinary ways of speaking about truth are a source of evidence regarding our ordinary thought about truth
 - For this reason: R&B's finding indicates that there are at least two importantly different ways in which English speakers think about truth
 - One potential explanation of this is that there are at least two truth concepts $TRUTH_1$ and $TRUTH_2$ that are respectively used by English speakers

Extant experimental research on truth



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- A loose end in experimental research on truth: how might experimental findings such as those of R&B bear on debates about the metaphysics of *truth*?
- To close: we will aim to show that *cross-linguistic* experimental philosophy is indispensable to debates about TRUTH, alethic vocabulary, and *truth*

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about TRUTH



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- Extant findings in experimental philosophy inform debates about TRUTH insofar as:
 - i. These findings provide us with information about how we use alethic vocabulary, and
 - ii. This information in turn constitutes evidence regarding our deployment of TRUTH
- *Notably*: TRUTH isn't meant to be a concept that is possessed only by members of certain linguistic communities (e.g. the community of humans who speak NZ English)
 - Rather, TRUTH is meant to be possessed by a *linguistically diverse* subset of actual creatures—the set of creatures who are able to think about truth, irrespective of the languages that they speak

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about TRUTH



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- For this reason: experimental studies on truth should involve participants from a broad array of linguistic communities
 - If they involve e.g. only NZ English-speaking participants, then they will not enable us to draw *general* conclusions about the behaviour of TRUTH
 - Rather: they will only enable us to draw comparatively modest conclusions about how TRUTH is used by NZ English speakers

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about alethic vocabulary



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- The main aim of a theory of alethic vocabulary is to specify what alethic vocabulary means
- A primary source of evidence here is how alethic vocabulary is *used*
- *Notably*: alethic vocabulary is used not only by working academics but by competent speakers generally
 - For this reason: philosophers interested in the meaning of this vocabulary should investigate its usage by competent speakers as such
- Empirical methods (e.g. those used by R&B) provide the most reliable way of doing this
- As a result: these methods are vital to debates about alethic vocabulary

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about alethic vocabulary



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- *Moreover:* alethic vocabulary is present in many, and perhaps all, existing natural languages (see Goddard (2018, § 3.4))
- For this reason: a theory of alethic vocabulary should identify uniformities and differences in the meaning of alethic vocabulary across these languages
- This insight can only be provided by serious cross-linguistic studies
- Accordingly: cross-linguistic experimental philosophy is indispensable to debates about alethic vocabulary

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Regarding debates about the nature of *truth*, we should first consider why *experimental philosophy* is valuable to these debates
- As we see it, there are at least two ways in which experimental philosophy (x-phi) can impact debates about *truth*

Ordinary beliefs about *truth*



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- X-phi can provide insight into our ordinary (implicit or explicit) beliefs about *truth*
- These beliefs constitute *preliminary evidence* in debates about *truth's* nature

Ordinary beliefs about *truth*



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- *Rationale for this suggestion:*
 - Ordinary speakers use their (implicit or explicit) beliefs about *truth* to navigate the world
 - *Examples:*
 - i. Evaluating other speakers' assertions as true or false ('What John said is true/false')
 - ii. Drawing conclusions based on what the speaker believes ('Given that p, it must be true that q')
 - iii. Selecting trustworthy information sources ('Website A reports the truth much more often than website B, so I trust A more than B')

Ordinary beliefs about *truth*



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- Moreover: this navigation is often *successful*
 - The relevant assertion may actually be true/false;
 - The truth of the relevant conclusion may indeed follow logically from the truth of the relevant belief; or
 - The more trustworthy information source may in fact be favoured over the less trustworthy
- Absent evidence that it is caused by non-truth-conducive factors, this success constitutes evidence that *truth* is as it is represented in these beliefs, i.e. that the beliefs are true
- As a result: ordinary beliefs about *truth* serve as preliminary evidence in debates about *truth*'s nature

Ordinary beliefs about *truth*



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- Since this evidence is preliminary, it can of course be overridden by other evidence
 - *Potential examples:* philosophical arguments which demonstrate that correspondence theories of truth are incoherent, or scientific findings that our minds or language do not ‘represent’ the world in a sense that can underpin a correspondence theory of truth
- The main point: experimental findings regarding our ordinary (implicit or explicit) beliefs about *truth* provide an evidential *point of departure* in debates about *truth*’s nature

Empirical objections against theories of *truth*



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- X-phi can also provide evidence for or against *objections* against theories of *truth* that turn on (tacit) empirical hypotheses
 - A notable objection of this sort: the *non-coextensiveness objection*
 - This objection comes in two main forms:
 - *Form #1*: theory *T* identifies *truth* with property *P*, yet a truth-bearer can have *P* even though it isn't true
 - *Form #2*: theory *T* identifies *truth* with property *P*, yet a truth-bearer can be true even though it lacks *P*
 - A well-known example of Form #1: Bertrand Russell's *Bishop Stubbs objection* against coherence theories of *truth*

Empirical objections against theories of *truth*



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“[T]he objection to the coherence-theory lies in this, that it presupposes a more usual meaning of truth and falsehood in constructing its coherent whole, and that this more usual meaning, though indispensable to the theory, cannot be explained by means of the theory. The proposition “Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder” is, we are told, not coherent with the whole of truth or with experience. But that means, when we examine it, that something is *known* which is inconsistent with this proposition. Thus what is inconsistent with the proposition must be something *true*: it may be perfectly possible to construct a coherent whole of *false* propositions in which “Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder” would find a place. In a word, the partial truths of which the whole of truth is composed must be such propositions as would commonly be called true, not such as would commonly be called false; there is no explanation, on the coherence-theory, of the distinction commonly expressed by the words *true* and *false*, and no evidence that a system of false propositions might not, as in a good novel, be just as coherent as the system which is the whole of truth.” (Russell 1910, pp. 156-157)

Empirical objections against theories of *truth*



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- According to Russell: coherence theories of *truth* to entail that a proposition p 's having *truth* consists in p being a member of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
- Against such theories, Russell points out that there are false propositions (e.g. the proposition s that Bishop Stubbs was hanged for murder) that are nevertheless members of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
- He notes that a coherence theorist might respond by insisting that s is inconsistent with other propositions that we know to be true, e.g. the conjunction of:
 - q = Bishop Stubbs was never convicted of murder and
 - r = if a person is never convicted of murder, then they are not hanged for murder
- On this basis, the coherence theorist might insist that s can be dismissed as clearly untrue

Empirical objections against theories of *truth*



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- Russell's follow-up objection: in offering this response, the coherence theorist is using 'true' in its *ordinary* sense, according to which a proposition's being true *doesn't* consist in its being a member of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
- Russell contends that for this reason, the coherence theorist is ultimately compelled to use 'true' and 'false' in ways that are inconsistent with their theory of *truth*

Empirical objections against theories of *truth*



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- *Point #1:*
 - Russell initially suggests that there are false propositions that are members of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
 - He supports this suggestion using an example of a proposition that he takes to be obviously false yet also a member of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
 - To evaluate this example, it isn't enough to consider what Russell finds obvious, nor what you, I, and our colleagues find obvious
 - Rather: we need to use empirical methods to determine whether most speakers who can competently use 'false' (or a standard translation thereof) judge that this proposition is false
 - In light of R&B's findings, the results here may be surprising

Empirical objections against theories of *truth*



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- *Point #2:*
 - Russell also claims that coherence theorists must ultimately use ‘true’ in its ordinary sense, according to which a proposition’s being ‘true’ doesn’t consist in its being a member of at least one possible, coherent set of propositions
 - Here, Russell advances an empirical hypothesis about the meaning of ‘true’—to know whether we should accept or reject it, we must evaluate the hypothesis empirically
- These points show that empirical methods are essential when we evaluate the Bishop Stubbs objection—and any other objection to a theory of *truth* that turns on a (tacit) empirical hypothesis

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- It's now fairly straightforward to explain why *cross-linguistic* x-phi is indispensable to debates about *truth*
- Ordinary speakers' (implicit or explicit) beliefs about *truth* constitute preliminary evidence concerning *truth's* nature
- The crucial question: *whose* ordinary beliefs about *truth* are relevant here?
 - The most defensible answer, as we see it: the ordinary beliefs about *truth* that are held by actual humans, no matter the languages that they speak

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- *Rationale for this answer:*
 - A theory of *truth* aims to identify the nature of the property/relation *truth*
 - It will be widely granted that if *truth* has a nature, then its nature doesn't vary across linguistic communities
 - Rather, *truth* is standardly taken to have the nature that it has throughout the actual world (and perhaps in all possible worlds)
 - As a result: when we aim to determine whether a theory *T* of *truth* aligns with our ordinary beliefs about *truth*, it would be entirely *arbitrary* to privilege the ordinary beliefs held by members of a certain linguistic community/communities
 - Instead: the only non-arbitrary approach is to compare the beliefs about *truth* that are held by members of a diverse array of linguistic communities

Cross-linguistic x-phi and debates about *truth*



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- Similar considerations apply in connection with the non-coextensiveness objection
 - The metaphysical upshot of this objection is meant to be that *truth* \neq property *P*
 - Again: this upshot isn't meant to hold only within certain linguistic communities
 - Rather: it is meant to hold throughout the actual world (and perhaps in all possible worlds)
 - Accordingly: when assessing the tacit empirical hypotheses that are built into instances of this objection, we should determine whether they are borne out among humans *as such*, no matter the languages that they speak
 - To determine this: we must test these hypotheses using participants from a large range of linguistic communities

Summing up



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- In sum:
 - Cross-linguistic x-phi is indispensable to three overarching debates about truth in analytic philosophy
 - For this reason: the dominant Anglocentric model for inquiring about truth should be abandoned
 - At present: there are very few cross-linguistic studies of truth
 - Going forward, a priority should be to conduct more studies of this kind and to expand the range of languages covered by such studies
 - In doing so: we will be able to generate significant progress in debates about truth and promote cross-cultural understanding within and beyond philosophy



Kia ora/thanks!