

Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy 4

Amy Olberding *Editor*

# Dao Companion to the *Analects*

 Springer

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# Dao Companions to Chinese Philosophy

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Editor

# Dao Companion to the *Analects*

 Springer

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Amy Olberding

Few texts in any cultural or philosophical canon are as influential as the *Lunyu* 論語, or *Analects*. The text has been received as one of the earliest and most authoritative accounts of the life and thought of Confucius, Kongzi 孔子, and thus as a founding document in the tradition associated with him. The *Analects* has inspired generations of readers, informed the work of myriad philosophers, literati, and critics, and exercised considerable power over the cultural imagination. Likewise, Confucius, the thinker and moral exemplar at the heart of the text, enjoys an uncommon stature in both Chinese history and in the world's wisdom traditions. He is, as the *Analects* tells us, akin to sun and moon, achieving heights of learning and sagacity others simply cannot approach (19.24). It is difficult to overstate the sweeping and profound influence of this text and its protagonist. The work assembled in this volume aspires to provide an orientation to the *Analects* and to the thought of Confucius as it ostensibly features in that text. This brief introduction, then, simply provides short sketches of the history of the text, of Confucius, and of the structure of the volume itself.

### The *Analects*

While Tae Hyun Kim and Mark Csikszentmihalyi provide, in Chap. 3 of this volume, a detailed and sophisticated account of the textual history of the *Analects*, it is nonetheless useful to say here, in far briefer form, a bit about the text itself. Popular perceptions of the text, throughout much of Chinese history and perhaps even now among its global readership, have held that the text is a largely accurate and coherent record of Confucius' views and life composed by his students or their

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followers at a time closely proximate to Confucius' own life. The compositional history of the text should, however, make us wary of such assumptions.

The version of the *Analects* with which most readers are familiar, what is typically deemed the "received text," dates from several generations after Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.), from the Han 漢 Dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.). As Kim and Csikszentmihalyi detail, it was during this period that the text began to enjoy considerable scholarly attention. The *History of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) records that there were three different versions of the *Analects* in circulation early in the Han, one of which was said to be "ancient" and discovered concealed in the walls of a home believed to have belonged to Confucius. None of these three versions of the text survives today, however. Instead, the received text is the product of effort by Han Dynasty scholars to synthesize a single version of the text out of those available to them. Two notable early scholars of the text, ZHANG Yu 張禹 (d. 5 B.C.E.) and ZHENG Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200 C.E.), each compiled his own version of the text by editing together material from the texts then in circulation, the latter also appending commentary aimed at illuminating the text. These versions of the text, though very popular in their time, are also lost to us. The received version apparently derives from them, however. It is the work of HE Yan 何晏 (190–249 C.E.), who compiled his own eclectic version of the text by drawing on the works of Zhang and Zheng. Thus while presumably rooted in earlier versions of the text, the received version of the *Analects* is of relatively late date, quite temporally distant from Confucius and those who immediately followed him.

What we know of the origins of the received *Analects* of course immediately defies any assumption that *this version* of the text is the product of Confucius' immediate intellectual descendants. However, the origin story of the *Analects* is more complicated still and it is clear that we cannot even assume that the received text is, in any straightforward or complete way, *rooted in* the work of Confucius' near intellectual descendants. For there are reasons, internal to the text itself, to think that the material assembled therein was crafted over a far more generous temporal span than such an account of its origins will allow.

Beginning in the Qing 清 Dynasty (1644–1912), scholars of the *Analects* began to query closely the significance of the text's stylistic and linguistic variety. The tradition of textual scholarship they initiated continues to this day and, while there are many ongoing debates about just what conclusions may be drawn, what is clear is that the variations in linguistic conventions, syntax, and literary or argumentative style found within the *Analects* indicate that it is a text composed over several generations. It is, put simply, a pastiche of multiple historical strata, with some passages clearly dating to significantly later periods than the traditional popular view of the text could permit. To give but one uncontroversial example, the last five books of the *Analects* appear to be of later vintage than the rest of the text. Book 19, for example, is entirely composed of claims made by and dialogues between Confucius' students, with no direct purported quotation of Confucius himself. More generally, Books 16–20 abandon the practice in the prior books of referring to Confucius as "zi 子," or "the Master," instead using "Kongzi 孔子" ("Master Kong") or his style name Zhongni 仲尼. So too and perhaps most

basically, many the passages found here are simply strikingly and dramatically longer than what is found in the rest of the text. These and other indications internal to the text itself have led scholars to conclude that Books 16–20 represent a late stratum and perhaps multiple later strata of the text.

As noted above, the work of parsing the *Analects* in order to identify probable historical strata within it is ongoing. Identifying stylistic and linguistic anomalies is one element in this effort. Another is comparing the multiple styles of the text to those found in other texts of more certain vintage in order to trace, through such comparisons, rough probable dates for particular passages or groups of passages in the *Analects*. This work is the subject of much scholarly debate and secure conclusions remain elusive, but what is indubitably clear is that the traditional popular view – a view that ascribes historical accuracy and authenticity to the text’s account of Confucius by way of dating the text’s origin in temporal proximity to Confucius’ life and the lives of those who knew him – cannot be sustained. While individual passages or groups of passages may have a relatively early date, the text as a whole unambiguously does not. Some passages are certainly apocryphal and, moreover, we cannot assume that all reflect a common purpose or agenda.

While the mystery of the *Analects*’ origins is likely to remain insoluble, it is important to observe an additional front in efforts to understand the text’s history, the recent archaeological finds that have given us “new” versions of the text that antedate the received version. In recent decades archaeology has opened up new territory in scholarship on early Chinese texts as excavations of ancient tombs have yielded copies of canonical works that pre-date received versions. In the case of the *Analects*, the most notable discovery has been the Dingzhou *Analects*, a copy of the text found in 1973 in a tomb in Dingzhou that dates to 55 B.C.E., over 200 years older than any previously discovered editions. A second version of the text dating from this approximate period has also lately been excavated in North Korea, though scholarly access to this version has so far been quite limited. While the Dingzhou *Analects* does not radically depart from the received version, its modest differences in passage arrangement and use of variant characters suggestively indicate ways in which the text may have undergone alteration over time.<sup>1</sup> More generally, the discovery of earlier versions of the *Analects* and the possibility that others may be found is a potent signal that understanding of the provenance of the *Analects* is, and will likely remain, incredibly fluid.

Just as efforts to map the compositional history of the *Analects* are ongoing, so too articulating the hermeneutical implications of this history is an enduring subject of discussion among scholars of the text. That is, although scholars agree that the text is effectively a pastiche, what this bodes hermeneutically for interpreting the text philosophically is an open question. There are of course rather obvious hermeneutical implications of the *Analects*’ mixed origins. For example, while any philosophical text may contain inconsistencies, shifting emphases, or embed

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<sup>1</sup> Ames and Rosemont 1998 is a translation of the Dingzhou text and additionally provides notes and summary material on how the Dingzhou text differs from the received text.

in its reasoning subtle alterations in its claims, the compositional history of the *Analects* makes such elements especially challenging for interpreters. Ordinary hermeneutical practices, such as application of the principle of charity where shifts in reasoning are discerned, are complicated by the need to recognize that any apparent tensions in the text may result from differences in authorial sources. The wider issue in play and the governing question that informs all interpretation is whether and to what extent the text, despite its complex compositional history, evinces a conceptual and thematic unity that renders it available as *a piece* of philosophy rather than many fragmentary pieces of what may be *multiple* philosophies.

In addition to presenting Kim's and Csikszentmihalyi's astute survey of the text's history, the chapters assembled here come at the text from multiple vantage points. *How* to read the *Analects* is, put simply, a question that this volume invites readers to entertain rather than seeks to answer. Some of the chapters gathered here address their themes with attention to the *variety* of voices the *Analects* presents, highlighting the way in which distinct tones or movements in the text reflect the development of its concepts over time. Other chapters approach the text by considering the effects of the text's diverse voices drawn in *chorus*, treating the *Analects* as a volume that, whatever its mixed origins, was historically received by many readers as a presumptively unified totality. In presenting these contrasting approaches together, this volume mirrors the diversity of hermeneutical approaches to the text employed in contemporary scholarship. A plurality of hermeneutical methods need not, and in this volume is not, conceived to be a "problem" in need of resolution, but is instead conceived as an opportunity to entertain the happy complexity of an impossibly rich text and efforts to capture for understanding what it offers.

## Confucius

Just as the origins of the *Analects* remain somewhat mysterious, so too any accurate historical account of Confucius, the protagonist at the heart of the text, is elusive. Confucius is, put simply, a man about whom much has been said and little can be verified. The traditional account of his life largely rests on the biography offered by SIMA Qian 司馬遷 (c. 145–c. 86 B.C.E.) in the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*). SIMA Qian's account, however, is again quite temporally distant from Confucius' life. More significantly, his account, like many accounts of Confucius, interweaves hagiography and legend, and cannot be considered biographical in conformity with standards contemporary historians would recognize or employ. The struggle to capture the historical Confucius, put simply, rests in just this, in separating the man from the many legends that surround him. For Confucius has long featured in Chinese history as a figure whose "biography" is often presented and understood in ways strategically pitched to answer to present needs and purposes. As recent work by Michael Nylan and Thomas Wilson shows, Confucius is a figure with plural "lives," as iterations of his biography are often rhetorically

inflected and embellished to serve the needs of a particular time and place (Nylan and Wilson 2010).

There are some general features of Confucius' life we can remark with some confidence. Confucius was from the state of Lu and while little is known of his early life, Confucius himself notes in the *Analects* that he is of humble origin, ascribing his possession of many "menial" skills to just this (9.6). He suggests here that he has lived as one who, absent the privileges and perquisites of status, has had in some measure to make his own way in the world, acquiring his learning and refinement by effort rather than enjoying them as birthright. What we indubitably know is that Confucius came of age and lived during a time of increasing political and social instability, and this profoundly influenced his thinking.

Confucius lived during the Spring and Autumn period (*Chunqiu* 春秋, 722–481 B.C.E.) of the Eastern Zhou 周 period (770–221 B.C.E.), a time marked by the weakening of traditional political authority. Where once kings enjoyed reasonable command in a feudal order that located authority in the king and relied on lineage and kinship systems for the governance of individual fiefdoms, the period surrounding Confucius' lifetime was marked by a steep decline in monarchial authority. Provincial lords and nobility were increasingly asserting autonomy from the Zhou king, vying with each other for power and territory, and assuming for themselves both political authority and the symbolic ritual prerogatives that accompanied it. So too, the feudal nobility sometimes saw its own power challenged and usurped as ministerial advisors began to seize at opportunities to secure their own advantage and accumulate influence. During this time, the Zhou king was but a titular ruler and the locus of real power was ever shifting. It was, in short, a time in which the old order was giving way, but there was little sign that any coherent and stable new order would replace it.

Confucius' responses to the political and social realities of his age can be seen to ground the governing logic of his own life. Much of what Confucius says in the *Analects* can be read as resulting from reflections generated by the chaos of his society, his claims about everything from familial life to effective rulership borne of his efforts both to make a moral way for himself in a corrupt age and to discover wider remedies for its ills. That is, while the *Analects* is often aspirational, ambitiously describing harmonious familial and political relations, as well as investing the person of virtue with uncommon power, its aspirations are forged in disappointment. The world Confucius philosophically imagines and wishes to see realized is not the world he inhabits, a world he perceives as morally, politically, and socially adrift. Much of his teaching thus remarks in its recommendations just what he thinks is lost in his own age. During his lifetime, however, Confucius enjoyed little success in winning an audience for his views.

However much admiration Confucius received from his students and, through their propagation of his teachings, came to enjoy the admiration of generations that would follow, he was little recognized in his own age. Confucius' aspirations to serve as advisor to a ruler and thus to exercise political influence in the improvement of his society largely came to naught. Confucius' efforts to participate actively in politics took place on two fronts. He sought political employment in his home state of Lu, and when those efforts did not yield satisfying result, travelled

elsewhere, to neighboring states in search of better opportunities. He was, the *Analects* makes clear, sometimes solicited for his counsel on various matters, but whether at home or abroad, found no stable position. The highest post he achieved – a position, in his home state of Lu, roughly equivalent to police commissioner – was of relatively brief duration and did not lead to further promotion or opportunity. Confucius’ own lack of significant success in securing a stable and meaningful position in government is of course another pronounced thematic element in the *Analects*. We find in it Confucius’ reflections on good government, reflections that effectively recommend him for just the sort of work he was denied in life. And we find many comments that both sensitively acknowledge the struggle to live virtuously in an age that rarely rewards virtue and encourage equanimity where one fails to win public recognition of one’s merit.

Denied any formal role in politics, much of Confucius’ activity consisted in teaching students who, like himself, aspired to achieve posts of influence in government, and it is Confucius’ efforts as teacher that summon the lion’s share of the *Analects*’ attention. Confucius’ direction of his students simultaneously acknowledges their shared aspirations to improve society and the need to articulate carefully the abiding rewards of living ethically even should they fail in these aims. The sense of a community linked by common hopes and shared devotion to developing moral character permeates the *Analects*’ presentation of Confucius’ interactions with his students. Indeed, the *Analects*’ depiction of Confucius and his students is often treated as a describing what was effectively the first “Confucian community.”

Insofar as the *Analects*’ depiction of Confucius and his students can afford some glimpse into their mode of life, the features of this community and its members strikingly cast into relief key elements of Confucius’ teaching. First, it should be observed that Confucius’ students operate throughout the text as his interlocutors, their questions and interactions with Confucius stimulating many of Confucius’ observations. Moreover, as interlocutors, they are a diverse lot, their differing capacities for understanding and stages of moral development often apparently informing what Confucius’ says in his replies. More generally, based on what we see in the *Analects*, it is clear that the program of learning Confucius recommended was pitched at making his students able and competent actors in the politics of their day and that, for Confucius, this entailed making them, put simply, good people. The mechanisms through which this would be accomplished consisted in a rigorous syllabus of classical learning and, most generally, the acquisition of what can be called cultural refinement. Thus Confucius expects his students to master the classical literature of their age and, more broadly, to see the traditions and exemplars of the past as living guides and inspiration for their conduct. As Sor-hoon Tan argues later in this volume, in Chap. 16, achieving command of tradition and thereby deriving direction for present conduct is a strategy that simultaneously roots moral development in the demonstrated excellence of past successes and exemplars, and encourages new growth as the past and its models are appropriated to address present need. Confucius encourages his students to look upon their cultural inheritance as a commanding force, but does so in forward-looking aspiration.

It is beyond the scope of this brief introduction to detail the richly varied personae of Confucius’ students or rehearse the *Analects*’ narrative elements that

depict their experiences with Confucius. Suffice it to say that Confucius' students effectively represent a spectrum of abilities, achievement, and success. For example, YAN Hui 顏回, a young man of low background and considerable poverty, is Confucius' most adept learner. His capacities are such that Confucius once remarks that he himself is not as good as YAN Hui (5.9) and, on another occasion, pronounces him as beloved as a son (11.11). At the other end of the spectrum are students such as Zaiwo 宰我 and Ranyou 冉有. The former features in the *Analects* as rather indolent and insensitive, provoking Confucius to remark that he is akin to dried dung, a material of little use for building (5.10). The latter, Ranyou, shows more promise initially, but comes to disappoint Confucius rather dramatically. Ranyou does win a position of some influence with the ruling Ji 季 Family, but becomes corrupted under their influence and Confucius heatedly denounces him (11.17). Other students, such as Zilu 子路, clearly are both followers and friends to Confucius. Nearer to Confucius' own age, Zilu is a rather brash presence, often challenging Confucius and sometimes criticizing him. In short, the *Analects'* depictions of Confucius' students effectively make us privy to Confucius' instruction as it sounded and reverberated through the experience of learners of quite different personalities, temperaments, and abilities.

The rich mixture of personalities and temperaments we find in the *Analects'* depiction of Confucius' community of students breathes dramatic life into the text's account of Confucius' teaching and views. Perhaps most to the point, it serves to vividly animate Confucius' many claims about what a life lived virtuously may afford. While political ambitions, many of which are frustrated, inform and structure the lives of those depicted in the text, one comes to see that the many remarks Confucius makes about the joy afforded independently of worldly success has some foundation in the community of shared purpose and friendship he and his students achieve. Confucius' most immediate legacy, the only legacy *he* would have known himself to leave consisted in just this. As his life drew to its close, he must have believed himself to have failed in his most ambitious aims. He could not then have imagined that his students would transmit his teachings with the success they did and thereby give birth to a cultural tradition that would dominate China for generations. Instead, the compensations and rewards of his life were far more intimate and modest. The *Analects* perhaps captures this best in an exchange between Zilu and Confucius. In *Analects* 9.12, Confucius' is ill and, in a striking misjudgment, Zilu has his fellow students pose as retainers so that Confucius will appear to be of higher status than he in fact is, his household populated by attendants his status would not warrant:

The Master was gravely ill, and so Zilu sent some of his disciples to serve as retainers. On improving slightly, Confucius said, "It has been a long time indeed that Zilu has been up to such pretenses. If I have no retainers and yet pretend to have them, who am I going to fool? Am I going to fool *tian* 天? Further, wouldn't I rather die in the arms of my disciples than in the arms of some retainers? Even though I do not get a grand state funeral, I am hardly dying by the roadside" (9.12).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>The translation of 9.12 given here is from Ames and Rosemont 1998.

Confucius' response to Zilu's scheme distills a sense of Confucius' life as he himself may have seen it. He did not get all he wanted, or even all many thought he deserved, but his resolve was to appreciate deeply the company of companions committed, like him, to find the subtler joys a life of virtue could afford.

## Organization of the Volume

As the foregoing remarks on the *Analects'* origins suggest, interpretation of the text presents many challenges. This is true, however, even apart from any consideration of problems in identifying authorship and distinguishing historical strata among its various layers. While many texts allow multiple interpretations, the *Analects* simply permits an uncommonly wide range and resists distillation into secure conclusions. The text is at once laconic and expansive. Its structure, an apparently non-linear assemblage of brief, suggestive passages, affords little that can readily steer a reader along any clear interpretive path. The individual passages themselves are often oblique, their terse messages richly evocative rather than plainly directive or transparent in meaning. Nonetheless, the conceptual compass of the text is vast, gathering under its scope reflections on family, friendship, and community; learning, history, classical literature, and music; rulership, governance, and politics; high ceremony and prosaic etiquette; behavioral norms, moral emotions, and appropriate demeanor; and more. So too, the forms of communication employed in the text are multiple. The text details claims Confucius made, conversations between Confucius and his students, and descriptions of Confucius himself and his life.

Because the diversity of the text's interests and themes, as well as its fragmentary, non-linear style, render it open to multiple disciplinary approaches, no single approach will exhaustively capture what the text offers. This volume thus does not aspire to completeness. Instead, the work assembled here is aimed at a more modest goal: providing self-consciously philosophical treatments of the text's most noteworthy philosophical concepts, claims, and implications. Underwriting this approach is the assumption that whatever else the text may do, it affords reflections, insights, and indeed implicit arguments that are of philosophical interest both for understanding the worldview limned in the text and for appropriation in contemporary theorizing.

Even with the self-conscious aim of approaching the *Analects* philosophically, there are of course myriad ways in which this might be done, multiple philosophical methodologies that might be applied to the text. Rather than adopt a common methodology, the authors writing for this volume represent a spectrum of interpretive strategies. The hermeneutical difficulty of the *Analects*, these strategies make clear, is also a kind of openness, an invitation to trace its suggestions along multiple interpretive routes. Confucius avers that he provides "one corner" and expects learners to infer the other three (7.8). The work assembled here engages just that effort, showing the variety in scholarly attempts to interpret this singular text.

We here seek simply to present, rather than unify, the diversity of interpretations the text has invited.

The body of the volume is divided into three major parts. The first, comprised of Chaps. 2, 3 and 4, establishes the *Analects* in historical context. While the focus of the volume is on philosophical interpretation of the text, the history of the text's formation, the commentarial tradition the text generated, and Confucius' life, all inform understanding of it. The *Analects* is a text that embeds a particular historical view in its treatment of Confucius and his community and enjoys its own rich history *qua* text. Part I of the volume thus seeks to orient understanding of the *Analects* in this wider context.

As noted above, the *Analects* is a text constructed over time, the work of apparently many hands. In Chap. 2, "History and Formation of the *Analects*," Tae Hyun Kim and Mark Csikszentmihalyi assay the history of textual criticism applied to the text. From a very early period, Kim and Csikszentmihalyi show, scholars developed differing ideas about the origins of the *Analects*. Beginning in the Qing Dynasty, theories regarding the text's formation became increasingly sophisticated, the text understood as a layered document that contained accumulated accretions in which different authorial voices could be discerned. More recently, archaeological efforts have unearthed versions of the text that pre-date the received version and enrich understanding of the text's composition and history. Surveying generations of thinking about the text and efforts to understand its complicated compositional history, Kim and Csikszentmihalyi provide both a history of the text *qua* text and a history of the many scholars who have sought to unlock the mysteries of its origins. These processes, they aver, not only demonstrate much of interest regarding authorship and text formation in early China, they stand as hermeneutical challenge for contemporary readers, for whom earnest engagement with the text requires sensitivity to the complexity and diverse origins of its contents.

Chapter 3, "The Commentarial Tradition" by John Henderson and On-cho Ng, situates the commentarial tradition to which the *Analects* gave rise by considering both particular movements in interpretation evident in Chinese commentaries and, more broadly, the way in which these commentaries participate in hermeneutical strategies and commitments seen in many canonical traditions. As Henderson and Ng observe, many readers of the *Analects* would historically have engaged the text through interpretive glosses and paradigms provided by scholars. In their chapter, Henderson and Ng survey both some of the work of these scholars and the hermeneutical orientations they adopted. In particular, they argue that responsible engagement with and interpretation of the text by these scholars often incorporated criteria identifiable in other canonical traditions: (1) The text was taken to be all-inclusive and thus it affirmatively contained or could address all truth. (2) The text was ordered by logic that, however opaque it might initially appear, could be discerned and thus revealed in interpretation. (3) The text contained no genuine contradictions and the task of interpretation was in part to dissolve, through various devices, any apparent contradictions. (4) The text was understood to exhibit profundity and refinement in its reasoning, qualities responsible interpretation would illuminate. (5) Nothing in the text was counted extraneous or inessential,



and Henderson and Ng canvass the many and arduous efforts to assay the text's myriad inflections and meanings, highlighting significant movements in interpretation and the historical contexts from which these emerged.

In Chap. 4, "Confucius and His Community," Lo Yuet Keung offers a survey of Confucius' life. The chapter focuses in particular on Confucius' autobiographical account of himself, found in *Analects* 2.4: "At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I established myself; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart's desire without overstepping the line."<sup>3</sup> Lo provides an interpretation of Confucius' life as it is presented here and focuses in particular on the stages of learning Confucius here articulates. Confucius, Lo avers, must be understood not simply as sage, but as learner, his sagacity in fact a product of his identification of himself as one who unfailingly devotes himself to a continual process of learning. In his analysis, Lo thus assays the suggestion in Confucius' account of demarcated stages in his own development, and seeks to articulate how each stage in the progression Confucius' achieves may be understood. He likewise frames the account of learning embedded here in its wider context, contrasting Confucius' posture toward learning with that of rival views found in Mohism and Daoism. Finally, he suggests how the process Confucius ascribes to himself informs his role as teacher and how it features among the community of Confucius' students.

With the historical context and situation of the *Analects* in hand, Part II of the volume assays many of the *Analects*' most pronounced philosophical commitments and claims by examining the text's conceptual landscape. The approach adopted in this section employs the philosophical lexicon of the text as a gateway to the path the text marks out, using particular concepts or concept clusters as mechanisms for accessing the text's wider arguments and commitments. Each chapter in this section is thematically organized around a concept or concept cluster and seeks both to explicate the particular claims, injunctions, and commitments related to the concept and to situate these in the wider compass of the text's worldview and commitments.

Part II begins with an analysis of the concept *ren* 仁, a concept at once at the heart of what the *Analects* offers and interpretively elusive given Confucius' sometimes oblique and varied uses of it. In Chap. 5, "Ren 仁: An Exemplary Life," Karyn Lai organizes her discussion of *ren* by focusing on the ways in which *ren* associates throughout the *Analects* with a life well lived. *Ren*, she argues, most fundamentally describes a quality discernable in morally exemplary lives and indeed understanding *ren* as that which both structures and manifests in an exemplary life can serve as a framework through which to read the text's diverse claims about it. Lai's analysis begins with consideration of how the *Analects*' usage of *ren* is distinctive and distinctively broader than what we find in other, both earlier and later, texts. Its expansive quality is highlighted in particular with reference to its association with, though not reducibility to, moral dispositions the *Analects* recommends. Fundamental to the concept, Lai avers, is the commitment to the

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<sup>3</sup> As Lo does, I here use the translation of Lau 1979.

well being of others. In describing the account of the exemplary life the *Analects* appears to associate with *ren*, Lai offers contextually sensitive treatments of many of the text's claims about *ren* and couples these with reflections regarding how the model of the exemplary life the *Analects* proffers might fruitfully inform contemporary thinking and reasoning regarding the good life.

In Chap. 6, "Ritual and Rightness in the *Analects*," Hagop Sarkissian addresses both *li* 禮 and *yi* 義. The most formidable ethical practice endorsed in the *Analects*, *li*, or ritual, encompasses a range of human conduct, from formal court rituals to norms of etiquette for interpersonal interaction. Sarkissian both details the textual sources for understanding the distinctive potency Confucius identified as belonging to the *li* and assays the several contemporary scholarly interpretive strategies for framing their significance in the wider ethical and socio-political sensibilities of the *Analects*. His analysis undertakes examination of many core philosophical questions the *Analects*' emphasis on the *li* raise and, in particular, considers what role emotion and the training of a learner's emotions play in recommendations to follow the *li*. Throughout, Sarkissian's analysis couples close textual scrutiny with sensitivity to insights regarding expressive conventional conduct yielded by contemporary psychology. In contrast with *li*, Sarkissian argues, *yi*, or "rightness," appears pitched in the *Analects* to in part address recognition that the *li* cannot exhaustively cover the entirety of human experience and situations. *Yi*, he explains, effectively couples with *li* to encompass and mark a path toward the fundamental goal of social harmony limned in the text.

Perhaps the most pronounced element in the social harmony articulated in the *Analects* is familial life and the relations between family members from which wider social orders emerge. In Chap. 7, "Family Reverence (*xiao* 孝) in the *Analects*: Confucian Role Ethics and the Dynamics of Intergenerational Transmission," Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. address the central importance of flourishing familial relations captured in part in the concept *xiao* 孝, which they translate as "family reverence." Ames' and Rosemont's analysis of *xiao* is first grounded in recognition that in the worldview of the *Analects*, human sociality is a potent given, with human beings conceived as always embedded in a nexus of relationships with others and inhabiting roles that articulate those associations in wider, socially recognized ways. People, they argue, are here defined by way of the roles they instantiate with and for others. Ames' and Rosemont's analysis of *xiao*, as a value concept that aspirationally targets relational living, examines the cognate characters, *ti* 體 ("body," "embodying," "forming and shaping," "category, class") and *li* 禮 ("ritual," "achieving propriety in one's roles and relations") as a way to capture the sense that *xiao* addresses an embodied virtuosity in relationship. Using their distinctive conceptualization of Confucian "role ethics," Ames and Rosemont argue that the ethical and deeply relational aspirations embedded in the concept of *xiao* entails conceiving the person as one who embodies in her person and conduct the accumulated traditions, rituals, aesthetic sense, and, most broadly, cultural learning and values of her society.

While *li*, *yi*, and *xiao* can be loosely understood as belonging to a vocabulary of behavior, action, and comportment, conceptually capturing broad values regarding

ethical conduct, the *Analects* also evinces a marked interest in speech and the relation between speech and morality. In Chap. 8, “Language and Ethics in the *Analects*,” Hui-chieh Loy provides a comprehensive consideration of the relation between speech and morality, both as they ought intersect for individual moral agents and as the relation between language and morality will influence social order. As Loy explains, in the *Analects*, we find a consistent emphasis on care in speech coupled with observations that disparage and discourage speech that is too skillfully eloquent or clever. One conclusion this immediately recommends is that Confucius is concerned that speech not outpace or conceal the reality of the speaker’s character, that one ought not assume in one’s words a moral posture unsustainable by one’s conduct. This, Loy avers, may be seen as importantly related to the oft-cited doctrine of “correcting names” found in *Analects* 13.3, where Confucius appears to suggest that correcting the “promiscuous” use of language has implications for social morality. Loy’s analysis of *Analects* 13.3 considers the possibility that this passage is a later addition to the text, but traces the sensibility it endorses to other claims Confucius’ makes, showing that the seeds of what would later come to be prominent themes in Confucian thought about language are available in the *Analects*. Finally, Loy considers what can be concluded regarding Confucius’ attitudes toward speech as a medium for ethical guidance and, in particular whether *yan* 言, *qua* verbal formulations intended to school learners, are effective in directing learning and development. Contrasting Confucius’ claims to those of Mohists and Daoists, Loy concludes that Confucius hews to a middle position that neither evinces the confidence in *yan* seen in the Mohists, nor adopts the rather fulsome skepticism seen in the Daoists.

In Chap. 9, “Uprightness, Indirection, Transparency,” Lisa Raphals undertakes a study of the concepts of “straightness” (*zhen* 真) and “uprightness” or “to rectify” (*zheng* 正), as they relate to language but also, and more significantly, as they more broadly capture communication and action in its broadest sense. The standard view in scholarship on the *Analects* has held that Confucius prized uprightness, taken to indicate a rather orthodox sense of moral correctness. Raphals’ analysis of these terms, and of *zheng* in particular, challenges this view. While *zhen* and *zheng* are frequently treated in scholarship as being synonymous, Raphals argues that they must be carefully distinguished and focuses in particular on the ways in which *zheng* enjoys a broad conceptual compass in the *Analects*. *Zheng*, she argues, should be understood to encompass alignment in multiple senses, including the epistemological, physical, and even cosmological. Contextualizing the *Analects*’ use of *zheng* in historical context, showing its affinity in particular with uses of the term in the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) and “Inner Cultivation” (*Nei ye* 內業) chapter of the *Guanzi* 管子, Raphals links her proposed revision of understanding of *zheng* with the *Analects*’ clear though often understated interest in *wuwei* 無為, which she translates as “acting without acting.” Confucius, she argues, does not uniformly privilege the direct while disdaining indirection. Indeed, she argues, the *Analects* provides an implicit account of indirection quite distinct from later Confucian works.

Part II of the volume concludes with two chapters that consider the text's more global interest in articulating and developing a path toward virtue for moral learners. Chapter 10, "Cultivating the Self in Concert with Others" by David Wong, affords a study of the moral psychology available in the *Analects*, describing the project of self-cultivation limned in the text and what implicit commitments regarding moral psychology are evident in it. Wong argues, first, that a key technique evident in the *Analects* is the presentation of moral exemplars who afford models for emulation by the learner. Second, he shows that the process of moral development limned in the text places emotion at the foreground of virtue and, consequently, renders the cultivation of moral emotion a central imperative in moral development. Attending closely to how ritual, *ren*, and other value concepts, such as *shu* 恕, sketch a program in which the agent's emotions and capacity to recognize and appreciate the emotions of others are crucially important, Wong argues that the *Analects*' emphasis on the emotions provides much that is of interest for contemporary moral psychology. Third, as is evident in his analysis of emotion, Wong shows the deeply relational character of moral cultivation in the *Analects*. Following the path laid out in the *Analects*, he demonstrates, entails conceiving the development of character as a project pursued within community and under the influence of communal practices and values. While Wong's analysis throughout closely attends to insights gleaned from contemporary psychology, he concludes with an explicit consideration of Confucian resources for addressing the problems raised by situationism. The *Analects*' view of moral cultivation, he suggests, offers resources that can be harnessed to answer to such contemporary challenges to character-based moral theorizing.

Finally, Part II concludes with a consideration of the *Analects*' resources for explaining moral failure. While the prior chapters attend to the affirmative aims and values articulated in the text, in Chap. 11, "Perspectives on Moral Failure in the *Analects*," Amy Olberding considers what the text suggests for understanding the forces at work when people morally err. Olberding focuses jointly on Confucius' remarks about the *xiaoren* 小人, or "petty person," and on the *Analects*' narrative presentation of Ranyou 冉有, one of Confucius' students who rather dramatically morally fails. Confucius' comments about the *xiaoren*, she argues, are of limited use in explaining moral failure, particularly the moral failures to which ordinary people and moral learners will be prey, for they tend toward depicting the *xiaoren* as an implausibly unified corrupt character, the *xiaoren* featuring as one rather totally bad. Instead, she argues, Confucius' use of the *xiaoren* seems to best function as a strategy for discouraging, rather than explaining, moral failure, operating as a hortatory device for stimulating aversion in moral learners. In the *Analects*' presentation of Confucius' student Ranyou, however, a more sophisticated and nuanced perspective on moral failure emerges. In Ranyou and Confucius' responses to Ranyou's failings, we find resources to address more fully the psychology of moral failure, both as it may manifest in succumbing to temptations and through moral confusion. Unlike the *xiaoren*, Ranyou features in the text as a kind of everyman, and Confucius' responses to him thus show something of how more ordinary moral failure may be understood.

The final section of the volume, Part III, is devoted to consideration of some of the most important interpretive challenges and controversies featuring in contemporary debates about the *Analects*. Like the scholarship from which this section draws, Part III entertains two related interests, both assaying interpretive challenges the text poses and considering how addressing these challenges will inform what use contemporary philosophers may make of the *Analects* in wider, ongoing philosophical debates. The chapters gathered here, that is, consider both interpretive dilemmas that emerge from the text and the stakes of these dilemmas for utilizing the *Analects* as inspiration and resource in contemporary philosophical reasoning.

In Chap. 12, “The *Analects* and Moral Theory,” Steven C. Angle canvasses the several ways in which scholars have recently sought to describe the *Analects* with reference to moral theory. As Angle details, efforts to locate moral theory in the *Analects* have yielded quite diverse interpretive frameworks, ranging from deontological readings to virtue ethics to role ethics. Angle’s analysis of these trends is grounded throughout by a sensitive treatment of the metatheoretical and methodological commitments evident in them. Part of what is at issue, he argues, in efforts to read the *Analects* for theory is just what relationship this text can or should have to patterns of philosophical reasoning and conceptual categories developed in western philosophical discourse. Worries about interpretively rendering the text in idioms alien to it couple with worries about isolating the text from ongoing philosophical dialogue by eschewing the idioms in which that dialogue is engaged. Angle observes the justice of both concerns and suggests the importance of acknowledging conceptually distinct, though sometimes practically overlapping, “scholarly modes”: the interpretive and the dialogical. The former, he notes, will adopt and appropriate non-indigenous theoretical schemata and vocabulary only where doing so promises to illuminate the text in ways interpretation without such tools cannot. In contrast, the dialogical mode will privilege that which can enable interaction between this text and others, fostering through shared conceptual frameworks the possibility of cross-cultural and cross-philosophical conversation. In his analysis of the various theoretical models in play, then, Angle considers each with reference to wider concerns and aspirations regarding robustly pluralistic and global philosophical discourse.

Chapter 13, “Religious Thought and Practice in the *Analects*” by Erin M. Cline, considers the often thorny debate regarding just how the *Analects* may be understood with respect to religious sensibility. As Cline observes, it seems clear that the *Analects* has both religious elements and something like a religious sensibility. However, characterizing those elements more exactly, whether by identifying doxastic commitments or by considering the practices endorsed in the text, presents significant interpretive challenges. Cline surveys the considerable range of scholarly opinion regarding religion in the *Analects* and demonstrates through a close examination of the text itself just why secure conclusions on the subject remain elusive. Focused in particular on the most controversial challenges dividing interpretations – Confucius’ views regarding *tian* 天 and the existence of spirits – Cline consistently calibrates her review of the diverse scholarship on the subject

with consideration of the text's resources, both its claims and its more ambiguous allusions. Finally, like Angle, Cline acknowledges that the stakes of considering the religious aspects of the *Analects* often engage interests scholars have in drawing connections and affinities between this text and contemporary philosophical sensibilities and interests. Cline cautions, however, against any easy assent to finding views in the *Analects* that closely mirror contemporary perspectives and advocates carefully situating the text in its own historical and cultural context that we might better see it in its own right, both as it assents to and deviates from views prevalent in its own age and context.

Like the religious dimensions of the *Analects*, the political orientation and possibilities of the text have long generated scholarly debate. In Chap. 14, "The *Analects* and Forms of Governance," BAI Tongdong considers what views of government and political leadership emerge from the text. As Bai observes, recent scholarship on the text has been profoundly influenced by contemporary political concerns and, in particular, with assessing what, if any, resources the Confucian tradition might afford for modeling distinctively Chinese forms of liberal democracy and democratic political structures. Bai presents a growing countertrend to this effort and argues that the *Analects* more closely aligns with a form of meritocracy that would both provide for upward mobility based on skill and enable government by a talented and learned elite. Bai argues that the political struggles and crises to which the *Analects* responds anticipate those seen in the western transition to modernity. In particular, he observes, the text is situated in a time in which developing a new system to replace a collapsing hereditary system of rulership has urgency and Confucius suggests, he argues, a remedy in which merit identified through demonstrated competence and ability in learning would replace the old hereditary order. Finally, Bai argues that in the *Analects* we see the beginning of a political sensibility that traces to the later Confucian tradition and endorses meritocratic rule, and that we should consider whether this recommendation poses useful and potent challenges to liberal democracy.

As is the case with so many canonical philosophical works, the *Analects* was composed in a patriarchal age. And, as with many works from classical corpuses, one concern in both interpretation and appropriation of the text is whether and how it can incorporate contemporary egalitarian and feminist sensibilities. In Chap. 15, "Why Care? A Feminist Re-appropriation of Confucian *Xiao*," Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee details the most prominent strain in feminist interpretation of the *Analects*, the effort both to recognize strong affinities and to develop a closer alliance between Confucian ethics and contemporary feminist care ethics. As Rosenlee observes, care ethics develops in the liberal west and confesses its origins in reaction to prevailing western views of autonomy, critiquing the individualistic flavor and inflexibly principle-governed abstraction of many western moral theories. Confucianism, as it emerges from the *Analects*, Rosenlee argues, originates instead in a deeply relational understanding of the human person and thus comprehends a model of flourishing immediately promising for feminist appropriation and alliance with care sensibilities. The aims of care ethics, she shows, not only bear a strong affinity to Confucian sensibilities regarding family and the constitution of a

meaningful life, they may find support and enriching supplement in consideration of Confucianism. In a chapter that interweaves consideration of high theoretical concerns with sensitive observations on the practical, lived experience of what it means to care well for others, Rosenlee reflects on how care ethics and Confucian ethics jointly provide mechanisms for conceiving a richly relational form of human flourishing. Ultimately, she contends, developing a hybrid blending of care and Confucian sensibilities regarding the deeply relational nature of moral life is one of the more promising possibilities for developing genuinely global feminism.

Finally, Chap. 16, “Balancing Conservatism and Innovation: The Pragmatic *Analects*” by Sor-hoon Tan, addresses a persistent interpretive struggle in reading the *Analects*. The *Analects*, it is often observed, combines two apparently contradictory impulses, lauding fidelity to tradition while detailing in its depiction of Confucius a philosopher who undoubtedly creatively innovates. Tan’s analysis undertakes to assess and reconcile this apparent tension. Confucius’ vaunting of tradition and apparent conservatism, she argues, is far from any uncritical endorsement of slavish adherence to the past. Instead, it can be understood to emerge from a pragmatic attitude through which Confucius sought remedy to present ills through close and critical reflection regarding what past successful patterns could model for contemporary appropriation. Commitment to honoring the past and tradition was, Tan argues, a commitment to learning from it with an eye toward marshaling resources of excellence and authority to address present ills. Sensitive to how current debates about conservatism feature in contemporary revivals of Confucianism in present day China, Tan’s analysis makes a case for seeing Confucius’ lauding of tradition and commitment to preserving past models as a deeply pragmatic and ultimately innovative strategy, one that cultivates a sensitivity to excellence through which present problems may be better understood and more efficaciously addressed.

## Conventions

With a work of this sort there are of course some competing interests. The hope is to provide a volume that is accessible for reader use, but so too, it is important not to suppress complexity and scholarly variety in favor of accessibility. This is most felt in the issue of translation, for there is no scholarly consensus regarding how best to render in English many of the most important and frequently discussed terms in the philosophical lexicon of the *Analects*. Indeed, a scholar’s choice of what English terms to use in translation is part of her work as an interpreter and will typically carry meaningful indicators of her interpretation. Because of this, no effort has been made in this volume to standardize across its many chapters the translation of Chinese terms or of passages from the *Analects*. Instead, each scholar contributing to the volume has made his or her own choices with respect to translation matters. As I note earlier in this introduction, the work assembled here observes, both directly and indirectly, the many interpretive challenges of

reading the *Analects*. Translation is one of these challenges. Nonetheless, to facilitate reader identification of these translation choices across chapters, key Chinese terms are given in the text of each essay and the index provided of the whole serves to link the variety of translation choices to the Chinese source terms. A note is included at the beginning of each chapter that indicates whether the translations included in the chapter are the author's own or derive, in whole or in part, from existing published translations.

Numbering of passages in the *Analects* can vary slightly in different editions of the work. In order to provide a uniform system that will make passages cited in the volume easy to locate, each citation of the *Analects* is followed, first, by the number of that passage in D.C. Lau's widely available edition of the work. Where scholars have employed another edition of the work, the numbering in that edition, if it differs from Lau's numbering, is given following the Lau number. An index locorum is also included at the end of the volume in order to facilitate readers' ability to locate all sections of the volume where a particular passage is discussed.

Finally, it bears emphasizing that there is much more that may be said about the *Analects* than is offered here. The text's long history and rich insights defy efforts at summary. The work presented here, it is hoped, can provide a ready reference for some of the text's most important claims, commitments, and values, but so too, its authors hope that it will inspire additional and deeper inquiry.

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**Part I**  
**Text and Context**

## Chapter 2

# History and Formation of the *Analects*

Tae Hyun Kim and Mark Csikszentmihalyi

It is possible, of course, to pick up and read the *Analects* without concern for its pedigree, historical significance, or authorship.<sup>1</sup> Pithy and sometimes humorous, its paragraphs can trigger profound reflection even in a reader completely unaware of its cultural resonances. Yet for many *Analects* readers past and present, both the authority and import of the text are tied to specific claims about its authorship and structure. For this reason, serious scholarship on the *Analects qua* text has been going on almost since it first gained wide circulation in the Han 漢 Dynasty (206 B. C.E. – 220 C.E.). Since at least the time of Cui Shu 崔述 (1740–1816) in the Qing 清 Dynasty, scholars have gone even further and applied probing critical and hermeneutical approaches to the *Analects*. Vying over the nature of its connection to a historical Confucius, and at times tracing the text back to multiple sources, work in this critical vein has provided a rich basis for modern readers who wish to know how the text formed in order to understand its contents in historical context.

In this chapter, we lay out some of the major concerns of such textual scholarship on the *Analects* and explain what was at stake both in terms of the historical concerns that produced such research, and also spell out its implications for the modern reader who brings a different set of assumptions to the text. We begin with the earliest accounts and appropriations of the *Analects* in the Han Dynasty, which describe its refinement into something like its current form, and how it was taught and studied in distinct social locations to particular ends. We then turn to early modern and modern studies of the text by researchers in China, Japan, and the West who were in part inspired by the text-critical concerns of Qing scholars, and to the perspectives on text formation gained from recent archaeological finds of early

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Chinese language sources quoted in this chapter are the authors' own translations.

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versions and quotations of the *Analects*. Having outlined these stages of writing on the history and formation of the work, we then discuss how the concerns that animated such research have given way to different approaches to such classical works, and sketch the implications of the results of these changes for a reader approaching the text with contemporary questions about the nature of the *Analects*, its authorship, and its composition.

Reconstructing the early history of a work that has gone through thousands of years of revision and recontextualization is a difficult task, and it is worth emphasizing how little is definitively known about the early composition of the *Analects*. Before the first extant systematic treatments of Confucius' life and of his writings, 300–400 years of comparative silence surrounded his biography and much of the content of the one work that is now regarded as most representative work of his worldview.<sup>2</sup> While we will see that several early texts describe how many of the anecdotes in the *Analects* were written down soon after Confucius' death, the existence of this “silent period” has provided an opening for a strong revisionist challenge to the assumption of its early origins. In the next section, we look at the first systematic statements to emerge after this silence, and examine why it is that the *Analects* was compiled, or emerged from relative obscurity, in the Han dynasty.

## Han Accounts of the Formation of the *Analects*

Even though the *Analects* has usually been dated to the Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國) period (475–221 B.C.E.), the first several attributed quotations of it and the first accounts of its composition both date to the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.), the long formative period of consolidation that followed the Warring States Period and brief Qin 秦 unification (221–206 B.C.E.). An early collation of quotations that may today be found in the *Analects* also appears, albeit in a different order and with some other material, in two individual chapters of the *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記), traditionally dated to the end of the second century B.C.E. The chapters are entitled “Biographical traditions surrounding Zhongni's [i.e., Confucius] Disciples” (*Zhongni dizi liezhuan* 仲尼弟子列傳) and “Hereditary House of Confucius” (*Kongzi shijia* 孔子世家).<sup>3</sup> As we will see, the earliest archaeologically

<sup>2</sup> It is true that the distinction here between biographical materials and quotations or descriptions of Confucius' positions may well be anachronistic prior to the arrangements of traditions (*liezhuan* 列傳) surrounding historical figures in the circa 100 B.C.E. *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*). However, it is noteworthy that many of standard elements of such biographies (ancestry, birthplace, highest official title, etc.) are not part of materials quoted in the “Masters” literature prior to the *Shiji*, hence the term “comparative silence”. On this point see the important early work of Makeham 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Other collections of overlapping materials exist, such as chapters 28–32 of the *Xunzi* 荀子 or numerous chapters of the *Family Sayings of Confucius* (*Kongzi jiaju* 孔子家語). However, the dating of these chapters is usually understood to be more speculative than that of the *Shiji* (*Records of the Historian*).

excavated versions of the *Analects* date to the middle of the first century C.E., making the late second and early first century B.C.E. the first period we can definitively say the material in the *Analects* truly began to be widely cited and taught. In the century that followed, its importance was confirmed when writers began to ask and answer questions about the origins and structure of the text, and to engage in the kind of exegesis suited to pedagogical uses.

Two somewhat conflicting accounts of its composition and structure are found in the *Balanced Discussions* (*Lunheng* 論衡) of WANG Chong 王充 (27-c.100 C.E.) and the *History of the Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書), assembled and rewritten from earlier materials by BAN Gu 班固 (39–92 C.E.). These two accounts are part of two different kinds of books, and reflect different attitudes towards contemporary versions of the *Analects*. Nevertheless, they both assume that the versions they were reading either dated to the time of Confucius' disciples, or were a subset of a more ancient work from the age of the early disciples.

While excavations of Han tombs have unearthed numerous copies of works that were likely thought to have post-mortem utility for the tomb occupants, a very different cross-section of the Han literary universe is available in the bibliographical listings in BAN Gu's *History of the Han*. The listings are the outgrowth of an imperially sponsored inventory of books commissioned originally during the reign of Emperor Cheng 成帝 (33–7 B.C.E.), and revised during the subsequent reign of Emperor Ai 哀帝 (7–1 B.C.E.). The section devoted to the *Analects*, consisting of 12 titles in 229 chapters, tells quite a bit about versions of the *Analects* and related texts that were in circulation in the late Western Han 西漢 period. This *History of the Han* inventory begins with three versions of the *Analects* itself, an "ancient" (*gu* 古) version in 21 chapters, a state of Qi 齊 version in 22 chapters, and a state of Lu 魯 version in 20 chapters, the last of these also having a "transmission" (*zhuan* 傳) in 19 chapters. Of these three versions, the Lu version has the same number of chapters, 20, as the modern version and appears to be more like the modern version than either of the other two. A commentarial note transmitted with the original inventory notes that the "ancient" version 出孔子壁中兩子張 "came out of Confucius' wall, and contains two Zizhang [chapters]." This version was written in the ancient script used before the imperial standardization of the late third century B.C.E., and likely differs from the Lu version in that the last section of the last chapter of the modern edition was separated out into its own chapter, making it the 21st chapter. The second half of that chapter in the modern edition begins "Zizhang asked" 子張問, and so likely was separated from the first half to constitute an independent "Zizhang" 子張 chapter. It was the second "Zizhang chapter" since the 19th chapter also begins with the words "Zizhang," and chapter titles derived from the first words of the chapter.<sup>4</sup> The Qi version has two more chapters than the Lu version, and the commentarial notes say it "has extra 'Asked

<sup>4</sup>This contrast is substantially confirmed by the formal aspects of the Dingzhou find (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 147).

the King’ and ‘Knew the Way’ [chapters]” 多問王知道。<sup>5</sup> If this comment works like the other one, we may infer that all three versions consisted of the same core material, but the “ancient” version divided the last chapters differently, and the Qi version had two extra chapters.

Besides these three early versions of the *Analects* circulating in the first century B.C.E., the inventory also lists early works dedicated to explanations (*shuo* 說) of the *Analects*, works that probably had many characteristics of commentaries. The inventory includes a “state of Qi” explanation in 29 chapters and a “state of Yan” transmitted explanations in three bundles. Some works of this type were also associated with individuals: 21 chapters of explanations by the Marquis [Sheng 勝] of Xia 夏 (d. 17 B.C.E.) from Lu, another 21 by the Marquis [ZHANG Yu 張禹] of Anchang 安昌 (d. 5 B.C.E.) from Lu, and 20 by WANG Jun 王駿 (d. 15 B.C.E.) from Lu. Of these, the most influential was likely that of ZHANG Yu, who was charged with teaching the text to the heir apparent in the 40s B.C.E. For this pedagogical purpose, he compiled his own *Sections and Sentences of the Analects* (*Lunyu zhangju* 論語章句), which became the most influential version of the text during that time: “most scholars adopted Zhang’s text.”<sup>6</sup> This may be a sign that the three versions listed at the beginning of the *Analects* section of the inventory were effectively replaced by the Zhang version in the 40s B.C.E.

Finally, the inventory lists other works connected to the *Analects* that probably drew on the text but applied it to political and ritual contexts. The titles of the lost 18 chapter *Memorials* (*Yizou* 議奏) and a seven chapter *Confucius’ Three Audiences* (*Kongzi sanchao* 孔子三朝) both refer to the practice of remonstrance to the emperor and may have had persuasive and/or ritual content.<sup>7</sup> The inventory also contains the *Family Sayings of Confucius* (*Kongzi jiaju* 孔子家語), a version of which circulates today as a miscellaneous collection of Confucius-related works. Finally, a two bundle work called *Models for Portraits of Confucius and Disciples* (*Kongzi turen tufa* 孔子徒人圖法) likely contained depictions for sacrificial contexts.

This inventory provides a sketch of how the *Analects* and related texts circulated in the Han, and also speaks to the social role occupied by the text in the first century B.C.E. The ritual and political applications of the text coincide with its role in the curriculum for training the crown prince, giving the impression that at the time the text was seen as an expression of the fundamentals of ritual and political practices

<sup>5</sup> These phrases do not exist in the current *Analects*, but it is worth noting that the similar-looking chapter title “Asked about jade” (*wen yu* 問) appears in the modern version of the *Family Sayings of Confucius*, another work whose title appears in the inventory. The content of this “Asked about Jade” chapter that may have been part of the Han edition of the Qi version of the *Analects* concerns the way that jade mimics the virtues of the gentleman. Versions also appear in the *Record of Ritual* (*Liji* 禮記) “Meaning of gift exchange” (*Pinyi* 義) chapter, and in the *Xunzi* 荀子 “Models for action” (*Faxing* 法行) chapter.

<sup>6</sup> *Hanshu* chapter 81 (Ban 1962: 3352). Since this title is not otherwise attested in the inventory, it is probable that “explanations” were the “sections and sentence” commentaries.

<sup>7</sup> Some have argued that part of the *Three Audiences* is preserved in chapters about the government and military in the *Elder Dai’s Records of Ritual* (*DaDai liji* 大戴禮記), for example, Z. Zhu 2011.

valorized by the status of Confucius and his disciples. But the inventory goes further to talk about the way the text was composed:

The *Analects* is composed of discussions in which Confucius responded to his disciples and others of his contemporaries, and of his disciples' words when speaking to one another and of speech they heard directly from the Master. At that time, each of the disciples had his own personal records. After the Master died, his disciples gathered them all together to discuss and then compiled them, and so they were called his "selected speeches" (i.e., *Analects*).<sup>8</sup>

Ban's explanation for the title of the work is that it is words or speech (*yu* 語) of the Master that had been discussed/disputed (*lun* 論), effectively an orthodox account to be made available to later generations. It contained Confucius' direct responses to his disciples, and reports of his speech by his disciples. The picture this description paints is of a work that was composed soon after Confucius' death from the notes and recollections of his disciples, and in turn vetted by their own disciples.

While Ban's account is more detailed, in his skeptical and wide-ranging *Balanced Discussions* WANG Chong gives a different account of the formation and nature of the *Analects*.<sup>9</sup> WANG Chong begins his account with the assertion that the original *Analects* did not have 21 chapters, as the ancient and Zhang Yu versions did in Wang's own time. According to Wang, the original *Analects* had hundreds of chapters about the words and acts of Confucius recorded by his followers, but that version of the text was lost soon after the rise of the Han. When the "ancient" version was uncovered, it had only 30 chapters. Besides the 21 chapter ancient version *Analects* in circulation, which others regarded as the only early version of the text, there was another version circulating, called "nine chapters of Hejian region" (*Hejian jiupian* 河間九篇), along with the two well-known versions of Qi and Lu.<sup>10</sup> Considering that Wang mentions this text and the original total number of chapters twice, he seems highly confident about the existence of the Hejian version. The statement that there was a version different from the three versions of the *Analects* mentioned by BAN Gu is only attested in WANG Chong's *Balanced Discussions*, but it indicates that very different accounts of the *Analects*' formation existed even in the century or so after it was widely cited and taught.

<sup>8</sup> *Hanshu* 30 (Ban 1962: 1717).

<sup>9</sup> Wang 1990: 4.1135–1139.

<sup>10</sup> Since Wang does not specifically refer to the number of chapters in these two texts, he must assume that they had basically a similar or the same number of chapters as the ancient *Analects*. However, he specifies that the Hejian version had nine, implying it was significantly different from that of the three well-known versions, and its contents complemented theirs. Here, the term "Hejian" might refer to the library of Prince Xian 獻 of Hejian, who during the second century B.C.E. re-edited SHUSUN Tong's 叔孫通 anthology of ritual texts after Shusun's death (*Hanshu* 22 in Ban 1962: 1480) and was connected with the compilation and transmission of Han classicist works such as the *Book of Music* (*Yueji* 樂記), *Zhou Regulations* (*Zhou zhi* 周制), and *Prince Xian of Hejian's Responses About Superior and Inferior in the Three Yong Palaces* (*Hejian Xian wang dui shangxia san yongong* 河間獻王對上下三雍宮), see *Hanshu* 30 in Ban 1962: 2342, 2352). WANG Chong's reference to this work is not otherwise attested, but it opens up the possibility that some Han references to Confucius materials that are not part of the extant *Analects* derive from this work.

In contrast to Ban, Wang argues that although the version of the *Analects* circulating in the Han was an important text, it was incomplete and misunderstood by his contemporaries. He criticizes people who claimed to know the *Analects*, but were ignorant of the fact that they only had part of the original work. He further argues that the first record of the words and acts of Confucius did not originally have canonical status, but was recorded on eight cun 寸 bamboo slips suitable for everyday records. Wang stresses that these records were not written on longer two chi 尺 four cun slips proper to canonical works. While BAN Gu's opinion likely represents more mainstream ideas about the formation of the text in the first century C.E., the iconoclast WANG Chong reflects a critical awareness that calls into question Ban's assumption that editions circulating in the Han were transparent versions of the notes and recollections of Confucius' disciples. This divergence of opinion in the earliest extant critical discussions of the formation of the text indicates the extent to which those discussions were based on evidence that was already contested. In the time since, some scholars have ignored the WANG Chong account, instead portraying the BAN Gu account as somehow definitive. But it took more than a millennium before the issue of text formation began to be addressed on the basis of evidence internal to the work itself.

## Late Imperial Text Criticism and a Layered *Analects*

In early imperial times, ideas about the formation of the *Analects* generally did not go beyond the account given by BAN Gu. It was not until the rise of text critical approaches in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, approaches in part reflective of a shift in the attitudes to the past by Song 宋 connoisseurs and critics, that concerns such as those in Ban's account of the provenance of the text began to take a back seat to enquiries into the structure of the work. Representative of the earlier period is the following description given by the great Song Dynasty systematizer ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200 C.E.):

The book of the *Analects* is made up of the records of his first- and second-generation disciples of the Sage's words and actions, how he comported himself in social contexts, behaved in his career, and acted optimally in exhaustive detail. For example, chapter ten ("Xiangdang" 鄉黨) lays out all the details of the ritual standards of the time.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> X. Zhu 1986: 15.287 describes the intent of Confucius' disciples in compiling the *Analects* in order to contrast it with the *Mengzi*, which is more open-ended and less concerned with the details of ritual than with general principles inherent in ritual forms. The comparison between the two texts is made as an illustration of how once one becomes habituated to practice one can relax one's attention to ritual standards because their inherent principle had become internalized. But it is also clear that Zhu sees this as a historical argument, since he follows the passage quoted above by saying, "By Mengzi's time, this had gradually been abandoned." This psychological and historical explanation meshes with the order of the two works in Zhu's recommended sequence for learning the *Four Books* (*Sishu* 四書): *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), *Analects*, *Mengzi*, and *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸). Many years after his death, these works became the new curriculum for the imperial examination system.

Here, the normative dimension of the work is much more clearly described than in the above accounts. According to Zhu, the *Analects* is worthwhile because it records every facet of Confucius' exemplary life. Yet it is also obvious that the basis of the account of the formation of the *Analects* is still BAN Gu's description, and that Zhu sees the work as internally consistent.

It was not until the late Ming that some scholars such as LUO Yuyi 羅喻義 (d. 1639) began to view the work as having two distinct parts. Although Luo's work is lost, later sources say it described the *Analects* as made up of two sections, each devoted to a different topic: moral self-cultivation and virtuous rule.<sup>12</sup> Not long afterwards the idea of a bipartite *Analects* gained currency and was further developed in Tokugawa Japan. Irō Jinsai 伊藤仁齋 (1627–1705), Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728) and DAZAI Shundai 太宰春臺 (1680–1747) argued that the *Analects* can be divided into two ten-chapter sections distinct both formally and philosophically. In the 1683 preface to his *Ancient Meanings of the Analects* (*Rongo kogi* 論語古義), Itō argues that the last ten chapters were a later supplement to the first ten, with the substantively unique chapter ten forming a border line territory between them (Kaizuka 1972: 38). His two later followers developed this idea. Ogyū assigned the composition of the two divisions of the text to the disciples referred to by the informal names Lao 牢 and Xian 憲 in *Analects* 9.6 and 14.1, respectively (Ogyū 1994: 14). Dazai, in his *External Transmission of Ancient Explanations of the Analects* (*Rongo kokun gaiden* 論語古訓外伝) points to numerous formal variations that only appear in one of the two divisions of the *Analects* defined by Itō as further proof of the thesis (Dazai 1754). While Luo's distinction between two divisions of the text was rooted in a philosophical account of their relationship, one that was in some ways similar to ZHU Xi's explanation of the relationship between the *Analects* and *Mengzi*, these Japanese scholars dared to imagine the two divisions as distinct both in terms of the date of their composition and the identity of their compilers. Luo and Itō used the terms “Upper Division” (*shanglun*, *jōron* 上論) and “Lower Division” (*xialun*, *karon* 下論) for the two-division hypothesis they pioneered, and it has continued to influence students of the text to the present day.

A century later, a Chinese follower of ZHU Xi made a notable effort to approach the *Analects* not by division but by individual chapter and section, and ended up formulating new hypotheses that also rejected key aspects of Ban's account. The pioneering philologist CUI Shu approached the *Analects* from the perspective of a critic of the lax approach to the classics encouraged by the “heterodox” Neo-Confucian “School of the Mind” (*xinxue* 心學). In his 30s, after studying ZHU Xi's orthodox interpretations of the *Analects* with his father CUI Yuansen 崔元森,

<sup>12</sup>We know about Luo's work *Chapter Divisions of the Analects* (*Lunyu fenpian* 論語分篇), through a preface preserved in *Examining the Meaning of the Classics* (*Jingyi kao* 經義考) by ZHU Yizun 朱彝尊 (1629–1709). Luo seems to have used the theory of “Substance and Application” (*tiyong* 體用) to explain how the two divisions functioned differently. While the first division is about human moral perfection centered on the virtue of benevolence (*ren* 仁), the latter is about the application of virtue in the world. Luo seems to consider these equally valuable aspects of the message of the Master (Y. Zhu 1997: 6.783).



CUI Shu's intensive study of textual sources raised doubts in his mind about the reliability of parts of the work and led to a dissatisfaction with the Song commentaries: "I plainly understood the shortcomings of the traditional commentaries" (Cui 1983: 2). In particular, Cui outlined a theory that the last five chapters were wholly or partially later interpolations.

Cui's approach to the text was to set up an expectation of formal consistency throughout the work, consistent with BAN Gu's account of the editorial hand of the first two generations of Confucius' disciples. Deviations from this consistency would then imply that some parts of the text were less reliable. In such cases it was usually the conventions governing the front section of the *Analects*, or the conventions that appear more frequently in the entire *Analects*, that Cui took to be original. Cui left three important writings devoted to the textual problems of the *Analects*: a chapter titled "Remnant structure" (*yixing* 遺型) in his *Records of Examining Beliefs about Confucius* (*Zhu Si kaoxinlu* 洙泗考信錄), (Zhu and Si being rivers in Shandong), an appendix titled "Further Examination of the Origins of the *Analects*" (*Lunyu yuanliu fukao* 論語源流附考) in his *Additional Records of Examining Beliefs about Confucius* (*ZhuSi kaoxin yulu* 洙泗考信餘錄), and in a later independent short work *Additional Explanations About the Analects* (*Lunyu yushuo* 論語餘說).

The most celebrated idea among CUI Shu's many insights on the *Analects* is that the last five chapters of the *Analects* exhibit formal differences that indicate later interpolations into the text. He notes that the words used for references to the Master are generally different in these five chapters, and each has unique stylistic features not found in the rest of the work. Chapter 16 contains features such as itemizations of the virtues (16.4–16.8) and paired sayings. Chapter 17 has similar lists (17.6, 17.8, and 17.16), while chapter 18 has sections that he argues are closer to the allegorical anecdotes of *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Chapter 19, he writes, is less distinctive, except for the last four sections of the chapter which consistently use "Zhongni" 仲尼 to refer to Confucius. Finally, the style, length, and topics covered in chapter 20 are all highly unique (Cui 1983: 261–326). Cui's approach was more fine-grained than that of earlier scholars, allowing him to notice features that had previously been passed over.

Even as he revised his theory to be more consistent with Luo and Itō's two-section hypothesis in his later works, Cui's approach was groundbreaking in that he made generalizations at the level of individual chapter or section. This may be seen in an example from the later work *Additional Records of Examining Beliefs about Confucius*. Cui argues for a later date for the "Lower Division" of the text. Cui notes that in the "Upper Division", when describing conversations with Duke Ding 定公 or Duke Ai 哀公, the authors keep using a certain set phrase, "Confucius responded [to him]" (*Kongzi duiyue* 孔子對曰), but when Confucius talks to lesser nobility such as Ji Kangzi 季康子, the work only says "The Master said" (*Ziyue* 子曰). In "Lower Division" chapters (e.g., 11.7, 12.17–12.19), the text records "Confucius responded [to him]" even when he is speaking with lesser nobility. CUI Shu understood such inconsistencies to reflect the social changes that had taken place in the time between the times of the composition of the two divisions such that lesser nobles were

treated with more respect as the social hierarchy became blurred (Gu 1983: 609–622). This approach preserves the basic idea of a bipartite text, supporting it with an argument about the historical change in linguistic conventions, and augmenting it with the idea that individual sections might be later interpolations.

More recent approaches combine the methods pioneered by CUI Shu and earlier historical descriptions of the text's formation in order to come up with even more detailed descriptions of layering in the *Analects*. Notable examples of this approach are found in the works of two notable modern Japanese scholars, TSUDA Sōkichi 津田左右吉 (1873–1961) and TAKEUCHI Yoshio 武内義雄 (1886–1966).

TSUDA Sōkichi, who taught at Waseda University until his resignation in 1940, turned his attention to quotations in pre-Han texts with parallels in the *Analects*. Since a number of *Analects* passages are found verbatim in other texts, and since some of them have a different form or attribution, Tsuda argued the *Analects* could have been formed through a selection process from several early texts in the late Warring States period (Tsuda 1948: 108–109). Looking closely at parallel passages, Tsuda asked whether Warring States texts used those passages in a very different way, and concluded that they did not. He inferred that few *Analects* passages dated to earlier than the earliest text that contained such parallel passages, the *Mengzi* (Tsuda 1948: 219–239). He reasoned that even if the relevant *Analects* passages originated before *Mengzi*, they were re-written and edited in accordance with the needs of later writers such as Mengzi, Xunzi 荀子, and the early Han Confucians.

Tsuda tried to reconcile this conclusion with the historical evidence by looking not at Han accounts of *Analects* text formation, but instead at the period's development of Confucius as a textual authority. He argued that beginning around the time of the *Mengzi*, a school that claimed Confucius as founder formed, and that, as a result, some of that school's ideas came to be associated with or attributed to Confucius. As a result, ideas concerning the Kingly Way (*wangdao* 王道) from Mengzi's time and concerning the importance of ritual and music from Xunzi's time are found in *Analects* passages. Whether the passages were created at the time of Mengzi and Xunzi, or whether they were selected out from a larger set of quotations or memories at those times, the similarity between Confucius' thought and those of his later followers is seen not as a result of their slavish devotion to him but rather of their remaking of Confucius in their own image (Tsuda 1948: 238–239). As a result, Tsuda cautions against seeing the *Analects* as an authentic expression of Confucius' thought, but rather sees it as a composite work. This rather radical position, that if the *Analects* is not a late Warring States composition, it is at least a late Warring States recasting of Confucius' image, assumes that Warring States authors were willing to alter or create the sayings of the putative founder of their tradition. Perhaps because this view did not fit well with a conservative view of the Confucian tradition, the Tsuda hypothesis was not widely influential in its time, but has been echoed in the writing of recent scholars who have taken a more critical approach to the formation of the *Analects*.

By contrast, TAKEUCHI Yoshio's approach not only took Han accounts of text formation seriously, but developed the layering hypothesis described above into a theory that the *Analects* had five distinct chronological layers. The oldest of these

layers, according to Takeuchi, is the set of chapters 2–8 (later supplemented with chapter 9) that constitute the core that the Han writer WANG Chong identified as the “Hejian” text. Takeuchi argued these seven chapters were the texts transmitted by the lineage of Zengzi 曾子 (Master Zeng), because he observed that many verses and sections of these seven chapters resemble those in the works associated with Zengzi or Zisi 子思 (Takeuchi 1942: 99–100, 146–148). WANG Chong also referred to two chapters from Qi and Lu texts, and Takeuchi roughly aligns this material with chapters 1 and 10 of the received version (Takeuchi 1942: 90–91).<sup>13</sup> A third layer is made up of two distinct strata from later sources, chapters 11–15, and 19–20. Concentrating on the former group, Takeuchi argued that its narratives center on the disciple Zigong 子貢 and points out that the evaluation of the historical figure of Guanzhong 管仲 in this chapter group is different from that in the earlier chapter groups (Takeuchi 1942: 100–105). He further holds that grammatical elements in these chapters indicate they were written in the language of the Qi region. Finally, Takeuchi sees the three chapters 16, 17, and 18, as deriving from independent and distinct sources probably much later than the rest of the text.<sup>14</sup> Takeuchi was clearly inspired by his Ming dynasty and Edo period predecessors, but developed their two-stage models into a much more sophisticated multi-layer picture.

The work of Tsuda and Takeuchi has been widely influential, and a number of more recent studies have tried to develop multi-layer descriptions of the text as the product of an accretion of smaller units of texts over time. The most notable example is KIMURA Eiichi’s 木村英一 (1906–1981) *Confucius and the Analects* (*Kōshi to Rongo* 孔子と論語), which describes a mode of accretion as the association of multiple “section groups” (*shōgun* 章群) as the smallest unit of the text. The “section group” is a unit grouped by a certain features such as philosophy, style or terminology, and Kimura analyzes the basic structure of the work as small section groups placed together to make larger “section group associations” (*shōgun renkan* 章群聯關). Each chapter contains such “associations,” combined with single sections and section groups (Kimura 1971: 211–229).

An example of Kimura’s “section group association” is found in his analysis of Chap. 4 of the *Analects*. Kimura notes that all the sections except the last begin with the phrase “the Master said” (*Zi yue* 子曰).<sup>15</sup> Sections 1–7 treat the virtue of *ren* 仁 (i.e., benevolence), comprising the first “section group”. Sections 8 and 9 are about Way and form the second such group. Sections 10 and 11 are about the *junzi*

<sup>13</sup> Following ITŌ Jinsai, Takeuchi points out that while the Master is called “Kongzi” 孔子 in the first half of chapter 10, he is the “Gentleman” (*junzi* 君子) in the latter half, a combination that probably postdates the *Mengzi*. Also, Takeuchi thinks chapter 1 was intended to be an introductory chapter representative of Confucius’ teachings, and so combines the sayings of disciples whose communities in Qi and Lu region passed down different interpretations of his teachings.

<sup>14</sup> Takeuchi largely relies on CUI Shu’s arguments about the distinctive aspects of these chapters (Takeuchi 1942: 201–203).

<sup>15</sup> Kimura notes that sections that use the term Kongzi 孔子 rather than Master (*zi* 子) likely come from the outside of master-disciple tradition. They were probably from the different sources, and collected and reorganized by members of the tradition.

君子 (i.e., gentleman), while 12 through 14 treat the virtues of the *junzi*, becoming the third and fourth section groups, respectively (Kimura 1971: 286). Kimura claims that these four section groups can be seen as a thematic “section group association,” constructed to describe the virtue and attitudes of the gentleman (i.e., the last two section groups) who embodies “benevolence” (the first section group) and clarifies the “Way” (the second section group). These 14 sections are a single section group association, a collection of sayings about the virtues of the gentleman, and correspond to the first part of the chapter. The last part of the chapter is made up of the another group of sections, sections 15–25, that Kimura suspects was compiled by Zengzi’s students based on thematic similarities to Zengzi passages elsewhere in the *Analects* and the *Mengzi*.<sup>16</sup> For Kimura, these 11 verses could have formed from a set of collected sayings by students of Zengzi. Taking these two halves of the chapter together, Kimura sees chapter 4 as having been compiled by students of Zengzi working in the region of Lu (Kimura 1971: 175, 289–293).

Kimura’s study provides the most detailed theory of textual accretion of the *Analects* to date, and makes a strong case that the organization of each chapter of the *Analects* reveals strata that may contain clues to the process of formation of the work. For scholars like Kimura, it is not just that there are inconsistencies in form and content that indicate the text is a composite one, it is that the patterns of these inconsistencies may be used to reconstruct a multigenerational process of textual composition.

A separate study based on a similar accretion model is the 1998 *The Original Analects* by E. Bruce and A. Taeko Brooks. The Brooks’ study adds to the conclusions of earlier scholars by making a number of original observations about formal features of the text and parallels with other Warring States texts. They propose a precise chronology of the text that identifies sections 1–14 and 15–16 of book 4 as the oldest layer of the *Analects*, which the authors date to the mourning period following the death of Confucius in 479 B.C.E. (Brooks and Brooks 1998: 208). *The Original Analects* combines a set of arguments about text formation with a detailed chronology of the evolution of Confucius’ circle, and so dates particular passages based on events that Brooks and Brooks speculate occasioned the composition or addition of particular passages. So, speaking generally, fifth century B.C.E. groups include books 5–6 and 7–9. Books 2, 3, and 10–15 date to the fourth century B.C.E. Finally, books 1 and 16–20 are the most recent layers, dating to the third century B.C.E. The Brooks’ study introduces English-language readers to the tradition of text-critical scholarship on the *Analects*, summarizing the implications of this line of scholarship by saying the *Analects* is “not one text but a series of texts of different date, containing a few sayings that may go back to the historical Confucius, along with many others that were added in the next two centuries by his successors. . .” (Brooks and Brooks 1998: 1). This clear statement of the conclusions of five centuries of scholarship is difficult to argue with, especially since, as we will see in the next section, the evidence of recent archaeological finds support several aspects of it.

<sup>16</sup> For example, section 17 of chapter 4 uses the term self-examination (*zisheng* 自省), and the *Mengzi* records Zengzi on self-reflection (*zifan* 自反) (*Mengzi* 2A2).

## Archaeology and the *Analects*

The surge in archaeological activity in the People's Republic of China since the end of the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s has provided important resources for the study of early China. Finds have both provided evidence of Han editions of the *Analects* and also revealed much about editorial practice that governed the assembly of texts in early China.

Two excavated versions of the *Analects* from the Han dynasty indicate that the text was widely circulated in something close to its present form in the first century B.C.E. The first example is known as the “Dingzhou *Analects*” because it was buried in the tomb of King Huai of Zhongshan 中山懷王 in 55 B.C.E. near the modern city of Dingzhou 定州 in Hebei Province. Although the bamboo slips themselves were damaged following their 1973 excavation in the 1976 Tangshan earthquake, they reveal very few significant departures from the received text.<sup>17</sup> A roughly contemporary version of the *Analects* was excavated in the 1990s in North Korea. Because the tomb also contained a wooden board recording a Lelang Commandery 樂浪郡 census of 45 B.C.E. the tomb is dated to some time prior to 45 B.C.E. LEE Sungsi 李成市 and his colleagues who have studied photographs of slips from the tomb which correspond to passages from the present *Analects* chapter 11 and 12, have come to the preliminary conclusion that most differences with the received version are phonetic or graphic variants (Lee et al. 2009: 127–166). Both exemplars come from the first century, not coincidentally the very time of the first commentaries to, and, as noted above, an expanded social role for the text.

Prior to this time, passages from the *Analects* are found in tomb texts, most notably from a looted fourth century B.C.E. tomb whose contents are now held at the Shanghai Museum. The contents of these texts suggest that, as contrasted with the practice of the last 2,000 years, these fragments were often reworked and edited. The differences between the two received and excavated texts show how fluid and variable these early sayings were. Where a famous line from *Analects* 12.1 quotes the Master: “Overcome oneself and return to ritual to act with benevolence” (克己復禮為仁), the Shanghai slips read: “A Gentleman performs the rites by relying on benevolence” (君子為禮以依於仁) (Ma 2005: 253–65). These two formulations of similar ideas are significant because they are so different formally, and as they are followed by a similar exchange about benevolence (*ren* 仁), they might have been based on two different written formulations of the same teaching.

The contrast may at first seem trivial, but comparing them to two additional passages makes it a telling difference. The excavated version actually contains an expression found elsewhere in the *Analects*. In *Analects* 7.6, the Master says: “Be

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<sup>17</sup> The Dingzhou version contains quite a few variant characters, several places where “Master” replaces “Master Kong”, and an interesting final passage that is added on to end of chapter 20 in a way that perhaps indicates it was originally a separate chapter 21. See *Hebeisheng wenwu yanjiusuo Dingzhou Hanmu zhujian zhengli xiaozu* 1997. For a discussion of the significance of the final slip see Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 134–162, 157, note 54.

intent on the Way, occupy virtue, rely on benevolence, and wander in attainments” (志於道 據於德 依於仁 游於藝). This indicates that the three character phrase “rely on benevolence” was added by an editor to a new context, because it either originated in the 12.1 passage (if the excavated version is older) and was pasted into the 7.6 passage, or it originated in the 7.6 passage (if the *Analects* is older) and was substituted into the bamboo slip version of the 12.1 passage. Besides this evidence of the malleability of the early text, there is also evidence that older materials were quoted, but that the attribution sometimes dropped out. This can be seen in the classic *Zuozhuan* 左傳 entry for year 12 of Duke Zhao 昭公, which has the master quoting the above *Analects* phrase, “Overcome oneself and return to ritual to act with benevolence,” but prefacing it with the phrase: 古也有志 “In ancient times, there was a principle. . .” (Ruan 1991: 1338–42), absent from the *Analects*’ presentation of the saying. In a similar vein, *Analects* 13.22 contains a saying that is identified in the Shanghai slips as *gu zhi yi yan* 古之遺言 “A saying left from ancient times” (Ma 2005: 1.198), but that identification does not appear in the *Analects* presentation of the saying. Perhaps other things that Confucius says are “ancient principles” that are being quoted – we just fail to recognize them as quotations today.

Generally speaking, the Shanghai parallels attest to multiple rather different versions of *Analects* passages being in circulation in the early period. This does not mean the *Analects* is not the “original” testimony that some early accounts have suggested. However, it does say something important about the editorial practices common during the centuries between the death of Confucius and the first references to the *Analects*. During that time, those who used texts were both liberal with cutting and pasting and loose with attribution compared with attitudes after it entered the canon. It is fair to ask, however, what do these conclusions mean for the modern reader of the text?

## What Is Known, What Remains to Be Discovered

What exactly does this impressive and complex history of textual research and this new information about text formation mean for someone who picks up a copy of the *Analects*, ㄣㄠ, *Entretiens*, *Лунь юй*, or one of the many other translations of the work with the assumption that it provides a glimpse into the thought of “Confucius” or the essence of “Confucianism”? Does it matter to a modern reader how the text formed?

The simple answer is that some readers will care and some will not. It all depends on why the reader is interested in the text. To a reader interested in later Chinese history, say, Song dynasty thought, understanding ZHU Xi’s progressive scheme that situates the *Analects* relative to other works like the *Mengzi* is more important than actually understanding what text the authors of the *Mengzi* were using when they quoted the *Analects*. For a reader who is looking for personal inspiration or for arguments to include in constructive philosophy for

the twenty-first century, a creative misreading might be more valuable than a historically accurate interpretation based on the late Warring States intellectual context. These examples show that there are people for whom the actual circumstances of a text's formation do not matter at all to their appreciation or use of the text.

Nevertheless, for many purposes, understanding the contents of the *Analects* in historical context is an implicit goal of approaching the text. It should matter to comparativists, for example, how closely certain passages actually mirror statements of the Golden Rule in other traditions.<sup>18</sup> And for those interested in understanding the intellectual legacy of the founder of one of the world's great traditions, the distinction between the original message and its appropriation by disciples and later members of the tradition is certainly key to their project. Indeed, the ability to distinguish between these layers is a key byproduct of the tradition of text-critical scholarship described above. Many readers of the text today fall into these two camps, and yet many contemporary readers find it threatening to pull the carpet out from under the simple identification of the *Analects* with Confucius.

This is perhaps why there is a common reaction when such textual scholarship is brought up, that the *Analects* may be composite in sections, but it is *by and large* reflective of the thought of Confucius. Yet there is no reasonable application of a hermeneutical tenet like the "principle of charity" that could justify looking at a series of texts of different date as the consistent work of a single individual. Properly speaking, that principle assumes rationality or coherence on the part of a single person. Perhaps, though, one could repair this impulse and postulate an "editorial principle of charity" that would apply to composite texts that were put together by a single editor that would work in a similar way.

Are there grounds for assuming an "editorial principle of charity" such that early texts were assembled to be rational or coherent wholes? While there is no definitive answer to this question, it is true that the fluidity of editorial practices in the Late Warring States period indicate that we should not assume a very strong version of such a principle in early China. As this chapter has shown, the received historical tradition tells us that the *Analects* is not authored by a single person, but rather the results of the collation of the fragmentary accounts of multiple disciples, perhaps over multiple generations. The work of centuries of textual critics has identified layers of the text such that it is clear that the text is a composite of more than one "coming together" of such fragmentary accounts. Finally, archaeological evidence suggests that it is likely that editors had little compunction about revising the words of the master or cutting out attributions of quoted materials prior to its becoming fixed by the first century B.C.E. To the extent that there is editorial consistency, then, it is the consistency of different editors at different times.

At the same time, it is worth noting that some of the text-critical assumptions of the scholars examined in this chapter also may not be shared by the modern reader. One objection might be that these pictures are grounded in a particular narrative

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<sup>18</sup> For some disanalogies between the "Golden Rule" and what James Legge dubbed the "Silver Rule" in the *Analects*, see, e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 2008: 157–169.

about master-disciple traditions that derive from early accounts of the formation of the text. For example, Takeuchi's thesis identifies the "Hejian chapters" and those of the versions of the states of Qi and Lu in the present *Analects* text. His revisionist account is grounded in WANG Chong's account of the early origins of the *Analects* just as previous scholars have relied on BAN Gu's account. Recent archaeological work suggests the data these accounts provide may be less authoritative than previously thought. Another issue is that some scholars, notably Tsuda and the Brookses, have based their dating of a complex *Analects* on a chronology and model of linear evolution of ideas, developed in part based on a set of other early texts that are not dated according to similarly complex criteria. These assumptions suggest that the final word on the *Analects* will not be uttered until other texts from the period are subjected to a similar level of scrutiny. Taken together, these criticisms, while admittedly made with the benefit of hindsight, show that there is still room for significant new work in the area of text criticism even without considering the need to integrate archaeologically excavated versions of early texts with the traditional picture.<sup>19</sup>

These conclusions should have very little impact on readers interested in questions of historical reception of the *Analects* or those intent on using it constructively. However, for those who wish to use the text to dig down to an original layer of Confucianism, or use it as a transparent window onto the identity of a major religious and philosophical founder, it has significant implications. If these conclusions are correct, then the *Analects* represents not an "original layer" but several early sedimentary layers of a somewhat uneven intellectual landscape. It is not a window into Confucius' life, but into a structure occupied by a number of people who claim to be his descendants and who possess divergent portraits and records of him. These conclusions do not necessarily call into question the import of the *Analects*, but by casting doubt on traditional claims about its authorship and structure, necessitate constructing a different and more nuanced basis for its authority.

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<sup>19</sup> Two recent dissertations that represent new directions in text critical work that reflect insights on text formation that result from archeological discoveries are Weingarten 2011 and Hunter 2012.



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# Chapter 3

## The Commentarial Tradition

John B. Henderson and On-Cho Ng

### Introduction: The Canon and Its Commentaries

Many if not most modern students of the classics, including the *Analects*, regard commentaries as secondary or ancillary works, fully subordinate to the classical or scriptural text that they purport to explain.<sup>1</sup> So effective is this prejudice against commentaries as a genre that few scholars nowadays take them as worthy of study in their own right, and fewer still admit them as comprising the mainstream of many premodern intellectual traditions. The main if not the only purpose of the gloss, so the story goes, is to explain the text, as plainly and unobtrusively as possible. Once you have understood the text, you can forget the gloss, especially when the latter is apparently based on hopelessly archaic or deeply flawed philological principles. Indeed, the modern scholar might well be tempted to skip the commentary altogether, and go straight to the “bare, original passages” of the classical or scriptural text (Slingerland 2006: viii).

This seemingly plausible argument is rendered tenuous by a couple of considerations. One of these is that the line between canon and commentary was not so easily drawn in most traditions. In some traditions, works composed originally with an exegetical intent found their way into texts that were later canonized, such as the Book of Chronicles in the Old Testament and the gospel of St. Matthew in the New Testament (Halivni 1986: 17; Moule 1982: 94–95). According to

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Chinese language sources quoted in this chapter are the authors' own translations.

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Jacques Guillet, the New Testament as a whole is primarily a commentary on and reading of the Jewish scriptures (Guillet 1984: 56). Indeed, even the *Analects*, the main subject of the present volume, was once classified as a commentary, well before its canonization as one of the Confucian *Four Books* (*Sishu* 四書) in the twelfth century (Zhou 1983: 273–274).<sup>2</sup> Even a cursory reader of the *Analects* will probably take note of Confucius’ brief comments on the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) and the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), two earlier classical texts that Confucius is supposed to have edited. Second, commentaries do not just explain obscure language in a classical or scriptural text; they sometimes almost literally bring the text to life, as has been said of Shankara’s commentary on the *Brahma Sutra* (Arapura 1986: 136). In the tradition of rabbinic Judaism, even God, the ultimate giver of life, is depicted as an exegete who studies and interprets his own Torah (Fishbane 1986: 19).

But how might commentaries “give life” to a classical or scriptural text, if not by illuminating obscurities and revealing the meaning simply and plainly? One way is by showing how the texts of the canon present more than meets the eye, that they, despite appearances to the contrary, fulfill several important criteria for canonicity that appear to be almost universal; these include comprehensiveness, orderliness, consistency, and profundity, as well as the absence of superfluities (Henderson 1991: 89–138). Together with the obvious point that most commentaries illuminate obscurities in the classical text, these points are probably the most common “triggers for exegesis” in most traditions. In a sense, traditional exegetes, in focusing on these points, have anticipated the objections of modern philosophers who often criticize older canons, especially those of non-Western cultures, for lacking one or more of these attributes. In other words, modern philosophers’ criticisms of traditional canonical texts often resemble those of traditional commentators, and are therefore not necessarily products of some species of arrogant Orientalism.

## Canonicity and the Hermeneutics of Comprehensiveness

As the primary repository of the wisdom of Confucius, the “great sage and teacher of ten thousand generations,” it was particularly important that the *Analects* live up to the criteria of canonicity, once, that is, it was canonized. Perhaps the most universal of these criteria is that the canon is comprehensive or inclusive, that it contains all significant learning or truth. As Jonathan Z. Smith has written, “Where there is a canon we can predict the necessary occurrence of a hermeneute, of an interpreter whose task it is to continually extend the domain of the closed canon over everything that is known or everything that is” (Smith 1978: 23). Although the case for comprehensiveness may be harder to make for the Confucian *Analects* than

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<sup>2</sup> The *Four Books* include the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), the *Mengzi* 孟子, the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), and the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學).

for such substantial tomes as the Christian Bible, commentators on canons both great and small generally think big when it comes to canonical comprehensiveness. In the case of the *Analects*, some commentators apparently tried to make up for the rather spare size of the classical text by composing truly voluminous commentaries, such as the Ming 明 commentator, CHEN Shiyuan 陳士元 (1516–1597), who arranged his encyclopedic commentary, the *Classified Investigations on the Analects* (*Lunyu leikao* 論語類考), according to the format of the encyclopedias of the time (de Bary 1981: 91). An earlier commentator, HUANG Kan 皇侃 (488–545), remarked that all patterns (*li* 理) are contained in the *Analects* (Makeham 2003: 90), even though the book in itself does not really approach encyclopediacy.

But the strongest Neo-Confucian argument for the encyclopediacy of the *Analects* entailed linking it up with the other three of the *Four Books*, which achieved canonicity as a unit during the Song 宋 era. ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), the great synthesizer of Neo-Confucianism, arranged these *Four Books* in a pedagogical order that, taken as a whole, constituted a complete Confucian curriculum. As Zhu remarked in comments he included in his anthology of Neo-Confucian writings, the *Reflections on Things at Hand* (*Jinsi lu* 近思錄),

I want people first of all to read the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) to set a pattern, next to read the *Analects* to establish a foundation, next to read the *Mengzi* 孟子 to observe its development, and next to read the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸) to seek the subtle points of the ancients (Zhu 1972: 3.10).

But even before the Neo-Confucian canon of the *Four Books* was formed during the Song era, commentators as far back as the Han had linked the *Analects* with other classical texts primarily through the commentarial strategy of reading one classic off in terms of another. Thus the Han commentator MA Rong 馬融 (77–166) observed that

in annotating one particular classic, he would necessarily incorporate the other classics. Thus, when in annotating the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) he discussed the systems of ritual, he would bring in the *Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli* 周禮); in discussing the *Classic of Changes'* obscurities and profundities, he would make use of the *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳) and the *Analects*, and also refer back to the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經) in order to analyze the principles of the *Classic of Changes* (Li 1981: 149).

But if any (or all) of these commentarial strategies for establishing the comprehensiveness of the *Analects* failed to impress, there was always the fallback position enunciated by the Sage himself: “If after raising one point (or corner) of an argument, my auditors do not come up with the other three parts, I do not go over the one point again” (7.8). In other words, the *Analects* is truly comprehensive in what it points to, if not in what it actually says.

## Canonicity and the Hermeneutics of Coherence

If commentators sometimes had a tough time establishing the comprehensiveness of the *Analects*, making a case for its coherence and orderliness (our second commentarial assumption) was probably even more difficult. First, the *Analects*

appears to be quite haphazardly organized, with no thematic or structural rhyme or reason apparently informing its 20 chapters. As early as the sixth century, HUANG Kan tried to establish “that the individual chapters in the *Analects* are set out in the sequence we find them for a particular reason. Thus at the beginning of each chapter he . . . explained why it is placed where it is” (though “the explanatory power of any given link is limited to the two immediately adjacent chapters”) (Makeham 2003: 90).

For example, in his prefatory comments to Chapter 12, Huang says that:

YAN Yuan 顏淵 was a disciple of Confucius and foremost among his followers. This chapter follows after the previous chapter because he led the disciples in being the most advanced in his undertaking of learning. This is why “YAN Yuan” follows after “Xian jin” (Makeham 2003: 121).

Second, some later commentators on the *Analects* also tried to establish a good order of the text at the micro level, with respect to the passages that follow one another within the individual chapters. ZHU Xi, for example, read a temporal order into the *Analects*’ famous characterization of Confucius’ lack of negative qualities—its statement that Confucius had no prejudices, no inflexibilities, no stubbornness, and no egotism:

These four in tandem form a temporal cycle. It arises with prejudice, proceeds to inflexibilities, rests in stubbornness, and is completed in egotism. In general, prejudices and inflexibilities constantly [appear] before an affair has begun, and stubbornness and egotism after the affair has been concluded (Zhu 1974: 56).

An earlier Song commentator on the *Analects*, CHEN Xiangdao 陳祥道 (1053–1093), attempted to explain the apparently random order of a similar set—that which says that Confucius “did not speak of prodigies, force, disorder, and gods” (7.20)—as follows:

The harm caused by prodigies is not so great as that caused by force. The harm caused by force is not so great as that caused by disorder. Prodigies, force, and disorder are man-made. Therefore, [Confucius] puts them first. Gods are not man-made. Therefore, [Confucius] puts them last (X. Chen 1977: 4.13b–14a).

Finally, a modern Japanese scholar, KIMURA Eiichi 木村英, says that the order of the sayings in some chapters of the *Analects* may be explained by their having been joined together in their present form for purposes of recital and memorization (Kimura 1967: 57). The idea that a canon manifests a certain pedagogical order appears in commentaries to canons ranging from the *Four Books*, as explained above, to the Platonic dialogues. As Daniel Gardner has pointed out, ZHU Xi in particular, “eagerly seeks to find coherence in and among the *Four Books*” (Gardner 2007: 11).

For many of our contemporaries, the general commentarial assumption regarding the character of the classics that is common to most traditions—that the canon is self-consistent, that internal contradictions in it are only apparent—is more of a live issue than the first two. Modern-day adherents of a tradition, believers, might admit that their canon is not comprehensive in the sense of containing all knowledge and truth. They might find some place in the world for secular learning, philosophy or

science. They might also admit that their classical or scriptural text lacks something in the way of orderliness or coherence. Divine revelations or sagely utterances, after all, sometimes proceed by fits and starts, and do not always meet the formal standards of the classical rhetor. But to admit the existence of significant internal contradictions in the canon is a more momentous matter, inasmuch as it seriously undermines the canon's claim to truth. For truth, even if it is not one and indivisible, must, by most estimations, at least be non self-contradictory, internally consistent. Moreover, even if a canon is not believed to harbor "the Truth" in some profound religious sense, the exposure of significant internal contradictions in it would certainly threaten its intellectual respectability. As Maimonides remarked,

If . . . two original propositions are evidently contradictory, but the author has simply forgotten the first when writing down the second in another part of his compilation, this is a very great weakness, and that man should not be reckoned among those whose speeches deserve consideration (Maimonides 1972: 245).

If such contradictions do manifest themselves in a highly revered or canonical text, then every effort must be made to "save the text." Faced with the existence of such contradictory propositions in the *Physics* of Aristotle, the master of those who know, Roger Bacon averred that since "so great an author does not contradict himself," then one of the two statements must be "falsely translated or is in need of exposition" (Bacon 1958: 32). Such exposition leading to the reconciliation of texts could be quite a labor-intensive enterprise. Thus a prominent scholar of the Rabbinic school of Shammai, Hananiah ben Hezekiah, is said to have burned 300 jars of "midnight oil" in the course of trying to make the Book of Ezekiel agree with the Pentateuch (Russell 1986: 41).

Fitting the Valley of Dry Bones into the Garden of Eden would be a labor (and resource) intensive exercise for almost any exegete. In contrast, the Neo-Confucian canon of the *Four Books* is much more homogenous in almost every respect than is either the Hebrew or Christian Bible, and thus less rife with apparent internal contradictions. But even in the *Analects*, alert commentators found some inconsistencies. HAN YU 韓愈 (768–824), for example, identified a kind of contradiction between the following two sayings recorded in the *Analects*:

The Master said: Men are by nature close to one another, but by practice are far apart from one another (17.2).

The Master said: Only [those of] the highest wisdom and lowest stupidity do not change (17.3).

HAN YU's comment on these sayings:

The first passage, in saying that men are by nature close to one another, indicates that men can through practice [move] upward or downward. But this [second] passage, in saying that the highest and the lowest do not change, indicates that men cannot change through practice. These two meanings contradict one another (Han 1986: 3:75).

Even where such inconsistencies did not strike at the heart of Confucius' teachings, they were the sort of question that clever students might ask, either to test their teachers or from simply being curious (Makeham 2003: 88).

From a pedagogical point of view, perhaps the most troubling inconsistencies in the *Analects* were those in which Confucius gives different answers to disciples who pose the same questions. The most common Confucian way of dealing with this type of apparent contradiction is based on the strategy of accommodation, the doctrine that the sages or divines whose words are recorded in the classics or scriptures keyed their teachings to different pedagogical levels in order to meet the needs and correct the views of different classes of disciples or auditors. Hence, sagely sayings and divine utterances that apparently contradicted one another were not interpreted as statements of absolute or immutable truths, in which case discrepancies among them would have posed serious problems, but as means of instructing and cultivating particular kinds of students.

Confucian commentators used the idea of accommodation to resolve apparent discrepancies particularly in their interpretations of the *Analects*. In fact, the *Analects* itself provides justification for this procedure in a saying attributed to Confucius: “To those who are above average, one can speak of higher [things]. To those below average, one cannot speak of higher things” (6.21). Elsewhere, Confucius explains his having given conflicting admonitions to two different disciples as follows: “Since Qiu was backward, I urged him on. Since You outstripped others, I held him back” (11.22). Later Confucian commentators, including HAN Yu, ZHANG Zai 張載 (1020–1077) and WANG Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), used the same principle to explain other instances in the *Analects* where Confucius gave different answers to the same question: His responses were intended to meet the needs or to accord with the intellectual or spiritual attainments of particular disciples (Hartman 1986: 184; Kasoff 1984: x; Y. Wang 1971: 1.100–101).

## Canonicity and the Hermeneutics of Profundity

If lack of a consistency is probably the most universal trigger for commentarial exegesis of a canonical text, alleged lack of profundity is not far behind, at least in modern times. Contemporary readers of the *Analects*, in particular, ranging from philosophers to poetasters, are often inclined to berate that text for its superficial lack of profundity, and even to ridicule it for its alleged “fortune-cookie sayings.” But profundity was an important criterion of canonicity in premodern times as well. As Bernhard Karlgren has pointed out, Confucian commentators frequently argued that a work identified as part of the canon was really a later forgery on the grounds that its contents are “shallow and vulgar” (Karlgrén 1929: 166). Although Karlgren, the modern philologist, calls this criterion of canonicity “curious and naïve,” it is evidently based on the assumption that the classics must be profound and refined, the opposite of “shallow and vulgar.”

One way of asserting the profundity and primacy of the *Analects* was simply to present it as the essence and summation of the Sages’ teaching and the master key to the classics as a whole. According to the prominent Qing 清 historian of classical studies CHEN Li 陳澧 (1810–1882), “the essentials of classical studies are all in the

*Analects*” (L. Chen 1970: 2.14). Even the earliest extant commentary to another one of the *Four Books*, ZHAO Qi’s 趙岐 (d. 201 C.E.) commentary on the *Mengzi*, characterizes the *Analects* as the linchpin of the *Five Classics*.<sup>3</sup> “The *Mengzi* only orders and illustrates the *Analects*” (Zhao 1965: 232.2a).

Such encomia notwithstanding, Neo-Confucian commentators, in particular, could not overlook that Confucius in the *Analects* had apparently neglected to discuss fully or define adequately the most profound Neo-Confucian philosophical ideas or metaphysical terms. These commentators’ consideration of this issue frequently focused on the remark recorded in the *Analects* that Confucius’ discourses on human nature (*xing* 性) and the Way of Heaven (*tiandao* 天道) could not be heard (5.13). One of the earliest of their explanations, by the third-century commentator HE Yan 何晏 (d. 249 C.E.) was simply that these conceptions were too “profound and subtle.” Thus Confucius’ [disciples] could not hear of them (He 1974: 5.4b). Another, posed by ZHU Xi, was that “the Sage [Confucius] taught people the broad outline. He spoke only of filiality, brotherliness, fidelity, and trust, words for daily use and constant practice. . . . Such terms as ‘mind’ and ‘human nature’ were not spoken of in detail until Zisi and Mengzi” (Zhu 1974: 2.40). The most common Neo-Confucian explanation for these apparent omissions in the *Analects*, for that text’s superficial lack of profundity, was that Confucius really did communicate his teachings on human nature and the Way of Heaven, but only indirectly, not explicitly through words. To support this idea, commentators cited another passage in the *Analects* in which Confucius attempted to justify his remark to a disciple that he would prefer not to have to speak at all. Heaven, said Confucius, does not speak, and yet “the four seasons run their course, and all things are produced by it” (17.19). So too Confucius, though seldom speaking of human nature and the Way of Heaven, was able to subtly and indirectly convey the meanings of these ideas (Xie 1965: 214.3a). A Ming Neo-Confucian philosopher, LUO Qinshun 羅欽順 (1465–1547), however, asserted that Confucius did indeed explain the meanings of human nature and the Way of Heaven, but that he did so in the canonical appendices to the *Classic of Changes* which he is supposed to have written, not in the *Analects* (Luo 1987: 113). Finally, the redoubtable Qing scholar, QIAN Daxin 錢大昕 (1728–1804), excused Confucius’ not having spoken in the *Analects* of the Way of Heaven by arguing that the phrase really referred to occult and astrological matters beyond the ken of the proper Confucian sage (D. Qian 1968: 9.109).

Neo-Confucian commentators were also concerned with explaining why Confucius also apparently neglected to discuss fully or define adequately the cardinal Confucian virtue of “humanity” (*ren* 仁). The Song scholar-official, ZHEN Dexiu 真德秀 (1178–1235), noting the saying that Confucius seldom spoke of “humanity,” averred: “that of which Confucius seldom spoke was only the

<sup>3</sup> The *Five Classics* include the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Lushichunqiu* 呂氏春秋), and the *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記).



essence of humanity. As for the methods of seeking humanity and the essentials for practicing humanity, there are instances in all 20 chapters [of the *Analects*]” (Zhen 1965: 219: 3a–3b). ZHU Xi, answering a disciple’s complaint that Confucius was unclear in his expositions of “humanity,” explained that this manifold concept cannot be reduced to words without doing it violence. Zhu also maintained that Confucius intended to lead his pupils to humanity through their experiencing it, not through giving them a definition (Sato 1986: 214). A Qing scholar, WU Tingdong 吳廷棟 (1793–1873), argued that Confucius’ reticence on “humanity” arose from his fear that discussing it too much would drive his auditors to aim too high (Wu 1979: 159.4b). When the Sage did discuss or characterize it, claimed the Song commentator ZHENG RUXIE 鄭汝諧, he defined it rather inadequately or incompletely in terms of “filiality” and “brotherliness,” simply because this provided an accessible approach to “humanity” for his auditors: “If he had taught them [by attempting to explain] the ‘Way’ and ‘humanity,’ they would not have known what was the ‘Way’ or what was ‘humanity.’ Only by instructing them regarding ‘filiality’ and ‘brotherliness’ could they all know the proper point of entry” (Zheng 1970: 159.4b). Confucius thus accommodated his teachings concerning “humanity” to his audience.

The Song scholar WANG RUOXU 王若虛 (1174–1243) proffered a similar accommodationist explanation for the superficial lack of profundity in the *Analects*. Accusing other commentators of “three excesses”: being “too profound, too lofty, and too opaque,” Wang added that “the words of the sages are only of human emotions. Thus, they are readily understandable and easy to know, commonplace and yet enduring.” As for “the Master’s words concerning human nature and the Way of Heaven,” two profound metaphysical topics, Confucius’ close disciple, ZIGONG 子貢 himself said that they could not be heard. “And yet the Song Neo-Confucians all suppose that they have really heard them” (R. Wang 1965: 220.3b–4a). Although lack of philosophical profundity in a classic might well be perceived as a shortcoming, Wang turns this apparent debit to good account by indicating that the Sage spoke simply and accessibly of matters close to the human heart. In bringing the classics, or at least the *Analects*, down to earth, Wang, moreover, might well have found canonical support for his position in Mengzi’s famous saying that “though the Way be close at hand, it is sought in distant places; though affairs be easy, they are sought in what is difficult” (*Mengzi* 4A11).

Now a sort of “hermeneutical circle” takes us back to a position close to our point of departure (the comprehensiveness of the canon, our first criterion of canonicity): While canons must be all-inclusive in some sense, they must also be all-exclusive as well, containing no superfluities. Every jot and tittle must have some significance, indeed, not just some, but a great deal (even the begats – or from a sociobiological point of view, especially the begats). While most traditions are apparently content to establish this criterion by explaining the real significance of apparently superfluous passages in their respective canons, in the Confucian commentarial tradition, Confucius takes a more proactive role: he supposedly not only “transmits” the wisdom of the sages. Rather, his chief contribution to the formation of the classics, so many scholars of the Han and later eras argued, was in his having expurgated these precanonical writings in the course of transmitting

them. The Chinese classics, in other words, became classics, and were transformed from collections of ancient records on matters related to politics and ritual, into a set of canonical texts by a process of excision or expurgation. And Confucius himself was the great expurgator of this tradition (though he could hardly have expurgated the *Analects*, which was compiled sometime after his death).

But “when Confucius expounded the *Six Classics*,”<sup>4</sup> so WANG Yangming argued, “he feared that superfluous learning was creating a chaos in the world; so he lost no time in simplifying them to cause the [people of the] world to strive to eliminate [superfluous] writing and seek the real substance” (Y. Wang 1971: 20). Wang extended his ideas on the virtues of expurgation by arguing that the notorious first emperor of the Qin dynasty should not be condemned for burning books, only for burning the wrong ones and for harboring a selfish intention in doing so (Y. Wang 1971: 20–21).

But however tiresome an unexpurgated classic might be, Confucius apparently never tired of commentary; and one of his greatest delights recorded in the *Analects* was discovering a disciple with whom he could discuss the *Book of Odes*. One can only imagine how nonplussed Confucius might have been had he somehow lived to see the record of his conversations (the *Analects*) demoted in status from “commentary” to “classic.”

## Sustenance of Canonicity: The Main Commentarial Traditions

Having revealed and parsed the principal hermeneutic assumptions and principles that governed and guided the forging of the commentaries that undergirded the classical and canonical text of the *Analects*, it is helpful to take stock of the growth of this entire commentarial tradition in a more systematic manner, highlighting and pinpointing the most influential exegetical texts. In a crucial way, the dynamic development of this tradition, composed of heterogeneous and diverse readings of the *Analects* over time, ensured and sustained the continued textual authority and textual canonicity of the Classic. It was kept alive and renewed afresh by succeeding communities of interpreters. However the *Analects* came to be assembled as a complete text, by the reign of Wendi 文帝 (180–157 B.C.E.) in the early Han, it had achieved some kind of canonical status, as evidenced by the fact that a court-sponsored academic chair held by the Erudites (*boshi* 博士) was established for its study (Makeham 1996: 1–25). But in the reign of Wudi 武帝 (141–87 B.C. E.), the *boshi* chairs came to be monopolized by the experts on the *Five Classics* that were championed by DONG Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179–104 B.C.E.), whose vision

<sup>4</sup>The *Six Classics* include the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Lushichunqiu* 呂氏春秋), and the *Record of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記).

of classical canonicity won over the emperor. As a result, the *Analects*, although still much respected, receded into the background as a supplement or complement to the main classics rather than as classic in its own rights. Throughout the Han, it was often labeled and categorized as a *zhuan* 傳 (commentary), *ji* 記 (record) or *yu* 語 (discourse), as opposed to a *jing* 經 (classic). Nonetheless, various commentarial traditions did arise around the three main versions of the texts—the so-called *Gu Lunyu* 古論語 (the Archaic Script *Analects*), *Qi Lunyu* 齊論語 (The *Analects* of the old state of Qi), and *Lu Lunyu* 魯論語 (The *Analects* of the old state of Lu), the first being an old script text, while the latter two belonging to the new script corpus (B. Wang 1997: 81–85). HUAN Tan 桓譚 (23–50 B.C.E.), the Eastern Han scholar, informs us that while the three versions were similar, their difference amounted to some 640 characters. Notwithstanding their divergence and despite their variation, what happened in the Han was a gradual process of their synthesis and amalgamation, such that the great Han exegete, ZHENG Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200), was eventually able to forge a unified version based on the Lu text, the one that later generations came to embrace as the authoritative classic (Makeham 2003: 363–377; Jiang 2003: 610–616; Guo 2001: 337–339).

The first full-fledged commentary on the *Analects* that exerted long-term and lasting influences on later glosses and annotations was undoubtedly the *Lunyu jijie* 論語集解 (*Collected Explanations of the Analects*), long regarded as an anthological work under the general editorship of HE Yan 何晏 (c. 195–249), an illustrious scholar of *xuanxue* 玄學 (dark/esoteric/mysterious/obscure/abstruse learning), a term often too broadly and imprecisely translated as Neo-Daoism in Western scholarship.<sup>5</sup> The *Lunyu jijie* may be regarded as the Ur-commentary on the *Analects* in that it is a compilation that is both innovative and foundational. Its innovation lies in the principal guiding hermeneutic principle, which is based on Confucius' famous declaration that he transmitted the old tradition rather than creating a new one (7.1). The editors proclaimed:

By transmitting antiquity yet not developing one's own account of that antiquity, by assuming a position among assembled gathering yet not seeking to distinguish oneself from that assembly—one's sole guide being the way—one may, therefore, be without a personal presence (quoted in Makeham 2003: 50).

The *Collected Explanations* is thus meant to be the transmission and conveyance of the original authorial intents, and the way to do so is to invest interpretative authority on the collective commentaries. It is by virtue of the commentarial voices, collected, collated, arranged and systematized, that the teachings and messages of the *Analects* came to be, and could be, correctly known and comprehended. Commentary is thus not merely the subjective reading and interpretation of a compiler; it is the authoritative statement on the original classical text. Whereas ZHENG Xuan 鄭玄, for instance, did not quite make clear references to earlier commentaries even though

<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that John Makeham has convincingly shown that, contrary to traditional understanding and customary attribution, HE Yan's role as the main editor and the supposed influence of *xuanxue* on said work have been greatly exaggerated (Makeham 1999: 1–35).

he did appropriate them in his explication of the *Analects*, the *Collected Explanations*' very *raison d'être* is its assemblage and acknowledgment of previous commentaries, through which the words of the sage may be clearly heard and understood.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, by dint of its comprehensiveness in marshaling the earlier commentaries, it became the foundational commentary on the *Analects*, much followed, emulated and cited. HUANG Kan's 皇侃 (488–545) *Lunyu yishu* 論語義疏 (*Elucidation of the meaning of the Analects*), and XING Bing's 邢昺 (932–1010) *Lunyu zhushu* (*Annotations and Subcommentaries on the Analects*), for example, are themselves commentaries on He's *Collected Explanations*, including verbatim parts of its text and explanations. In fact, the commentarial authority of He's compilation was not eclipsed until the emergence of ZHU Xi's *Collected Annotations on the Analects* (Makeham 2003: 23–29, 73–750; Jiang 2003: 680–689).

While there is no question that from the third to the tenth century, He's *Collected Explanations* and ZHENG Xuan's commentaries predominated in the world of exegesis of the *Analects*, one commentarial compilation merits special attention, that is, HUANG Kan's *Lunyu yishu* (*Elucidation of the Meaning of the Analects*). First, it initiated the genre of *shu* 疏, or subcommentary. Second, by limiting the possibilities of different meanings by affirming the authoritative readings in the *Collected Explanations* and by referring to a host of Han and post-Han glosses, it strengthened the interpretative authority of the commentary, such that it overshadowed the authority of the words of the original classic. Third, it proffers the most sustained and systematic philosophical reading of the *Analects* before the hermeneutic endeavors of the *daoxue* 道學 scholars such as the Cheng brothers (CHENG Hao 程顥, 1032–1085, and CHENG Yi 程頤, 1033–1107) and ZHU Xi, as a result of the influences exerted by *xuanxue* and Buddhism on Huang's thinking (Makeham 2003: 79–80; Jiang 2003: v. 2.701–704).

As a subcommentary, Huang's *Lunyu yishu* has a tripartite organization: the original text itself, as presented by He's *Collected Explanations*; the main commentary, which consists of the *Collected Explanations*; and the *shu* commentaries of 40 identified commentators and a number of unnamed ones. Unlike He's compilation, which is characterized by a subdued and opaque editorial voice, Huang's stamp is everywhere impressed in the work (Makeham 2003: 85–89). *Via* commentaries, Huang waxed philosophic about the question of human nature, for instance. Glossing the meaning of this statement in the *Analects*, “To those of above-average talents, advanced subjects may be taught, but to those of below-average talents, advanced subjects may not be taught” (6:19), Huang commented:

As far as human talent and disposition are concerned, broadly considered, there are three [grades], the so-called superior, the average, and the inferior. Classified in a more detailed manner, there are nine [grades]: the high superior, the middling superior, and the low

<sup>6</sup> In particular, the explanations of the following commentators are included—KONG Anguo 孔安國 (died c. 100 B.C.E.), BAO Xian 包咸 (6 B.C.E.-C.E. 65), Mr. Zhou 周氏 (?), MA Rong 馬融 (79–166), ZHENG Xuan (127–200), CHEN Qun 陳 (d. 236), and WANG Su 王肅 (195–256)—of whom the most important is Kong, whose commentaries constitute almost half of the text. See Makeham 2003: 378–385.

superior; there are also the high average, the middling average, and the low average; and there are furthermore the high inferior, the middling inferior, and the low inferior. Altogether, there are nine grades. The high superior are the sages, and sages need not be taught. The low inferior are cretins, and cretins being unchangeable, they also need not be taught. Those who can be taught are those who range from the middling superior and below to the middling inferior and above (Quoted in Jiang 2003: 709–710).<sup>7</sup>

Through commentary, Huang also expressed his understanding of sagehood and sageliness within the philosophical framework of *xuanxue*, which dwelt on concepts such as *weimiao* 微妙 (subtle wonder), *xuantong* 玄通 (mysterious comprehension), *wu* 無 (emptiness), *you* 有 (there is) and *xu* 虛 (vacuity). Glossing the famous passage in which Confucius charted his own moral progress from age 50–70, when the master finally could follow his heart’s desires without the fear of transgression (2.4), Huang depicted Confucius as a sort of Daoist true person who achieved mysterious comprehension through subtle wonder and whose profundity was so deep that it could not be known in ordinary terms (Jiang 2003: v. 2, 718). Regarding *Analects* 14.28—“‘Three things a profound person always claims, none of which I have the ability to realize: the benevolent are never worried; the wise are never bemused; and the brave are never scared.’ Zigong said, ‘The master is describing himself.’”—Huang averred, “When Zigong said that the master was describing himself, he meant that for Confucius, what was not there (*wu* 無) was really there (*shiyou* 實有).” Huang elaborated by further citing JIANG Xi 江熙 (5th c.?):

The core being (*ti* 體) of the sage ends ultimately in great vacuity (*xu* 虛), and so he forgets his spirited majesty and sheds his illuminating wisdom, thereby making himself one with the abilities and disabilities of the masses. Therefore, he claims the lack of ability. Zigong recognized the master’s innate authenticity (*tianzhen* 天真) and said, ‘The master is describing himself’ (Quoted in Jiang 2003: 718–719).

This characterization of Confucius as the disinterested sage who personifies the ultimate reality of vacuity, the existential virtue of subtlety, and the phenomenological state of non-presence/non-action is typical of the *xuanxue* portrayal of the ideal and the good.<sup>8</sup>

But it was in ZHU Xi’s hands that classical commentaries became full-fledged vehicles for philosophizing. Zhu, following a trend that had already been set into motion during the Northern Song and extending the pioneering efforts of ZHOU Dunyi 周敦頤 (1017–1073) and the Cheng brothers, consolidated the classical and canonical status of the *Four Books* (*Sishu* 四書), namely, as already pointed out above, the *Daxue*, *Analects*, *Mengzi*, and *Zhongyong*, to be read in that specific order (Gardner 1984: 57–70). Because these texts encapsulated the essential core of the ancient sages’ teachings and on account of their relative ready accessibility and

<sup>7</sup> It is most likely that Huang’s division of human innate talents into nine grades was a philosophical reflection of the then prevailing system of *jinpin zhongzheng* 九品中正 (nine grades and the impartial and upright official), designed to rank candidates for offices.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed examination of the influence of *xuanxue* on Huang’s exegesis, see Makeham 2003: 96–147 and Jiang 2003: 713–723.

easy intelligibility, Zhu famously declared that they should take precedence over all the other classics, including the *Five Classics*. The *Four Books*, as Zhu explained metaphorically, were already cooked rice, whereas reading the other classics would be akin to threshing the rice plant as the initial effort to obtain the grains to cook the rice (Jiang 2003: v. 3/part 2, 758). In 1190, the *Four Books* were unprecedentedly grouped and published together by ZHU Xi as the *Sizi (Four Masters)*, which later came to be known as the *Sishu zhangju jizhu* 四書章句集注 (*Collected Commentaries on the Sections and Sentences of the Four Books*), or simply, the *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注. Of the *Four Books*, Zhu labored the longest and hardest on the *Analects*, producing 11 commentaries, the most well-known and comprehensive of which was the 1290 edition of the *Lunyu jizhu* 論語集注 (*Collected Commentaries on the Analects*), incorporated as a part of the *Four Masters* (Makeham 2003: 178–182).<sup>9</sup> We must also note that when the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) instituted the new civil service examinations in 1313–1315, Zhu's commentaries were promoted as the orthodox ones, and in fact, as the accepted authoritative interpretations until the abolition of the examinations in 1905, they continued to govern the way the classics were read (de Bary 1981: 54–60).

ZHU Xi's hermeneutics is inspired by the quest for the ultimate understanding and realization of the Way (*dao* 道) and principle (*li* 理). He created a new scriptural tradition through the *Four Books* because, for him, they revealed the culturo-historical discourse that was *dao* with its transmission, order, and lineage—the daotong—and the onto-cosmological truth that was *li*. He also posited a new hermeneutic relation between the reader and the classical text, to the extent that the reader might be one with the mind of the antique authors *via* the moral-intellectual pursuits of self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) and investigation of things (*gewu* 格物). His hermeneutic stance was not that one might simply study the Way and principle as taught by classics; one actually apprehended, embodied and knew them. Thus, if Zhu took much interpretive latitude in his exegesis, it was because, in the last analysis, philological and textual investigations were inadequate and insufficient for grasping the truths of the Way and principle. We may further argue that since, for Zhu, truth inhered in the *Four Books*, Zhu's philosophical conception of truth was textually based, generated, and mediated. It was through exegesis that the truths and truth claims of the classics could be revealed and understood. Thus, Zhu's readings of the *Analects*, however seemingly free-wheeling, strong, and radically unconventional, were imprimaturs affirming the Classic's authority (Gardner 1984: 57–81, 1991: 574–603, 1998: 397–422; Herman 2001: 103–128; Ng 2008: 255–276).

But at the same time that Zhu affirmed the authority of the classics, his commentaries were vessels of his metaphysical construals and ethico-moral teachings, which, as far as he was concerned, represented what the sages had intended to say, thereby also affirming commentarial authority. The *Collected Commentaries on the*

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<sup>9</sup> On ZHU Xi's life-long process of annotating and commenting on the *Four Books*, see M. Qian 1986: 1355–1388.

*Analects* was the commentarial venue wherein he advanced his moral-cultural project of learning to be a sage, through which he addressed a host of conceptual issues, from the nature of learning, through the nature of humanity, to the nature of sagehood. Here we see Zhu's engagements with a wide array of notions such as *tianming* 天命 (mandate of heaven), *tiandao* 天道 (the way of heaven), *li* 理 (principle), *ren* 仁 (humaneness), *yiguan* 一貫 (the one thread), *cheng* 誠 (sincerity), *zhong* 忠 (devotion), *shu* 恕 (reciprocity), and so on (Makeham 2003: 196–250; Jiang 2003: 760–782). This is not place to dwell on Zhu's philosophical disquisitions through his hermeneutic readings. Suffice it here to provide a couple of examples.

On Confucius' statement that he knew the mandate of heaven at the age of 50 (2.4), Zhu commented:

The mandate of heaven (*tianming*) is the flow and movement of the Way of heaven (*tiandao*) that is imbued in events and things, and that is the cause of why and how things are just so. Knowing this means, needless to say, reaching the ultimate of the essence of things without any doubt (Zhu 1985: 1.9a).

Here, Zhu, in equating the mandate of heaven with the Way of heaven, gives it a cosmo-ontological reading so as to assert the hows, whys, and wherefores of the workings of the world and the myriad things.

Regarding *Analects* 4.15—"My Way is penetratingly interconnected by the one thread"—Zhu explains:

The one principle (*yili* 一理) of the Master is holistically complete, which responds to the wrong and the right. It can be analogized with the ultimate sincerity (*zhicheng* 至誠) of heaven and earth that is ceaseless (*wuxi* 無息), which accounts for the fact that the myriad things have their own place. . . . Ultimate sincerity and ceaselessness are the substance (*ti* 體) of the Way, so that the multiple manifestations (*wanshu* 萬殊) all have one root (*yiben* 一本). The fact that the myriad things have their own place is the function (*yong* 用) of the Way. Seen in this way, the concrete reality of the "one thread" can be readily discerned (Zhu 1985: 2.13b).

Again, Zhu gave Confucius' central idea of the "one thread" a metaphysical spin, elucidating it in terms of his meta-ethical notions of sincerity, root, substance and function. In fact, Zhu went on to elaborate, contending that this one thread, understood as *ren*, expressed the virtues of *zhong* (devotion) and *shu* (reciprocity), the former being the Way of heaven, or substance, and the latter the Way of humanity, or function (Zhu 1985: 2.14a).

## A Concluding Thought: Commentary and Life of a Classic

Zhu Xi's commentaries, including the one of the *Analects*, as part of the state orthodoxy, to the extent that they were prescribed for the civil service examinations and thus in turn played important roles in the school curriculum, for some 700 years, remained a part of the intellectual, political, and social cultures of imperial China. Thus commentaries were often inseparable from the ancestral

classical texts themselves. Reading the commentaries became an indispensable part and imperative act of knowing the original ancient words. In a significant way, one may say that the commentaries invariably ended up usurping the textual authority of the classics. Whether it was HE Yan, HUANG Kan or ZHU Xi, an exegete/hermeneute inevitably and inexorably headlined ideas and concepts that might not have been in the original text. Yet the continued existence and vibrancy of the classical work depended on this very hermeneutic confection and contortion that commentaries perpetrated. To escape oblivion and death, a classic must yield its originary claim to authority to its readers, commentators, and interpreters, without whose efforts, be they exegesis or eisegesis, a text such as the *Lunyu* would have long been consigned to the dustbin of history.

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## Chapter 4

# Confucius and His Community

Yuet Keung Lo

Analytically speaking, we have two models of Confucius: a historical Confucius and the multiple perceptions of Confucius that evolved over the long course of Chinese history. The personae in these two models often differ even though they are not necessarily incongruous.<sup>1</sup> Although Confucius himself likely did not commit anything to writing,<sup>2</sup> we do have purported records of him in the *Analects*, where he is shown speaking about himself in seeming autobiographical remarks, as well as with his disciples and contemporaries. These remarks and conversations provide a self-portrait of the master that constitutes the core of the historical Confucius insofar as the *Analects* is historically reliable as a coherent text. While caution is warranted regarding the historical accuracy of parts of the book, there is no inconsistency about the personality and character of Confucius revealed therein. In the *Analects*, Confucius' disciples and contemporaries reportedly also offer their own descriptions of the master, and these direct and intimate perceptions enhance and, in a sense, animate the essential core of the historical Confucius, rendering him more lifelike and human than the somewhat unrealistic Heaven-born sage or philosopher in abstract imagination and antiseptic analysis to which he was often reduced in later historiography and philosophical hermeneutics. In spite of the sagely status he acquired and the cultural icon he became long after his death, Confucius repeatedly professed that he was a quiet yet unrelenting learner. His reiteration was more than mere modesty. It not only suggests that the master was

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of the *Analects* in this chapter are borrowed from Lau 1979 unless otherwise noted. Lau translates *ren* 仁 as “benevolence” but it is uniformly replaced with “humaneness” in my citations. Wade-Giles Romanization in Lau’s translation is changed to *pinyin* Romanization.

<sup>2</sup> The compilation of the *Analects* was credited to the disciples of Confucius in the earliest bibliographical record of the *Analects* in the Bibliographical Section of the dynastic history, *Hanshu* 漢書 (*History of the Han*), traditionally attributed to BAN Gu 班固 (32–92 C.E.).

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proud of his unassuming efforts in making continuous progress on his lifelong self-cultivation, but also that his contemporaries failed to recognize him as such. Indeed modern scholarship, too, does not seem to pay much respect to Confucius as a learner even though the Confucian notion of learning is given due attention. This essay seeks to fill this scholastic lacuna by examining Confucius as a learner ostensibly recorded in the *Analects* and how that role could help explain his philosophy and its evolution.

## The Learner

Confucius gave us perhaps the most famous description of himself when he said, “At fifteen I set my heart on learning; at thirty I established myself; at forty I came to be free from doubts; at fifty I understood the Decree of Heaven; at sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I followed my heart’s desire without overstepping the line” (2.4). However one may interpret the several critical stages of Confucius’ personal development, his life was in reality a continuous odyssey of learning with unflagging commitment and unquenchable passion. In an important sense, Confucius would characterize himself as a lifelong learner even though he was widely revered as the perfect sage<sup>3</sup> and exemplary teacher in premodern China, and is in modern times invariably recognized as the first private teacher in China.<sup>4</sup>

The master’s reflective characterization of his long life in terms of his progressive development in self-cultivation bespeaks his adamant interest in learning. In the master’s own understanding, his life was an odyssey of spiritual ascension to Heaven (14.35) that befits the gentleman (*junzi* 君子) (14.20, 20.3). Confucius’ characterization of himself as learner was profoundly accurate even if it sounds too modest for many students of Confucianism, past and present. Evidence abounds in the *Analects*. For instance, he proudly declared that “In a hamlet of ten households, there are bound to be those who are my equal in doing their best for others and in being trustworthy in what they say, but they are unlikely to be as eager to learn as I am” (5.28). In his own judgment, the master prided himself on being an eager learner and that, he thought, made him stand out among others. In fact, he learned

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<sup>3</sup> Some of Confucius’ contemporaries recognized his erudition, talents, and skills of various sorts and considered him a sage for that reason (9.2, 9.6). But Confucius and his disciples entertained a very different notion of sagehood. See below.

<sup>4</sup> This is indeed a misnomer in virtually all modern scholarship. See, for instance, Tu Wei-ming 杜維明, “The Confucian LIU Xia Hui Tradition in Chinese History” (Tu 1990). In fact, there must have been other scholars before Confucius who had offered education to commoners even though their influence was not nearly as widespread and long-lasting as that of Confucius. One such example was LIU Xia Hui 柳下惠, who, like his junior contemporary Confucius, was a native of the state of Lu. LIU Xia Hui had served as a judge (18.2) and Confucius considered him a worthy (15.14, 18.8). We are told that he “was dismissed three times when he was judge” (18.2). In the end he seemed never to be reinstated again, and, according to LIU Xiang’s 劉向 (ca. 77–6 B.C.E.) *Biographies of Women* 列女傳, he chose to teach instead.

with an urgency characterized in a general remark he made: “Even with a man who urges himself on in his studies as though he was losing ground, my fear is still that he may not make it in time” (8.17). One cannot help but sense that this general statement was also self-referential, as is evident in another remark Confucius makes more directly about himself: “Even when walking in the company of two other men, I am bound to be able to learn from them. The good points of the one I copy; the bad points of the other I correct in myself” (7.22). There was a teacher wherever he went because he was always a perceptive and dedicated student. Indeed an avid lifelong learner, the master confessed when he was 63 years old that he was one who “forgets to eat when he tries to solve a problem that has been driving him to distraction, who is so full of joy that he forgets his worries and who does not notice the onset of old age” (7.19).

Unlike a born prophet, Confucius acquired his philosophical and practical wisdom through persistent learning. He ascribed his prominence as a teacher to an inseparable but underappreciated greatness as a student. The master said, “A man is worthy of being a teacher who gets to know what is new by keeping fresh in his mind what he is already familiar with” (2.11). Evidently, a worthy teacher must be a relentless and creative student as well. The qualification of the teacher is contingent upon his quality as a student. This is effectively a new definition of the teacher. The master said, “Quietly to take note in my mind of what I learn, to learn without flagging, to teach without growing weary, these present me with no difficulties” (7.2).<sup>5</sup> Essentially, what Confucius was certain about his abilities concerns his role as a teacher and as a student at once, while taking a mental note quietly of what he has learned reveals his method of learning.

Confucius was unique among pre-Qin philosophers in the emphasis he gave learning. In contrast, the Daoists were exceptional in their aversion to and distrust in learning. While the Daoist stance was evidently polemical and targeted the Confucian emphasis on learning, few non-Confucian philosophers in the Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國) period (453–221 B.C.E.) promoted learning per se in their doctrines though they were not uniformly anti-intellectual.<sup>6</sup>

Because of his emphasis on learning, it is only natural that Confucius would reflect on learning as an experience and he often talked about it. For instance, he said, “If one learns from others but does not think, one will be bewildered. If, on the other hand, one thinks but does not learn from others, one will be in peril” (2.15). The term for learning is *xue* 學, which is graphically composed of a three-tiered formation. The top tier depicts a pair of hands drawing milfoil stalks; it conveys the idea that a diviner is engaged in the process of divination. The middle tier represents a pictograph of a small table (*ji* 几) while the bottom tier limns the outline of a

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<sup>5</sup> On another occasion, the master said, “How dare I claim to be a sage or a humane person? Perhaps it might be said of me that I learn without flagging and teach without growing weary.” GONGXI Hua said, “This is precisely where we disciples are unable to learn from your example.” See *Analects* 7.34.

<sup>6</sup> The Mohists were arguably a notable exception.

young man (*zi* 子). The composite graph suggests that a young learner is observing in front of a small table where a diviner is demonstrating how to divine with milfoil stalks. Thus the original notion of learning was about cracking the secrets of the unknown, and the way to gain such learning was to observe and imitate the recognized master who demonstrated it in person. Thus learning has a connotation of imitation and emulation, and is premised on the unspoken understanding that experience and history matter and the teacher is respected. Learning is by no means exclusively intellectual. In a sense, religious commitment is literally demanded and the goal of learning is pragmatic. Ontologically, hands-on imitation or rote memorization and critical reflection are distinct but they are not exclusive to each other in the experience of actual learning. Confucius' warning about unthinking model emulation and thinking in abstraction without realistic relevance should be appreciated in this cultural-historical light—it was essentially a holistic method of intellectual inquiry that integrates theoretical abstraction and concomitant praxis. Understood as such, the polemic intent is readily apparent in Chapter 48 of the *Daodejing* 道德經, which says, “In the pursuit of learning one knows more every day; in the pursuit of the way one does less every day. One does less and less until one does nothing at all, and when one does nothing at all there is nothing that is undone” (Lao 1963: 109). The contrast between the pursuit of learning and the cultivation of Dao seems irreconcilable. Relative to the issue of learning itself, the *Daodejing* passage shows little interest.

For Confucius, the scope of learning may be summed up in one word: *wen* 文 (culture), or cultural traditions of the past particularly the Three Dynasties of Xia 夏, Shang 商, and Zhou 周 (9.5, 2.23, 7.20), and the master took it upon himself to transmit it (7.1). More will be said about learning in the rest of this chapter,<sup>7</sup> suffice it to say here that *wen* was primarily recorded in ancient texts (15.27) such as the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經), the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) but was also manifested in the rites (*li* 禮) that regulated political institutions and personal conduct (3.9, 7.18). Thus Confucian learning is confined to neither book knowledge nor moral cultivation; it is social, political, and personal.

## The Nature of Learning

What is it about learning that mesmerized Confucius and made it such a transformative experience for him? One important clue lies in the opening chapter of the *Analec*s (1.1). It is plausible, as most traditional Chinese scholars insightfully observed, that the chapter was placed at the very beginning of the work because it highlights the central importance of learning, which was the key to the teachings

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<sup>7</sup>For a detailed analysis of the tripartite nature of Confucian learning as scholastics, self-cultivation, and faith, see Lao 2012: 103–130.

of Confucius.<sup>8</sup> One modern commentator even considers the opening chapter the motto of the Confucian academy (Ye 2002: 140). Indeed, the first chapter reveals much about the nature of learning and the trajectory of self-cultivation: “Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals? Is it not a joy to have friends come from afar? Is it not gentlemanly not to take offence when others fail to appreciate your abilities?” (1.1). In this tripartite claim, Confucius describes three kinds of emotive experience. Here he may very well be discussing his personal experiences, regarded as having a general significance, or he may be simply describing spiritual goals that are accessible to all. Of course, he can be doing both.

The three emotive states seem to reflect three kinds of inner experience in escalating levels that correspond to progress in learning that focuses essentially on spiritual cultivation. Learning and the regular practice of what is learned require only the effort of the learner, and the twofold endeavor gives him pleasure. It is no coincidence that this twofold endeavor is identical to the idea of learning embedded in the three-tier graphic formation of the term *xue*, as the art of divination required regular exercises not only in the process of learning but also in its actual practice. Of course, the emphasis on delight in the experience of learning was Confucius’ contribution. When the learner’s “friends” come from afar, presumably to discuss and exchange learning with him,<sup>9</sup> bonding and communion can be formed, and the joy resulting from this relationship and exchange appears to be more profound than the simple pleasure the learner can enjoy from learning and practicing in solitude. But companionship is a double-edged sword. When the bonding and communion are harmonious, profound joy ensues. Such harmony, however, is by no means guaranteed, and the learner’s true worth may not be fully appreciated. Faced with such a disheartening result, if the learner is capable of not allowing chagrin and frustration to upset his inner tranquility, or to undermine his faith in himself, he is then considered a gentleman, for that inner tranquility is the mark of truly sophisticated self-cultivation.

The tripartite process of self-cultivation begins with one’s own effort to learn and practice. It is critical that this movement toward goodness and self-improvement is entirely self-motivated. Only then can one fully savor the abundant pleasure of learning that is purely one’s own. It appears that true pleasure must come from within; it cannot be secured from without. Yet others are also necessary and implicated in one’s self-cultivation. As wonderful as learning on one’s own is, it would be better to have an opportunity to share what one has learned with one’s friends, especially a friend who comes from afar as this implies one’s learning now has far-reaching impact. Mutual exchange will magnify, enhance, and add depth to

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<sup>8</sup> For instance, ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) said that students should focus on the opening book of the *Analecets* first as it talks much about the fundamentals that constitute the foundation of the cultivation of virtues and the gateway to the Way. See Zhu 2003: 47.

<sup>9</sup> The term *peng* 朋 in this chapter is invariably understood and translated as “friends” in modern scholarship but strictly speaking, it actually means “fellow classmates.” For a discussion, see Lo, “Teacher-Disciples, or Friends?—An Historico-Exegetical Approach to the *Analecets*” (Lo 2007).

the pleasure of learning one enjoys alone. Solitary pleasure is now transformed into mutual joy. The private self is now expanded into a community or even a spiritual bond. Indeed, Confucius and his disciples did form such a fellowship in what can be considered the earliest Confucian community.

While one's yearning to express and share what one is worth may be irrepressible, one's true identity, as we all know painfully well, is often underappreciated, misunderstood, or simply neglected. And that poses perhaps the greatest challenge to the cultivation of a self of true worth. When examined as detailing a progressive model of development, *Analects* 1.1 suggests that the ultimate goal of self-cultivation rests with a unique inner equilibrium of self-fulfillment and ease with oneself that is immune to external interference and perturbation. The gentleman appears to live in a spiritual homeostasis anchored in self-fulfillment and unruffled by lack of appreciation from his community. This seems only natural, for the gentleman begins his self-cultivation with learning on one's own and for one's own pleasure. Confucius called this "learning for one's own sake" (*weiji zhi xue* 為己之學) (14.24). The whole process is self-motivated and therefore should not be frustrated in its drive toward completion. It is its self-motivated nature that determines the process of self-cultivation to be ultimately successful. The master said, "As in the case of making a mound, if, before the very last basketful, I stop, then I shall have stopped. As in the case of leveling the ground, if, though tipping only one basketful, I am going forward, then I shall be making progress" (9.19). The decision to quit or to persist can only be determined by the person in question. A fulfilled and completed self can never be compromised. Hence, the master said, "The Three Armies can be deprived of their commanding officer, but even a common man cannot be deprived of his purpose" (9.26). To persist in one's efforts toward self-fulfillment, one must acquire the virtue of constancy (*heng* 恒) (7.26, 13.22). No doubt Confucius himself was a living example as he never grew weary of learning.

Throughout the process of self-cultivation, emotive goodness is emphasized. From private pleasure to mutual joy, and to the mental state of being impervious to perturbation, true worth is measured against one's ability to be in touch with one's self in a delightful state, to flourish in the joy shared with others, and to persevere and feel at ease in tranquility in spite of lack of appreciation. In this sense, we may say that Confucius' self-cultivation is emotively driven and sustained. As we shall see, emotive goodness hinges upon Confucius' notion of the mind-heart.

## The Mind-Heart and the Learner in Action

In light of the emotive nature of Confucius' self-cultivation, the critical nexus in his self-professed spiritual odyssey seems to reveal itself. While he explicitly mentions *xin* 心 only once in his declaration, his lifelong cultivation hinges on it. In other words, the development and maturation of *xin* constitutes the spiritual progress of Confucius. The evidence is in the diction and expressions he uses in his reflection.



The term *xin* is often translated as mind-heart, which is usually understood as a physical organ but more precisely, it should refer to the functions and potency of the emotive heart and the cognitive mind, which are analytically dualistic but functionally holistic. As Mengzi 孟子 put it, “The ear and the eye are not in charge (*guan* 官) of thinking (*si* 思) and can be obstructed by external things. When one thing interacts with another, it will only be lured away. The mind-heart is in charge of thinking. When it thinks it will gain; or else it will not” (*Mengzi* 6A15). The word *guan* in the citation literally means “management or control” rather than its more contemporary meaning of “organ.” While it is accurate enough in most cases to take *si* to mean “think,” the term actually denotes holistically both the cognitive and emotive powers of the mind-heart. The complex graph *si* consists of two constitutive graphs *xin* 心 (heart) and *xin* 囟 (fontanel), which strictly speaking was considered the organ in charge of cognitive thinking in early China. The unique graphic composition of *si* clearly shows that “thinking” actually is not merely a cognitive function, which is indicated by the *xin* graph for the fontanel, but also an emotive expression at once, which is represented by the *xin* graph for the heart. In other words, thinking is a holistic activity that integrates the power of the heart and that of the fontanel (mind). It is precisely this peculiar semantic substratum of *si* that informs much of early Chinese thought including, as will become clear, Confucius’ intellectual and spiritual odyssey.

The term *zhi* 志 (often translated as “will”), according to the Han-dynasty lexicon *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, consists of two constituent graphs—*xin* 心 (mind-heart) and *zhi* 之 (to go) and it means “intent” (*yi* 意), or put differently, “that which *xin* aims at” (*xin zhi suo zhi* 心之所之). Thus *zhi* connotes the ideas of goal, goal-oriented action, and determination. According to DUAN Yucui’s 段玉裁 (1735–1815) definitive annotation, *zhi*, in Ancient Graph, stands for what would later become three different graphs in Seal Script, namely, *zhi* 志 (aspiration); *zhi* 識 (to register, to record); and *shi* 識 (knowledge) (Duan 2000: 506). The triple meaning of *zhi* evidently includes a strong cognitive element but its meaning as aspiration clearly suggests an additional dimension of volition, which expresses the power of will and striving relative to a goal in vision. In the context of Confucius’ self-described odyssey, *zhi* no doubt takes on this latter sense as its principal meaning. It is no coincidence that Confucius’ journey of self-cultivation began with his *zhi* at age 15. He set his mind upon learning early on. While learning is a broad concept and indeed encompasses virtually everything in its scope, in his teenage years Confucius was already interested in learning about antiquity (7.20), and in particular, the rites and ritual institutions.

At age 30, Confucius established (*li* 立) himself after 15 years of pursuit and practice of the learning he had set his mind upon acquiring. We are told that Confucius, as a young boy, was known for his curiosity in the rites of the Zhou dynasty and his favorite childhood pastime was mimicking the practice of Zhou rites. His favorite childhood pastime, it would seem, turned out to be a lifelong passion. In his early political career in his home state Lu, Confucius asked about the intricacies about every detail of the rites regarding the Grand Shrine for the Duke of Zhou 周公 during his visits there (3.15, 10.21). The famous legend about young

Confucius going to the capital of Zhou in order to ask Laozi 老子 about rites may not be historical, yet it does suggest that Confucius was well known for his unusual interest in the rites. All this goes to show that as a young adult Confucius dreamed of following the culture of Zhou (3.14). In light of this young dream, it can be argued that Confucius at age 30 was now an accomplished ritual master, familiar with the cultural and political institutions of the past as well as their history. He could stand on his own on the ground of historical knowledge, cultural learning and, in particular, the knowledge and practice of rites. That is why Confucius said, “A man... has no way of taking his stand unless he understands the rites” (20.3). Thus, in the second stage of Confucius’ spiritual journey, the mark of accomplishment was primarily cognitive in nature, even though rituals necessitated practice. No doubt, the performance of the rites would include both technical knowledge and affective elements, but it is important to note that in the *Analects* when Confucius and his contemporaries talked about the rites, they invariably would judge a person by his knowledge of them or the lack thereof (3.15, 3.22, 7.31, 20.3). In all cases, “knowing the rites” (*zhili* 知禮) means quite literally technical knowledge rather than the performance of the rites. For Confucius, “taking a stand on the rites” means that he had a good knowledge of the technical protocol and details of the rites. Indeed when he criticized historical figures such as Guanzhong 管仲 (3.22) or his contemporaries (3.1, 3.2), he aimed at their violations of the technicalities of the rites rather than how they were performed. While “knowing” the rites in the robust sense Confucius suggests includes having relevantly appropriate emotional orientations toward them,<sup>10</sup> such a robust understanding of the emotional import in the practice of the rites would come to Confucius when he mellowed in the lifelong journey of learning. This is reflected in the master’s own description of his odyssey of learning. Conceptually, Confucius distinguished “knowing it” and “being fond of it” (6.20), as well as a wise man and a humane man (4.2, 6.23) and ranked the latter over the former. Most important, the superiority of the latter lies in the person’s emotive accomplishments.

Ten years after thus establishing himself, Confucius claimed that he no longer had doubts. “Doubt” (*huo* 惑) has to do with uncertainty in decision-making and judgment. Being free of doubt incorporates the acumen to distinguish this from that and to appreciate the (inter)relationship between them. The *Shuowen* explains “*huo*” to mean “chaotic” or “bewildered” (*luan* 亂). Simply put, *huo* is a state of perplexity or quandary owing to one’s lack of awareness or specific knowledge. Nonetheless, the absence of quandary Confucius describes must be understood vis-à-vis his holistic cultivation at age 40 rather than a specific branch of knowledge or even a particular aspect of life. Confucius once said, “There are three things on the lips of the gentleman, none of which I have succeeded in following: A man of humaneness never worries; a man of wisdom is never in two minds; a man of courage is never afraid.” Hearing this, Zigong 子貢 commented, “What the Master

<sup>10</sup> In *Analects* 3.4 Confucius contrasts the technical details of funeral rites with the sorrow of the mourner who performs them and privileges the latter.

has just quoted is a description of himself” (14.28, 9.29). This self-portrait of Confucius eloquently shows that the absence of quandary in the master was not confined to any particular area of knowledge or experience. In the context of Confucius’ life journey, being free from doubt should also mean that the master, having established himself for a decade, finally came to confirm for himself that his determination to pursue his life-goals was absolutely correct and meaningful in spite of all the frustrations and challenges along the way. He was now all the more confident in continuing his uncompromising pursuits.

The graph for *huo* consists of two components with *huo* 或 (alternative) atop *xin* (heart/mind). While there is no question that *huo* represents the phonetic constituent of the composite graph, its semantic meaning (i.e., “alternative”) is probably operative as well. Literally, then, *huo* 惑 means “a mind of alternatives;” in other words, a person has a less-than-perfect mind who is in a state of *huo*. Age 40 is basically the midpoint of the life of Confucius, and it should be no coincidence that he characterized it with the expression *bu huo*, which evidently shows that the master was keenly aware of his spiritual achievement in terms of the cultivation of his mind-heart.<sup>11</sup>

In an often misunderstood passage, Confucius averred that “To make sense of an issue from only one end (*duan* 端)—this is harmful indeed” (2.16).<sup>12</sup> To the master, there are always two sides to an issue. Figuratively, an issue is comparable to a pole which has two ends (*duan*); no matter how we may change it, a pole will not be a pole without either of its ends. Thus when Confucius’ mind-heart was free of either-or confusions, he had thoroughly understood and abided by the practice of making sense of an issue not from only one of its ends. In more positive terms, Confucius would perhaps call the virtue of seeing things from a well-rounded perspective the mean (*zhongyong* 中庸), which he lamented “had been rare among the common people for a long time” (6.29). The portrait of Confucius that Zigong offers suggests a holistic approach to intellectual issues in a sagely character. Since *huo* is basically a cognizance-based quandary, it would seem that in the first half of his spiritual odyssey, Confucius’ achievement tends to lean toward the mind rather than the heart. In this light, it would make sense if the episode in *Analects* 9.8 below took place after he attained a mind-heart free of either-or confusions.

The Master said, “Do I possess knowledge? No, I don’t. A rustic put a question to me and my mind was a complete blank. I kept hammering at the two sides of the question until I got everything out of it.”

<sup>11</sup> Confucius must have been faced with difficult decision-making throughout his long life and the decisions he made might not be appreciated or understood even by his disciples. For instance, the master’s decision to meet Nanzi 南子, the wife of Duke Ling of Wei 衛靈公 who was reputedly notorious for her licentiousness must have been difficult, and in the end his disciple Zilu was very much upset with him and Confucius apparently felt obliged to defend his innocence by emphatically swearing that “If I have done anything improper, may Heaven’s curse be on me, may Heaven’s curse be on me!” (6.28). See also 17.1 and 17.5.

<sup>12</sup> My reading differs from Lau’s. See Lau 1979: 65.

Evidently, Confucius approached the question from both of its sides and he did not let his opinion or feelings get in the way. In fact, in helping the rustic see clearly both sides of the issue, Confucius might very well address the inquirer's feelings about either of them. Effortlessly and nonchalantly, his "completely blank" mind navigates the rustic through his puzzles. Hence, while feelings and emotions may affect how one makes decisions, the virtue of the mind-heart free of either-or confusions lies in its abilities to respect yet override them in making decisions.

Ten years after Confucius freed himself from being plagued by vague alternatives, he believed that he finally came to know the will or decree of Heaven. It is important to note that Heaven is impartial and all-encompassing (17.19), so after he had attained freedom from confusions and inflexible dualistic thinking, the master's next stage of achievement was elevated to the understanding of Heaven. The word he chose here is *zhi* 知, to know. It is clear that the tendency to lean toward the mind continued in the master's self-cultivation from age 40 onward. Apparently, knowing Heaven represents the apotheosis of his cultivation of the mind as "a man of wisdom is never in two minds." With his privileged knowledge about Heaven, it was difficult for his disciples, or anyone else for that matter, to appreciate what Confucius truly was. The master thus exclaimed ruefully to Zigong,

"There is no one who understands (*zhi* 知) me!"

Zigong said, "How is it that no one understands you?"

The Master said, "I do not complain against Heaven, nor do I blame Man. In my studies, I start from below and get through to what is up above. If I am understood at all, it is, perhaps, by Heaven" (14.35).

While Confucius believed he had gained privileged access to know the will of Heaven, he obviously also had faith that Heaven alone could understand him thoroughly and sympathetically. In the *Analects*, mutual understanding between mind-hearts is possible. *Analects* 14.39 has the following story:

While the Master was playing the stone chimes in Wei, a man who passed in front of the door, carrying a basket, said, "He puts real heart (*xin*) in his music!"<sup>13</sup> Presently, he added, "How small-minded! And how stubborn this sound is! If no one understands him, then he should give up, that is all!"... The Master said, "That would be resolute indeed. Against such resoluteness there can be no argument."<sup>14</sup>

To his listener, Confucius' stone chimes betray his lament over others' lack of appreciation of him, as well as his unswerving commitment to his ideal without compromising his principles. Thus he finds the sound Confucius makes "stubborn" and the master himself "small-minded" (*bi* 鄙); and he advises him to be flexible with his principles. The master does not refute him, and his unfortunate career certainly testifies to his listener's understanding. Clearly, *xin* is not only capable of cognitive learning but also a core of emotions and feelings. Moreover, once its

<sup>13</sup> To keep the explicit meaning of the original word *xin* in the translation, Lau's translation is modified here.

<sup>14</sup> Modified from Lau's translation.

emotions are stimulated, they may find expressions in the playing of a musical instrument such as the stone chimes. Thus *xin* can be manifested in emotively driven activities. Most important, mutual understanding between mind-hearts is possible and indeed can be much appreciated and mediated by listening, as in the case of the master and his unexpected listener. But it appears that the cultivation of the *mind*-heart for Confucius came to fruition in the communion between self and Heaven. It is little wonder that Confucius confided to Zigong that “he was thinking of giving up speech.” And when the disciple said, “If you did not speak, what would there be for us, your disciples, to transmit?” Confucius replied, “What does Heaven ever say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and there are the hundred things coming into being. What does Heaven ever say?” (17.19). The professed emulation of Heaven here is of paramount importance. Confucius had in a sense become one with Heaven. Apparently, he had already perfected his cultivation of the *mind*-heart.

In the *Analects* Confucius did not explain what Heaven meant but his disciples evidently understood him when he spoke of Heaven. Other than its most common meaning of physical sky (19.25), it is certain that, to Confucius, Heaven could regulate the workings of nature such as the procession of the seasons (17.19), determine whether a person has wealth and honor (12.5), or even whether the culture of the past should persist in a later age (9.5). On a more temperamental level, Heaven has the power to endow virtue in someone like Confucius (7.23), designate him to act as “the wooden tongue for a bell” to wake up the world of corruption (3.24), and set him on the path to sagehood (9.6). Heaven can cast a curse on people, including Confucius (6.28; 11.9); it can be offended and appeased (3.13). Heaven cannot be deceived (9.12) and the will of Heaven should be held in awe (16.8). In its totality, Heaven appears to be some sort of transcendental power that is much larger than the human individual, yet somehow it is immanent and operative in the human realm. Although Confucius was hesitant to discuss it, Heaven operates in a way that is accessible to human understanding (5.13). Indeed sages in the past such as Yao modeled himself upon Heaven (8.19).

To Confucius, Heaven is not only knowable but it is capable of knowing the mind-heart of people such as himself. At 50, Confucius believed he had cracked the mystery of the decree of Heaven and perhaps at the same time he was also convinced that only Heaven could really understand him. Interestingly, it was also at this same juncture that Confucius studied the *Classic of Changes* (7.17), which as is well known, was believed in early China to hold the key to the mysteries of the Way of Heaven.

In another 10 years, Confucius would declare that his ear became attuned. Like Heaven, Confucius no longer “speaks” but now naturally “listens” instead. The mention of the ear is peculiar here. Since the ear is an organ of sensory perception that is not capable of intellection, it indicates that the self-cultivation of Confucius began to swerve toward the heart after he had realized the full capacities of the mind and reached the apotheosis of knowledge in his privileged communion with Heaven. Confucius’ understanding of the decree of Heaven presupposes his dichotomous relationship with Heaven; Heaven is the object that he consciously

attempted to appreciate and comprehend. In the *Analects*, *zhi* (to know) is primarily intellectual in nature, whereas *zuo* 作 (to innovate, to create) is behavioral in nature, and the two concepts form a contrastive pair (7.28). Thus the master's eventual success in knowing the decree of Heaven symbolizes the full realization of his *mind-heart*. This, however, does not mean the cognitive mind is no longer at work with the attuned ear, which is interrelated with the emotive heart. Rather, at age 60 Confucius' *mind-heart* began to attain the full realization of its dual capacity. Indeed, one of the special characteristics of the Confucian sage is his extraordinary hearing, called *cong* 聰. The formation of the complex graph *cong* is most revealing. It consists of the three graphs for ear 耳, window 囟 (*cong*), and heart 心. In other words, the extraordinary power of the ear comes about when the channel between the ear and the heart is linked up much like the outside and the inside are connected without obstruction when a window on the wall that separates them is wide open. According to the *Shuowen*, *sheng* 聖 (sage) means "communion" (*tong* 通).<sup>15</sup> It is about the seamless union between the ear and the heart. DUAN Yucai explained, "The reason why *sheng* has an ear radical is that the sage has an attuned ear (*ershun* 耳順)." (Duan 2000: 592). In his view, Confucius attained sagehood at age 60. Little wonder that one of the special characteristics of the Confucian sage is his extraordinary hearing called *cong* 聰.

Traditionally, prior to the time of Confucius, the concept of the sage is intimately related to the auditory power of a spiritually accomplished person. A sage is someone who is able to listen to different and often conflicting opinions, usually in the context of decision-making in the political arena and legal adjudication. The wisdom of the traditional sage shines, as it were, upon whatever comes his way and illuminates it and reveals the truth of the object or issue under examination. No doubt the traditional sage is a wise person but his wisdom and insight is characteristically intellectual and cerebral. In other words, his sagely character is similar to that of Confucius at age 40 whose mind was free of vague alternatives.

The master's transformation of the concept of the sage perhaps begins with his privileged knowledge, which reaches beyond what is around him on the same plane of existence and toward communion with Heaven above. The second innovation Confucius brought to the concept of the sage is his emphasis on emotive excellence and its integration with cognitive brilliance in the *mind-heart*. This is evident in his personal odyssey of self-cultivation, particularly in his self-development after age 50. The Confucian sage employed his *cong* to differentiate and understand the spoken word thoroughly (12.20), taking the affective concerns of all involved parties (19.19).

As mentioned earlier, in the *Analects* knowing is cognitive in nature (6.20); it typically requires an external object, and thus emphasizes distinction and differences (2.17, 3.23, 4.1). The knower should be proactive (1.15; 2.23) and knowledge should be consciously sought (2.11, 7.20) and applied (1.12). Hence, mastery of the object of knowledge is critical and makes knowing worth its name.

<sup>15</sup> For a study of the etymology of the term *sheng* (sage), see Chen 2000: 409–427.

In contrast, the word “*shun*” basically means “to go along” in the verbal sense and “smooth like flowing water” in the adjectival sense. The expression “*er shun*” was unprecedented in pre-Confucius literary sources, suggesting that the spiritual achievement of Confucius at 60 was unique. Compared to knowing, which requires a person to reach out to an object actively in order to achieve its purpose,<sup>16</sup> listening apropos *ershun* not only does not entail the act of reaching out, but in fact forbids it. Knowing is active or even proactive and reactive, whereas listening is totally passive and receptive. The *ershun* listener must remain quiet in waiting, welcoming whatever comes his way. Knowing is judgmental and differential, and it presupposes and indeed tends to reify the boundary between self and others with the faculty of the mind. In contrast, *ershun*, listening with the sensitivity of the heart, is sympathetic and prizes the obliteration of the self-other boundary. It is responsive and accommodating rather than reactive and domineering. To be sure, listening can know and differentiate as well, but “*shun*” goes beyond the level of cognitive and analytic knowing; it actually depicts the emotive world of the listener in sympathy with that of the speaker, as a quiet stream of flowing water that meets with no obstacles in its course. Confucius, with an attuned ear, was obviously much more interested in relating to the voices he heard. He was keen on dissolving himself in forming a seamless communion with others. An episode in the *Analects* serves to illustrate the master’s aspiration to the obliteration of the boundary between self and others.

YAN Hui 顏回 and Zilu 子路 were in attendance. The Master said, “I suggest that you each tell me what it is you have set your hearts on.”

Zilu said, “I should like to share my carriage and horses, clothes and furs with my friends, and to have no regrets even if they become worn.”

YAN Hui said, “I should like never to boast of my own goodness and never to call attention to my good deeds.”

Zilu said, “I should like to hear what you have set your heart on.”

The Master said, “To have the old feel at ease in my presence, my friends find me trustworthy, and the young embrace me in affection” (5.26).<sup>17</sup>

First, the term Confucius uses here for “private wishes” is *zhi*, the same term he uses to describe the stage when he set his mind on learning at age 15. In other words, he is actually asking about the aspirations of his two disciples. The aspirations of the master and his two disciples unanimously converge on the relationship between self and others. Zilu is preoccupied with materialistic concerns in relating himself to others: His challenge is to go beyond the barrier of carriages, horses, clothes, and furs before he can form a union with others. YAN Hui obviously is more accomplished in his moral imagination. His aspiration is to completely subdue his ego in interacting with others. Still, YAN Hui’s cultivation tends to focus exclusively on his own self and on overcoming his egoistic impulses, so much so that others seem simply nonexistent in his moral imagination. The act of overcoming one’s egoistic

<sup>16</sup> The complex graph *zhi* for knowing consists of the *shi* 矢 (arrow) graph and the *wei* 隹 (target) graph. The idea of aiming at a target, reaching out and hitting it is prominent.

<sup>17</sup> Translation modified from Lau’s.

impulses and conforming to the rites emphasizes one's own sensory experiences such as seeing, hearing, speaking, and acting (12.1). And we do not see YAN Hui's aspiration to form a harmonious relationship with others.

Confucius' private wishes clearly far supersede those of his two disciples in both magnitude and profundity. He embraces people from all walks of life in his caring and loving kindness, and relates to them in a way particular to their unique identity. He does not bracket off others and focus exclusively on his own self. He recognizes the individuality of others and embraces their diversity. In his interaction with them, Confucius obliterates the boundary between self and others. In this specific sense, he goes along with others like water running in a free-flowing stream. This is the spirit of "*shun*" he finally came to embody and epitomize at age 60.

The three types of communion to which Confucius aspires are emotive in nature—feeling at ease, trusting, and embracing in affection. In other words, the achievement of *shun* signifies a shift in self-cultivation toward the heart. In Confucius' moral imagination, people from all walks of life become attached to him in various and distinctive ways while he himself stays, as it were, "motionless," as if he is an emotive magnet. In this sense, perhaps we can say that Confucius is an authentic humane person here who is "quiet" and "finds joy in the mountain" (6.23).

A decade after Confucius' ear was attuned, he came to the final stage of his self-cultivation, when he could follow the desires of his mind-heart without breaking any rule. He mentioned the mind-heart explicitly in the conclusion of his spiritual odyssey. That the role of the mind-heart is foregrounded here symbolizes the locus of the master's lifelong pursuit of human perfection. More specifically, it is the desires (*yu* 欲) of the mind-heart that are pitted against the rules (*ju* 矩). However, no dichotomy between the two is actually intended. In fact, Confucius means to say that he is finally able to roam freely following the desires and intentions of his mind-heart without violating any rule.

"*Ju*" literally means T-square but it is not exactly a ruler, for Confucius makes clear that its use requires practical judgment. It provides a measure or guideline for appropriate behavior rather than a hard-and-fast yardstick. It is perhaps comparable to the rule of thumb that always requires the user's discretion in its application. Mengzi once said, "A carpenter or a carriage-maker can give you the compass and the T-square (*guiju* 規矩), but he cannot impart his ingenuity" (*Mengzi* 7B5). It is precisely because *ju* is not a ruler that the master carpenter cannot teach his apprentice ingenuity (*qiao* 巧), which arises in response to shifting but specific circumstances and self-other relationships. In the language of Confucius himself, *qiao* comes from scaling (*quan* 權), which he considers the ultimate level of learning (9.30). The accuracy of scaling is dependent on and relative to the object or person in question, and therefore cannot be predetermined. In this connection, the master's use of the verb *cong* 從 is critical. In the *Analects*, *cong* always connotes a clear sense of volitional control (Lao 2003: 785–796). In conjunction with the desires and intentions of the mind-heart, the subject's active agency is unmistakable. The progression from *shun* to *cong* has never been noted in any scholarship but should not be overlooked. It marks the progress from non-interfering and receptive listening to active and spontaneous engagement with others and external circumstances.



The new achievement incorporates rather than displaces the earlier one. At age 70, Confucius was finally able to fully realize the dual capacity of his mind-heart in roaming freely without transgressing the parameters of appropriate behavior. In the *Analecets*, *yu* encompasses both emotive impulses and cognitive intentions (4.24, 3.17, 15.10). The ability to follow the desires and intentions of the mind-heart is then equivalent to a seamless integration and a full manifestation of both the emotive and cognitive capacities of the mind-heart in its complete magnitude. In this light, we may say that the mind-heart of Confucius at age 70 was virtually identical to the rules embedded yet to be discovered in external affairs. The rules exist because they are externally stipulated to guide and regulate behavior, but they are internally formulated as a result of comprehensive and well-rounded consideration, thus they may be called sensibilities as they take into careful consideration external circumstances and the feelings of the people involved in them. Rules are not hard and fast for Confucius; rather, they are the brainchild of the fully realized mind-heart. In a sense, the discovery of such rules is never-ending, but it is always rewarding as it helps to develop the capacity of the mind-heart to the fullest.

In his effortless going along with the desires and intentions of his mind-heart, it seems certain that Confucius must experience ineffable joy in his entire being. The master said, “To be fond of something is better than merely to know it, and to find joy in it is better than merely to be fond of it” (6.20). This is perhaps the best expression of his preference for joy over mere knowledge or even fondness. This hierarchy of emotive experience corresponds very well to the spiritual odyssey of Confucius, which begins with the determination to learn, proceeds through a thorough mastery of knowledge of the rites and a singularly confident understanding of and attunement with Heaven, and ends with complete realization of his own self and effortless communion between self and others. Figuratively, the master of complete self-realization no longer reaches out to connect with the external world; he simply stays put, like the Pole Star (2.1) or a nurturing mountain (6.23), yet all will be drawn to him and find joy in him. In privileging the emotive experience of joy, there is nothing that better captures the image and spirit than the self-portrait of the master himself. The master said, “In the eating of coarse rice and the drinking of water, the using of one’s elbow for a pillow, joy is to be found. Wealth and rank attained through immoral means have as much to do with me as passing clouds” (7.16). This is joy unto itself. And in a sense, this is also joy *par excellence*. It is found in the heart of Confucius. Insofar as understanding and observance of the rules concern the intellectual faculty of the mind and the following of the desires of the heart is emotively inspired and guided by a sensible knack for appropriate action, at 70 Confucius was the mind-heart embodied and exemplified at its fullness and in its wholeness. As Zigong observed, the self-portrait of the master consisted of a tripartite holism of the mind-heart: “A man of humaneness never worries; a man of wisdom is never in two minds; a man of courage is never afraid.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> An earlier and similar version of the analysis of Confucius’ lifelong odyssey first appeared in Lo 2012.

## Learning About Antiquity and the Limit of Learning

If the fundamental core of learning concerns one's own self grounded in the mind-heart—what Confucius called learning for one's own sake—the scope of learning is by no means limited to it. True to the spirit of humaneness, learning, for Confucius, was also pursued for the sake of others (*weiren zhi xue* 為人之學) (14.24). Learning for the sake of others describes learning that is oriented for public service. Because of its very nature, learning for the sake of others requires practical knowledge and inherited wisdom, and there is no better repository for them than experiences from the past. This explains why Confucius put a high premium on history, or what he called “antiquity.” Confucius said, “I transmit but do not innovate. I am faithful in what I say and devoted to antiquity” (7.1).<sup>19</sup> In the words of Confucius, the majority of the thinkers after his time attempted to “innovate” (*zuo* 作) rather than to “transmit” (*shu* 述) (7.28). Confucius observed that “there are presumably men who innovate without possessing knowledge, but this is not a fault I have” (7.28).

What the master called “antiquity” refers effectively to history and cultural traditions preserved in written documents. Hence the curriculum he taught consisted of the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of Documents*. The master's reluctance to innovate is by no means a sign of lack of creativity and blind adherence to tradition. Rather, his attitude to learning clearly indicates that tradition must renew itself ceaselessly and it is up to the learner to make certain that it does so by creatively engaging himself with it. For Confucius, the study of the past was meant for the good of the present and beyond. This is indeed true to the spirit of, and approach to, learning that does not “make sense of an issue from only one end”—the past and the present form a continuous whole and should therefore be understood together holistically.

The study of the past and cultural traditions pertains to what Confucius called the “learning that starts from the below” (*xiaxue* 下學), and at this level of learning, he said, “I use my ears widely and follow what is good in what I have heard; I use my eyes widely and retain what I have seen in my mind. This constitutes a lower level of knowledge” (7.28, 15.3).<sup>20</sup> But learning also has an upward dimension (*shangda* 上達) that, the master believed, could enable him to gain an intimate understanding of or even communion with Heaven (14.35).

When Confucius was besieged in Kuang, he declared that “With King Wen 文王 dead, is not culture (*wen* 文) invested here in me? If Heaven intends culture to be destroyed, those who come after him, will not be able to have any part of it. If Heaven does not intend this culture to be destroyed, then what can the men of Kuang do to me?” (9.5).<sup>21</sup> The culture inherited, renovated, and exemplified by the

<sup>19</sup> My reading is different from Lau's.

<sup>20</sup> For the importance and significance of sensory observation as a method of gaining knowledge in the *Analects*, see Lao 2005: 73–102. Note also that the ear to which Confucius referred here is an organ of sensory of perception rather than the attuned ear he acquired at age 60.

<sup>21</sup> My reading is different from Lau's and virtually all other modern interpretations.

recognized founder of the Zhou dynasty, King Wen and his son Duke of Zhou 周公, represented what Confucius called the traditions of antiquity<sup>22</sup> and Confucius aspired to emulate them in admiration. His declaration in Kuang was confident and unwavering, and his evocation of Heaven was no accident. We should keep in mind that Confucius was about 55 years old when he was trapped in Kuang and 5 years earlier, as he later reflected, he had already come to understand the Decree of Heaven. It should be noted that the master's confidence was neither stoic nor Heaven-inspired; rather, it resulted from assiduous learning of several decades that had facilitated his communion with Heaven. In other words, that learning could unify human and Heaven was not a mere theory of Confucius; it was rather a consummation of his personal experience of learning. When he said he would prefer not to speak in imitation of Heaven, he was quite serious. The well known doctrine of the unity of Heaven and humanity that would come to define Confucianism and even Chinese culture itself, one may argue, was already foreshadowed or even personified in the master's sedulous lifelong learning.

In this light, Confucius' attainment of a mind-heart free of either-or confusions at age 40 may have a peculiar twist and significance. It is plausible that the bewilderment in two minds that Confucius subtly alludes to might concern the realm of the human and that of Heaven. And between these two realms is a hard-to-perceive boundary, which only the truly wise can see with clarity and certainty. Hence, he is never in two minds (9.29, 14.28). It makes sense that Confucius could come to understand the Decree of Heaven at age 50 if a decade earlier he had acquired the wisdom and insight to see clearly the boundary between the realm of the human and that of Heaven, and a decade later his ear would be attuned which allowed him to welcome and embrace all things of humanity and of Heaven impartially and authentically as they are.

When his disciple Zilu asked him how to serve the spirits of the dead and the gods, Confucius told him, "You are not able to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?" And when Zilu ventured to ask about death, he replied, "You do not understand even life. How can you understand death?" (11.12). It seems clear that Confucius was disinclined to speculate about the nature of spirits and death, as he might deem matters of this sort lie beyond the certitude of human knowledge because the boundary between man and Heaven was difficult to mark clearly. Little wonder then that he instructed Zilu on another occasion that "To say you know when you know, and to say you do not when you do not, that is knowledge" (2.17).

For Confucius the line that demarcates known and unknown, as well as what can be known and what cannot, is not self-evident. Not only does it vary from individual to individual, but at a more profound level, it may mark the limit of human knowledge itself. The known is always recognized as such in the presence of the unknown, which may not be consciously acknowledged. While we all know we are ignorant of certain things and we may or may not know what they are, we may still

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<sup>22</sup> The master said, "The Zhou is resplendent in culture, having before it the example of the two previous dynasties (namely, the Xia and the Yin). I am for the Zhou." See *Analects* 3.14.

be unaware of our known ignorance when we think we actually know what we know which is made possible because of our ignorance. Thus knowledge and ignorance are ontologically interdependent. Only a man of wisdom is not confused about the boundary between them as he is “never in two minds.” When another disciple FAN Chi 樊遲 asked Confucius about wisdom, the master said, “To concentrate on working on what is befitting humanity and to keep one’s distance from the gods and spirits while showing them reverence can be called wisdom” (6.22).<sup>23</sup> While he was actually addressing the issue in a political context, Confucius was characteristically aware of the demarcation between what lies within the human realm and what lies beyond.<sup>24</sup>

## The Joy of Learning

Not only did Confucius elaborate on the critical importance of learning, but he could not resist talking about the joy the learner would unfailingly experience in its pursuit. Furthermore, he could even distinguish different shades of joy in learning. He said, “To be fond of something is better than merely to know it, and to find joy in it is better than merely to be fond of it” (6.20). Clearly, learning is not a mere matter of intellectual exercise or hands-on training. When learning transforms into joy, it is enriched and becomes integrated into the emotive fiber of the learner. Indeed, Confucius shared his own joy of learning and the art of acquiring it with others. Once, when he visited the state of Qi, he discussed music with the Grand Master there and heard the *shao* music of sage-king Shun. He decided to learn it from the Grand Master and for the 3 months he was learning it, he did not notice the taste of the meat he ate. Apart from its utility and practical significance, learning, in Confucius’ experience, is a pure form of irreducible joy. In this sense, learning transcends utility as joy is sufficient and fulfilling unto itself. Thus the gentleman is not just a “utensil” (*qi* 器) (4.12) because his learning is not confined to any particular application. Similarly, the wise person, Confucius said, finds humaneness to his advantage (*liren* 利仁), as he sees it as a practical value.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the humane person feels at ease (*anren* 安仁) in humaneness (4.2). Feeling at ease is not goal-oriented; it is being-in-oneness with the object or person in question.

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<sup>23</sup> My reading is different from Lau’s.

<sup>24</sup> Zhuangzi seems to be the only other philosopher in the Warring States period who explicitly contemplated on our knowledge of humanity and Heaven and the ambiguous and ever-shifting boundary between the two realms. For him, he who is able to demarcate such boundary is the Perfect Man (*zhiren* 至人). See the “Da zongshi” 大宗師 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

<sup>25</sup> Advantage may not be limited to any particular goal, and not aiming at being a utensil does not mean that the gentleman cannot function as a utensil as well. In fact, Confucius called one of his most accomplished disciples Zigong a “sacrificial utensil.” See *Analects* 5.4. On the other hand, the wise person is not necessarily a gentleman.

A person who is humane by nature spontaneously feels at home in humaneness without consciously convincing himself what it is all about.

While feeling at ease is not joy per se, there is an ineffable sense of well-being, inner peace, love, contentment, and happiness in the experience; it is what makes one feel in one's element. Thus being at ease is intimately associated with joy. Confucius said, "Look at the means a man employs, observe the path he takes and examine where he feels at home. In what way is a man's true character hidden from view? In what way is a man's true character hidden from view?" (2.10). A man's true character reveals itself when he is feeling at ease. While people may be at ease with pursuits of different natures, which may reflect different personalities and levels of self-cultivation, the experience of feeling at ease is ontologically the same. This is why Confucius emphasized the experience so much and taught his disciples how to observe it while respecting their unique temperaments and different intellectual inclinations.<sup>26</sup> According to his own experience, the master advised that a man can find his true self in the self-fulfilling joy of learning, as the opening chapter of the *Analects* suggests. In this light, Confucius revealed his most authentic self when he told his disciples that "In the eating of coarse rice and the drinking of water, the use of one's elbow for a pillow, joy is to be found. Wealth and rank attained through immoral means have as much to do with me as passing clouds" (7.16).

Pure joy is self-sufficient and autonomous by virtue of its subject being so in the first place. As his disciples observed, the master, in his private life, is "cordial yet stern, awe-inspiring yet not fierce, and respectful yet at ease" (7.38). YAN Hui, the only disciple Confucius deemed to be fond of learning, was also capable of cherishing a similarly joyous experience in spite of his straitened circumstances. The master praised him, saying, "How admirable Hui is! Living in a mean dwelling on a bowlful of rice and a ladleful of water is a hardship most men would find intolerable, but Hui does not allow this to affect his joy. How admirable Hui is!" (6.11). YAN Hui's simple yet genuine joy reflects a "constant virtue" that Confucius regarded highly as it was not compromised by YAN Hui's worsened living conditions. No wonder the master singled him out for being able to "not lapse from humaneness in his mind-heart for 3 months at a time," whereas "the others attain humaneness merely by fits and starts" (6.7). As noted above, a man of humaneness never worries, and YAN Hui, in the master's description, certainly showed no sign of worry.

Trite as it may sound, joy and being at ease as two types of fundamental lived experience are integral to a life of self-fulfillment and spiritual autonomy as Confucius envisioned and embodied it himself, and they seem alien to virtually all philosophers in the pre-Qin period. For the diligent and altruistic Mohists,

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<sup>26</sup> One of Confucius' criteria in justifying the practice of the 3-year mourning for one's parents was the bereaved children's inability to feel at ease with eating rice and wearing finery during the mourning period. See *Analects* 17.21.

self-sacrifice is not only the order of the day but the fundamental worldview and philosophy of life even though it is conceivable that they may attain a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in making their sacrifice for others. Similarly, joy is not an intrinsic value to be pursued in Daoism. The experience of joy, for instance, is to be avoided in Zhuangzi's 莊子 philosophy of non-attachment, as it is considered to be equally detrimental as sorrow to one's well-being. "Sorrow and joy are perversions of one's innate virtue" as much as "delight and anger are transgressions of the Way"<sup>27</sup>; when one's mind-heart is free of sorrow and joy, one's innate virtue is perfect.<sup>28</sup> Zhuangzi thus advises us to be "content with the time and go along" with whatever may come our way so that neither sorrow nor joy can penetrate our being, and consequently we are delivered from the bond of God (帝之縣解).<sup>29</sup> Evidently, Zhuangzi reconceptualized the idea of being content or feeling at ease (*an* 安) in his admonition and one cannot but suspect that he was trying subvert Confucius' understanding of the same idea. Whereas Confucius seeks to feel at ease with his true self and in his communion with his fellow human beings, Zhuangzi can only find peace in the impersonal passage of time and the unpredictable unfolding of events alien and external to his mind-heart. He even explicitly emphasizes that "if a person enjoys the communion between himself and others, he cannot be considered a sage."<sup>30</sup> His self-cultivation, then, serves only to consign himself and adapt to what lies beyond his control. Thus he says, "A man who cultivates his own mind-heart such that neither sorrow nor joy can sway or influence it; to understand that which is not amenable to change and be content with it as if it was one's destiny, only a person with innate virtue can do that."<sup>31</sup> In short, joy is simply not a positive experience or value to Zhuangzi. Indeed, he even questions if there is ever such a thing called perfect joy or happiness in the world, and even if there is, joy or happiness is merely an instrument or strategy for physical survival in dangerous times. To him, perfect joy or happiness is ironically void of joy or happiness; the purpose of perfect joy or happiness is to keep oneself alive and only non-action (*wuwei* 無為) can help one accomplish it because non-action is true joy or happiness.<sup>32</sup> If the Confucian notion of joy means that a man may be considered free and autonomous by virtue of the joy he experiences in learning or in whatever circumstances he may find himself through an intimate communion with the object or person involved, Zhuangzi's notion of joy seems to bemoan the

<sup>27</sup> It is also said in the "Geng sang chu" 庚桑楚 chapter of the *Zhuangzi* that "Liking, disliking, delight, anger, sorrow, and joy are the burdens of one's innate power."

<sup>28</sup> See the "Ke yi" 刻意 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

<sup>29</sup> See the "Yang sheng zhu" 養生主 chapter and "De chong fu" 德充符 chapter in the *Zhuangzi*.

<sup>30</sup> See the "De chong fu" chapter in the *Zhuangzi*. In the "Qiu shui" 秋水 chapter, Zhuangzi talks about the joy of fish and it seems that vicarious joy between man and fish is possible. As mentioned earlier, *sheng* (sage) means "communion" between the ear and the heart, but DUAN Yucai had Confucius in mind in his interpretation of the sage's *ershun* ability to be at ease in his communion with others.

<sup>31</sup> See the "Renjian shi" 人間世 chapter and the "Da zongshi" chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

<sup>32</sup> See the "Zhi le" 至樂 chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

fact that we are all conditioned beings and that freedom is possible if only we can become impervious to the vicissitudes of ever-shifting circumstances and impermanent human relationships that are ever ready to threaten our innate virtue and tranquility.

## Confucian Community

While Confucius' contemporaries unanimously commended him for his erudition, what his disciples truly admired was his demeanor, personality, and character—their remarks about the master in the *Analects* hardly mentioned his broad learning.<sup>33</sup> No doubt the way they appreciated a person was inspired by the master himself, as he frequently demonstrated it by his assessment of historical and contemporary figures (5.1, 5.2, 5.15–5.18, 14.9, 14.15–14.17, 18.1). But at a deeper level, we may say that it was Confucius' charismatic personality that actually drew some of his disciples to him. Reportedly, the master had more than 3,000 students in his teaching career and perhaps the majority of them were only interested in learning some skills from him to make a living (13.4) or getting some training from him to make themselves employable in the government (2.17, 13.5). They came from many different states and were not restricted to the master's home state of Lu. They also came from virtually from all walks of life—noble aristocrats and thieves included. Some were about his age while some were only in their teens (14.44). This is of course not surprising, as the master would offer instruction to anyone who, of his own accord, gave him so much as a bundle of dried meat as a present (7.8). The only type of student missing was women, even though Confucius certainly tried to teach the maidservants in his household how to behave properly in their roles.<sup>34</sup>

The disciples studied and perhaps even lived with Confucius in what may be called the earliest Confucian community.<sup>35</sup> They were in frequent contact with the master and when he was traveling abroad, some of them would stay home and perhaps take care of his household (5.22, 10.17). It was a closely-knit fellowship, like a family, in which Confucius was respected. To most of his students, he was a caring teacher who would even offer them financial assistance when needed (6.4),

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<sup>33</sup> Amy Olberding has discussed perceptively how the personal style of Confucius actually served an educative function in his teaching. See Olberding 2007: 357–374.

<sup>34</sup> In *Analects* 17.25 Confucius talked about the difficulty of managing the servants and maids in the household and it is probable that he was at least referring to his experience in his own household. In answering the Duke Jing of Qi 齊景公 about government, Confucius said, “Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son.” See *Analects* 12.11. Observance of the proper duties and obligations of political and social roles is the key to political success. It would seem that the master would advise that familial harmony also hinges on the proper observance by the master and servants of their respective duties and obligations in a household. For a detailed study of *Analects* 17.25, see Lao 2007: 131–163.

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed study of the earliest Confucian community, see Lao 2011: 41–58 and Lo 2014.

while to many he was no doubt a friend, and to some such as YAN Hui, he was treated as virtually a father figure (11.11). In fact, since there was no ritual stipulation on how a student should mourn his teacher, when the master passed away, his disciples had to improvise and they decided collectively to mourn him in accordance with the rites befitting a father. Likewise, Confucius also loved and cared very much about his disciples; he treated them like his friends and his beloved disciple YAN Hui was akin to a son to him (11.11). He hired some of them to work in his household (6.5). In fact, he even gave two of them his daughter and his elder brother's daughter in marriage (5.1, 5.2, 11.6).

The disciples themselves naturally studied together and they seemed to form different circles of friendship as some of them appeared to be particularly close (6.4) and often showed up together when they conversed with the master as in the case of Zilu, GONGXI Hua 公西華 and Ranyou 冉有. Although there was sometimes rivalry among the disciples as they vied for the approval or perhaps even attention of the master, they remained respectful of one another and exemplified his teaching that the gentleman seeks harmony but not conformity (13.23).

Legend has it that only 70 some students were well-versed in the Six Arts—rituals, music, archery, charioteering, writing, and mathematics. In fact, Confucius also instructed his disciples in what would later become Confucian Classics such as the *Book of Odes* (1.15, 1.6, 2.2, 11.6, 16.13, 17.10), the *Book of Documents* (7.18), and perhaps even the *Classic of Changes* (13.22). Notes taken by the disciples on such instructions may have actually found their way into the *Analects* we have today (20.1). According to the disciples, the master's instructions can be classified under four headings: culture, moral conduct, doing one's best, and being trustworthy in what one says (7.25). And they also ranked among themselves in four different categories of learning: virtuous conduct, speech, government, and culture (11.3). These two types of classification need not be identical but they can be further grouped into two broader categories of intrinsic learning and extrinsic learning. Doing one's best, trustworthiness, and virtuous or moral conduct pertain to intrinsic learning, which concerns primarily one's own personal and moral cultivation, whereas culture, speech, and government belong to extrinsic learning, which requires the acquisition of skills and abilities intended for practical applications. Obviously, intrinsic and extrinsic learning are not incompatible with each other.

It is no coincidence that these two types of learning seem to share a more fundamental schema of learning stated by Confucius himself. The master said, "Men of antiquity studied for their own sake; men today study for the sake of others" (14.24). Modern interpretations under the influence of Neo-Confucian scholars since the eleventh century invariably give this statement a moral twist, and learning for the sake of others thus becomes morally undesirable, if not condemnable, as it aims only at impressing or pleasing others rather than transforming oneself into moral perfection. Confucius' pronouncement did not come with an explicit context and multiple interpretations including the moralistic one are therefore possible. Though the exact circumstance that gave rise to the master's distinction between types of learning is not clear, a broader context of his view on learning and the mission of his teaching should be considered in deciphering what he might mean by learning for the sake of others.



That Confucius taught both intrinsic and extrinsic learning means that he embraced a much broader conception of learning than moral cultivation. Further, extrinsic learning was intended for practical applications. As the master said, “If a man who knows the three hundred *Odes* by heart fails when given administrative responsibilities and proves incapable of exercising his own initiative when sent to foreign states, then what use are the *Odes* to him, however many he may have learned?” (13.5). For Confucius, applied knowledge means political service and this was the particular objective of the learning about “speech” and “government” in the education he offered. Clearly, Confucius taught with the express purpose of training political and diplomatic talents, and he was well aware of the potential and abilities of his disciples for a job in the government (6.1) and would urge them to take political office (5.6). In fact, many of his disciples were employed by feudal vassals and noble houses (6.14, 11.14, 11.17, 13.14, 17.4). After all, the master himself had been looking for the opportunity to put his learning to practical use in the government. In sum, extrinsic learning was acquired for the sake of others and it was a perfectly legitimate and admirable endeavor in the Confucian community.

To Confucius, learning for the sake of others does not in itself compromise one’s moral integrity; what matters is how one makes use of one’s learning. So when the wealth of one of the noble families was greater than that of the Duke of Zhou, and still his disciple Ran You helped them add further to that wealth by raking in taxes, Confucius was outraged and said to his disciples, “He is no disciple of mine. You, my young friends, may attack him openly to the beating of the drums” (11.17). On another occasion, he criticized Ran You and Zilu as ministers “appointed to make up the full quota” as each failed to be a “great minister” who “serves his lord according to the Way and who, when this is no longer possible, relinquishes office” (11.24). A minister who can merely make up the full quota fails the noble task of using his learning for the sake of others. Worse still, he may be simply looking for personal gain. As the master said, “It is shameful to make salary your sole object, irrespective of whether the Way prevails in the state or not” (14.1). That is why Confucius warned his disciples not to be a petty *ru* 儒 scholar, but to be a gentlemanly one (6.13). In fact, one might argue that the hard-and-fast distinction Confucius draws between the gentleman and the petty person throughout the entire *Analects* carries this political significance in its instructive force. That explains why the master lamented that “It is not easy to find a man who can study for 3 years without thinking about earning a salary” (8.12). To be sure, there was nothing wrong or illegitimate about earning an honest salary with one’s learning, but presumably 3 years were not sufficient for a full training for an impactful and meaningful political career. More importantly, this eagerness to earn a salary evidently indicates that the learner is not much interested in learning for his own sake.<sup>36</sup>

YAN Hui, Confucius’ beloved disciple singled out for his genuine fondness of learning, can perhaps illuminate the relationship between learning for one’s own

<sup>36</sup> When QIDIAO Kai 漆雕開 refused to take office as Confucius instructed because he did not feel confident enough, the master was pleased (5.6). And when Zilu made another disciple Zigao the prefect of Bi, the master was not happy and thought Zilu was “ruining another man’s son” (11.25).

sake and learning for the sake of others. It is legendary that YAN Hui continued to live in joy in spite of his wretched poverty. While he was neither uninterested in nor incapable of taking political office,<sup>37</sup> he remained miserably poor, probably till the end of his life. It was most likely that he turned down offers much like the master did. Confucius sang the praises of YAN Hui, “Only you and I have the abilities to go forward when employed and to stay out of sight when set aside” (7.11). He acknowledged not only YAN Hui’s political abilities and willingness to put them to use but, perhaps more importantly, his readiness to “stay out of sight” when they failed to be recognized. In other words, YAN Hui excelled in both learning for one’s own sake and learning for the sake of others, and he would not compromise himself so that his straitened circumstances could be improved. Rather, he continued to enjoy being at ease when his learning could not be applied for the welfare of others. Evidently, he won much admiration from the master. True to his principle of learning—not to “make sense of an issue from only one end”—the master of course would not favor either type of learning exclusively. Yet it would seem he appreciated YAN Hui primarily because of his learning for one’s own sake, as the majority of the disciples opted for the learning for the sake of others, which initially prompted his remark on the people in his times. After all, Confucius said, “A humane person helps others to stand on their own as much as he wishes to manage to stand on his own, and gets others there as much as he himself wishes to get there.” Self and others are not only compatible but actually implicate each other. However, fundamentally and ultimately, “the cultivation and practice of humanness depends on oneself alone, and not on others.”

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<sup>37</sup> In *Analects* 15.7 YAN Hui asked Confucius about the government of a state, and judging from the master’s answer which is fundamentally different in scale and scope from those he gave to all other disciples, it is evident that Confucius was confident of his political talents.

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**Part II**  
**The Conceptual Landscape**

## Chapter 5

# *Ren* 仁: An Exemplary Life

Karyn Lai

The term *ren* 仁 has a prominent place in the *Analects*, mentioned in 60 of its 503 conversations.<sup>1</sup> These occurrences serve to intensify and complicate, rather than to clarify, its meaning. References to *ren* across a range of conversational topics and contexts impact on its meaning: it is the *summum bonum* of an exemplary life (Book 1), an *orientative stance* (Books 4, 6, 8 and 12); it is manifest in official life (Books 4–8, 12, 13, 17); there are discussions about its scope and cultivation (Books 14, 15) and the benefits for humanity when it is realized in exemplary government (Books 4, 20). This variance is to be expected in light of how the different conversations in the text figured in the lives of subsequent generations of followers of the tradition.<sup>2</sup> Some of these differences arise because of emphasis while others are more problematic as the meanings of *ren* appear incompatible in different conversations.

This chapter focuses on *ren* in an exemplary life, using this as a conceptual framework to draw together the range of meanings of *ren*. The discussion explores the significance of *ren qua* the orientation of an exemplary person, including especially the manifestations of *ren*. The analysis will include investigation of *ren* and its associations with other significant terms in key passages of the text. It will also explore how the Confucian notion of an exemplary life might contribute to contemporary debates in moral philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> References to and excerpted passages from the original Chinese text of the *Analects* are taken from the *Analects* 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce and Taeko Brooks present an analysis of the Books of the *Analects* according to their authorship associations (Brooks and Brooks 1998). Their analysis has significant implications for understanding the text, though I have not adhered strictly to their classification of Books for the purposes of this discussion. Rather, I have focused on the possible meanings of *ren* used in the contexts of passages in particular Books.

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The phrase “an exemplary life” is used here to denote how *ren* may be manifest in a life lived well. I have deliberately used the indefinite article “an,” rather than the definite article “the,” to allow for *different instantiations* of exemplary lives. This is to capture both the spirit of Confucian philosophy in the *Analects* and its compositional background; the text does not recommend a *singular* picture of the life well-lived. The term ‘exemplary’ is also used to indicate that the life of the person who manifests *ren* is inspirational without it necessarily being *paradigmatic*.<sup>3</sup> This is to avoid the suggestion that there is a *typical* example of a good life. The *renzhe* 仁者—an exemplary person—is to be distinguished from the *junzi* 君子, the ethically-minded Confucian engaged in official life: latter’s life is characterised by engagement in social and administrative matters although this is not necessarily the case for a *renzhe*. The following section examines the scope of *ren* in the *Analects*, drawing from classical texts, commentaries and contemporary analyses.

## The Scope of *Ren*

The meaning and scope of *ren* in the *Analects* is broader and more inclusive in comparison to its use in earlier texts such as the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經 1879) and the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經 1893–1895) (Chan 1955, esp. notes 4–5: 296). For example, in the *Shujing*, *ren* characterises the benevolence of the ruler, King Tang, while in the *Shijing*, two hunting poems utilise *ren* to denote manliness and virility (Schwartz 1985: 75). Wing-tsit Chan 陳榮捷 suggests that Confucius was the first thinker to have conceived of *ren* as the general virtue (Chan 1975: 107). The discussion in this chapter will attempt to show, however, that *ren* is oversimplified when characterized as “virtue”.

The character *ren* comprises two composite characters, 人 or 人, to signify human, and 二, meaning “two”. The *Shuowen Jiezi*, the earliest extant Chinese etymological lexicon compiled in 90 C.E. by XU Shen 許慎 (d. 120 C.E.?), explains *ren* in light of *qin* 親, relational proximity and affection (*Shuowen* 1981 卷九, 人部: 4927). This idea is expressed in *Analects* 1.2, where the root (*ben* 本) of *ren* is expressed in terms relational attachment, specifically, of filial piety (*xiao* 孝) and brotherly propriety (*di* 弟). The interpretation of the term *ben*, root, is critical to our understanding of the connection between these personal relationships and *ren*. The character *ben* may be understood to refer to the centrality—that is, the fundamental nature—of familial relationships in a person’s life. This means that these relationships are more significant, including being more morally weighty, than other, non-familial, relationships in the life of a person. *Ben* may also reflect chronological priority, whereby the familial context is the initial environment of a person’s development. In this sense, it highlights the importance of the formative childhood years in a person’s development. Within this environment, one learns how to relate to others.

<sup>3</sup> Antonio Cua uses the phrase “paradigmatic person” to describe the Confucian *junzi* (Cua 1971).

In discussing the meaning of *ben* in this passage, ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), the Song 宋 (960–1279) Confucian thinker, suggests that *xiao* and *di* are necessary components of *ren* but do not sufficiently constitute it. While *ren* relates to human nature and character (*xing* 性), *xiao* and *di* are channels (*yong* 用) for attaining ideal character.<sup>4</sup> If we follow ZHU Xi's line of reasoning, cultivation of personal relationships is a central aspect of *ren* but not its only one. ZHU Xi follows Mengzi 孟子 and places *ren* among three other, *yi* 義 (rightness), *li* 禮 (behavioural propriety) and *zhi* 智 (wisdom) as four cornerstones of Confucian thought (*Mengzi* 2A7; trans. Lau 1995: 18). In the *Analects* passages, however, these four terms are not linked in any of the conversations although *ren* is discussed individually in connection with *li* (3.3, 12.1, 15.33, 17.21) and *zhi* (e.g., 4.1, 4.2, 6.22, 6.23, 12.22) in various conversations. There are also associations with other terms. *Ren* in *Analects* 17.6 is articulated in terms of respectfulness (*gong* 恭), broad-mindedness (*kuan* 寬), reliability (*xin* 信), alertness (*min* 敏) and kindness (*hui* 惠) (17.6). In *Analects* 13.27, a person who is resolute (*gang yi* 剛毅) and deliberate in speech (*mu na* 木訥) is said to be close to *ren* (*jin ren* 近仁) (13.28). In *Analects* 19.6, a number of pursuits are taken collectively to constitute *ren*: learning extensively yet remaining focused on one's purposes (*boxue er duzhi* 博學而篤志); and inquiring with earnestness while engaging in self-reflection (*qiewen er jinsi* 切問而近思) (19.6). With this variation in its associations with other terms, it seems reasonable to hold that *ren* is not reducible to any one of these characteristics or dispositions, or even a set of them. This seems to be the undercurrent in *Analects* 5.8, where Confucius was unable to comment on whether particular individuals were to be deemed *ren* because he knew only of one aspect of their achievements.

Twice in the *Analects*, in different Books, *ren* is grouped in a trio, with *yong* 勇, strength of character, and *zhi* 知, understanding: “The Master said, ‘The wise [*zhi* 知] have no doubts, the [*ren* 仁] have no anxieties, the brave [*yong* 勇] have no fears’” (9.29; trans. Brooks and Brooks 1998: 56). The grouping of these three terms is significant: the image that is presented—lack of doubt, anxiety and fear—is compelling. Brooks and Brooks note that the focus here is on people without vacillations, drawing a connection between *Analects* 9.29 its previous conversation, *Analects* 9.28, which alludes to the sturdiness of the cypress and the pine (Brooks and Brooks 1998: 56).

Brooks and Brooks also suggest that *zhi* in this Book is appropriately understood as ‘wisdom’ whereas in earlier chapters of the text, it meant ‘mere knowledge’ (Brooks and Brooks 1998: 56). From a number of other conversations on *ren* and

<sup>4</sup> [Master Cheng said,] “. . . It is all right to call [filial piety and fraternal respect] the root of practicing true goodness [*ren*]; it is not all right to call them the root [*ben*] of true goodness. It would seem that true goodness is human nature [*xing*] and that filial piety and fraternal respect are its function [*yong*]. Within human nature [*xing*] there exist true goodness, righteousness [*yi*], propriety [*li*] and wisdom [*zhi*]: these four things and nothing more. Where do filial piety and fraternal respect come in? True goodness presides over love, and in loving, there is nothing greater than loving one's parents. Therefore it says, ‘Filial piety and fraternal respect: are they not the root of practicing true goodness?’” (Zhu 1983: 四書章句集注•學而第一; trans. Gardner 2003: 72).

*zhi*, it is clear that they are mutually-enhancing (See 6.22; 12.22). For example, *Analects* 15.33 presents the following conversation:

The Master said, “When persons come to a realization (*zhi* 知) but are not authoritative (*ren* 仁) enough to sustain its implementation, even though they had it, they are sure to lose it. . .” (Trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr. 1998: 191).

Inferring from the association between *ren* and *zhi* in the other conversations, I suggest that *ren*, *yong* and *zhi* in *Analects* 9.29 are not merely three separate virtues or capacities in a list but each must operate in association with the other two in the realization of an exemplary life. Although the passage articulates differences between the three capacities, there is a sense of holism or unity of these different capacities (cf. Gier 2001: 288; Yu 2007: 168). Hence, *yong* is not simply “bravery” or “courage” but strength of character, of a person who is not apprehensive (*ju* 懼).<sup>5</sup> *Zhi* is not simply ‘knowledge’ but understanding, as it is characterised by the lack of perplexity (*huo* 惑). The person of *ren* is marked by a lack of anxiety (*you* 憂). In *Analects* 14.28, which repeats the description of these three features, it is the *junzi* who ideally possesses such confidence and equanimity.

Among other things, the preceding analysis suggests that, in order to understand *ren* and an exemplary life more fully, we need to look into the contexts within which *ren* is (to be) manifest and realized. (This methodology of understanding *ren* also takes into account the varied authorship of the text and other compositional issues mentioned previously.) *Analects* 13.19 explicitly states that *ren* is manifest differently in different contexts: to be reverent in private (*ju chu gong* 居處恭), respectful in handling matters (*zhi shi jing* 執事敬) and sincere in interacting with people (*yu ren zhong* 與人忠) (13.20).

The connection between *ren* and *li*, behavioural propriety, attests to this suggestion that *ren* in the *Analects* is primarily practical. *Ren* is not conceived of in abstraction but is necessarily manifest in behaviour. Conversations on the close connection between *ren* and *li* can help illuminate this point. In *Analects* 3.3, it is noted, rhetorically, “What has a person who is not authoritative (*ren* 仁) got to do with observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮)? What has a person who is not authoritative got to do with the playing of music (*yue* 樂)?” (Ames and Rosemont Jr. 1998: 82; see also 15.33). This gives the impression that *ren* must be manifest in appropriate behaviors.

In discussing the relation between *ren* and *li*, contemporary scholar Tu Wei-ming 杜維明 suggests that “. . . *ren* as an inner morality is not caused by the mechanism of *li* from outside. It is higher-order concept which gives meaning to *li*” (Tu 1968: 33). Tu’s characterisation of *ren* as ‘higher-order concept’ and ‘inner morality’ may not be appropriately sensitive to the underlying commitments of Confucian thought. First, it may not be accurate to describe terms in the *Analects* as “concepts” as if the *Analects* presents us with a unified conceptual framework within which abstract ideas are

<sup>5</sup> *Yong* 勇 is typically translated as “courage”. Here, however, I have translated it as “strength of character” as that better represents the meaning of the term in accordance with its uses in the *Analects* (e.g., 2.24) as well as in the *Shuowen*, which explains 勇 in terms of ability (*li* 力): 力部: 勇: 气也。从力甬聲。(Shuowen 1981 卷十四, 力部: 9196).



situated. Secondly, the suggestion that *ren* is “inner morality” may give the misleading impression that it may be conceived of in terms of the “inner” intentions or other psychological processes of a person. As Herbert Fingarette has pointed out, “[t]he psychological, subjective use of [*ren*] in Chinese is a later development, a use whose import is exaggerated both by the profound psychological bias of Buddhist commentators and by the Western, Graeco-Christian outlook of translators” (Fingarette 1972: 37. See also Fu 1978; Fingarette 1978).

There is some support for Fingarette’s concern when we examine passages such as *Analects* 12.1. When YAN Yuan 顏淵, a favored follower of Confucius, asked him about *ren*, Confucius replied, “[r]estraining yourself and returning to the rites constitutes *ren*” (克己復禮為仁) (12.1; trans. Slingerland 2001: 32). The sentiments of this passage sit comfortably with Fingarette’s assessment of the *Analects*, that “[t]he ceremonial act is the primary, irreducible event. . .” (Fingarette 1972: 14). Interestingly, this passage poses difficulty for Tu’s portrayal of *ren* as “higher-order concept” (Tu 1968). Being aware of this, Tu focuses in detail on the phrase *keji fuli* 克己復禮. According to Tu, *keji* is identical to self-cultivation (*xiushen* 修身) in Confucianism and is not primarily to be understood as “to conquer oneself” (Tu 1968: 30). In addition, *fuli* is not to be understood as submission to rituals but actively to bring oneself in line with *li* (Tu 1968: 30). No matter which way we understand *keji fuli*, it is important to note that, in this passage, *ren* is characterised in terms of *li*, that is, *keji fuli* is constitutive of *ren* (*wei ren* 為仁). Hence, it is not obvious that *ren* is a “concept” that has primacy in relation to *li*.

The issue of the relative priority of *ren* and *li* is thought to have emerged relatively early in the founding period of the Confucian tradition. Benjamin Schwartz notes that conversations associated with the disciples Ziyou 子游 and Zixia 子夏 usually emphasise *li* while those involving Zengzi 曾子, Zizhang 子張, and YAN Hui 顏回 show a greater commitment to *ren* (Schwartz 1985: 130–134). Although it is not the place to present the different views here, it is important to press the point that the two terms are closely connected in the *Analects*, and that the nature of their connection has been a controversial matter right from the start of the tradition.

A contemporary scholar, SHUN Kwong-loi 信廣來, has articulated a philosophically sophisticated view of the relation between the two terms. In “*Jen and Li* in the *Analects*,” Shun suggests that *ren* and *li* are inextricably interdependent terms (Shun 1993). According to this view, *ren* is manifest only in *li*-practices while a person cannot claim to have fully mastered *li* without also understanding the human feeling it conveys. Shun demonstrates this with an analogy in linguistic practice: To understand the concept of tense *is* to be able to use its various forms effectively. Conversely, the effective use of grammatical structures associated with tense is an indication of a person’s grasp of the concept. In logical terms, mastery of the usage of tense is *both* necessary and sufficient for the mastery of the concept within the linguistic community. Analogously, an exemplary person expresses himself or herself appropriately and reliably in different situations and contexts; while fluency in behavioural propriety is an indication of one’s appreciation of human relationships.

The discussion so far has focused on the scope of *ren*, noting in particular its breadth of meanings and its association with other dispositions (such as

broad-mindedness, reliability and kindness) deemed important by the early Confucians in the *Analects*. We have also seen that *ren* is irreducible to any one of these dispositions. I suggest that this is due in part to the fact that *ren* is manifest differently in different situations: in its close connection with *li*, *ren* is *irreducibly concrete*. The following section focuses on the interpersonal context in the life of an exemplary person.

## ***Ren*: Commitment to Humanity**

In the case of a person who embodies *ren*, insofar as he seeks to establish himself, he also establishes others. Insofar as he seeks to be accomplished, he helps others attain the same. To be able to take what is near and to grasp it is similar (for others) may be regarded the method of (being) *ren*. (6.30; translated by author).

The person who embodies *ren* is exemplary in the way he or she is mindful of the needs of others. More specifically, this involves the recognition that others may have similar interests, coupled with the desire to assist them. The sentiment in this passage captures the meanings of two other important terms, *zhong* 忠 and *shu* 恕:

The Master said, “Zeng, my friend! My way (*dao* 道) is bound together with one continuous strand.”

Master Zeng replied, “Indeed.”

When the Master had left, the disciples asked, “What was he referring to?”

Master Zeng said, “The way of the Master is doing one’s utmost (*zhong* 忠) and putting oneself in the other’s place (*shu* 恕), nothing more” (4.15. Trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr. 1998).

Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. translate *shu* as “putting oneself in the other’s place” and this captures the moral imagination required in the Confucian life. The character *shu* suggests mutuality, which can also mean that a person acts on the belief that others are like him or herself (15.24).<sup>6</sup> This means that an exemplary person, *renzhe*, has both the capacity and the willingness to be imaginatively engaged with the needs of others in part through self-reflection (19.6). *Zhong* and *shu* capture the essence of the relational self in Confucian philosophy. The terms are drawn together in *one* strand (*yi yi guan zhi* 一以貫之) in this passage, suggesting that they are a central focus of Confucius’ thinking.<sup>7</sup> Antonio Cua, whose scholarly

<sup>6</sup> “The Master replied, ‘There is *shu* 恕: do not impose on others what you yourself do not want.’” (15.24. Trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr. 1998: 189).

<sup>7</sup> Wing-tsit Chan writes, “. . . Confucianists have not agreed on what [the ‘one strand’] means. Generally, Confucianists of Han and [Tang] times adhered to the basic meaning of “thread” and understood it in the sense of a system or a body of doctrines. [ZHU Xi], true to the spirit of Neo-Confucian speculative philosophy, took it to mean that there is one mind to respond to all things . . . All agree, however, on the meanings of [*zhong*] and *shu*, which are best expressed by [ZHU Xi], namely, [*zhong*] means the full development of one’s [originally good] mind and *shu* means the extension of that mind to others.” (Chan 1963: 27). Contrary to Chan’s assertion, however, the terms *zhong* and *shu* do have a range of meanings in the early Confucian texts.

views on Confucian self cultivation are influential, articulates *ren* in terms of a person's commitment to the other:

[*Ren*] as an ideal theme in part pertains to the psychological condition of responsive agency. Methodologically, the practice and development of [*ren*] begins at the personal level . . . [However, w]hat is personal from the Confucian viewpoint can, and ultimately must, have a public or interpersonal import. [*Ren*], as an ideal, involves relation between men rooted in the agents' conscientious and continuing effort at self cultivation (Cua 1979: 57).

*Analects* 12.22 explains *ren* in terms of "loving others" (*ai ren* 愛人). This, however, should not be misconstrued as an indiscriminating love. Nor is it about emotional feeling or attachment to particular individuals; the passage discusses the manifestation of *ren* in official life, focusing especially on elevating those who are upright to more prominent positions. This same sense of moral discrimination is expressed in *Analects* 4.3, where Confucius noted, "The authoritative person [*renzhe* 仁者] alone has the wherewithal to properly discriminate the good person from the bad" (Trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr. 1998: 89. See also 15.33). Importantly, the opening conversations in Book 4 of the *Analects*, where this passage is situated, focus on being settled in *ren* among other like-minded people (4.1–7).

Commitment to the well-being of others is not the only measure of an exemplary person. In a conversation, Confucius challenged the assertion that Guanzhong 管仲 (c. 683–642 B.C.E.) lacked *ren* (14.17). Although Guanzhong was known to have overstepped the boundaries of ritual propriety (3.22), in *Analects* 14.17, Confucius applauds Guanzhong's achievements. This conversation poses problems for how we might understand *ren*, as Schwartz points out:

As an individual [Guanzhong's] morality left much to be desired. Having supported one claimant to the ducal throne, when that one was murdered he then threw his support to the later Duke Huan 桓公 . . . despite the fact that the strategy he devised for maintaining peace was ultimately based on the sanction of force and diplomatic guile rather than on moral force, Confucius cannot refrain from defending him . . . Here we seem to have a deep tension between a concept of personal morality based on purity of motive and intent and a concern with the good socio-political "results" achieved by a statesman of great talent but little personal virtue (Schwartz 1985: 109–110).

It would be reasonable to think that an exemplary person has a prominent role in society for that, after all, may be the most effective way in which he can help enhance the human condition. It is in this sense that the *renzhe* may be deemed "authoritative" (cf. Hall and Ames 1987: 110–25). An authoritative person achieves desirable outcomes for society *as a result of* his commitment to humanity; in his prominent position, he leads by exemplary behaviour and action. Yet, Schwartz here makes it clear that the focus on outcomes might eclipse the place of, or force compromises in, personal integrity.

*Must* an exemplary person be engaged in official life? On the whole, there seems to be some distinction between *renzhe* and *junzi* in the *Analects*, although *Analects* 6.26 refers to them interchangeably. The phrase *junzi* in the text is frequently used to refer to those who are engaged in public life in an official capacity. However, it is not necessarily the case that all in that capacity have a commitment to *ren* (14.6). There are also conversations where engagement in official life is cautiously

encouraged (9.13). In one instance, however, Confucius comes across as being defensive: when asked about his lack of involvement in official duties (*bu wei zheng* 不為政), Confucius cites the *Shujing* in his response, arguing that “The *Shu* says, ‘Be ye filial, only filial, be friendly toward your brothers, and you will contribute to the government.’ This too, then, is being in government. Why should you speak of being “in government?”” (Brooks and Brooks 1998: 113; see also 17.1).<sup>8</sup>

The passages in the *Analects* lack clarity on the issue of whether the *ren*-person must be engaged in official life. There appears to be differences in views. For example, *Analects* 14.6, which notes that there are *junzi* who are not *ren*, appears to be a criticism of some who were actually in office at that time. On the other hand, the conversation in *Analects* 14.28 seems to suggest that, ideally, a *junzi* proceeds in three ways (君子道者三), namely, *ren*, *yong* and *zhi*; Confucius in this conversation claims that he himself is not up to it.

In the final section below, I examine what it means to incorporate *ren* in one’s undertakings. The discussion focuses specifically on the close connection between *ren* and *zhi*. The investigation here will reveal assumptions about how *ren* is conceived in the *Analects*, not primarily as an abstractly-defined virtue or principle, but in terms of its realization. Drawing on some discussions of Confucian ethics as virtue ethics, while at the same time being cautious about such classifications of Confucian thought, I suggest ways in which the Confucian image of an exemplary person might inform contemporary debates in ethics.

## An Exemplary Life

A number of the conversations note the difficult and arduous nature of the pursuit of a life imbued with *ren* (e.g. 6.22; 15.10). It might involve great sacrifice, to the extent of having to give up one’s life (*shashen* 殺身) (15.9). Nevertheless, the *junzi* cleaves to *ren* at all times: “. . . never for a moment does a gentleman part from [*ren*]; he clings to it through trials, he clings to it through tribulations” (4.5; trans. Leys 1997: 15). A commitment to (realize) *ren* is a weighty matter, such that an exemplary person is slow to speak (仁者其言也訥) (12.3). According to ZHU Xi, Confucius in this conversation was addressing SIMA Niu 司馬牛 directly. SIMA Niu was known to be voluble and hence Confucius remarks that a person of *ren* is slow to speak because of the difficulty of expressing his profound ethical commitments (Zhu 1983: 四書章句集注•顏淵第十二).

The *practice* of *ren* is characterised by extensive study of a wide range of matters (*boxue* 博學) accompanied by reflections on application (近思 *jinsi*; in 19.6. See also 2.11). This captures an important aspect of Confucian learning: to learn from

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<sup>8</sup> Brooks and Brooks argue against treating this conversation as an actual record of Confucius’ beliefs. Instead, they suggest that this conversation captures the situation the Confucians were in, whereby they had lost their position at the Lu 魯 court. (Brooks and Brooks 1998: 113).

others *in order to* reflect on one's own situation, and to apply these insights to one's actions. In this connection, the associations between *ren* and *zhi*, understanding, are significant. In Book 4, *ren* and *zhi* are closely linked: "...How can anyone be called wise who, in having the choice, does not seek to dwell among authoritative [*ren*] people?" (4.1, trans. Ames and Rosemont Jr. 1998: 89; see also 4.2). The term *zhi* in the *Analects* refers primarily to knowledge *manifest*; it covers a range of capacities or deeds associated with the *exercise* of wisdom, intelligence, knowledge and understanding. In the conversations, the focus is on a person's ability to realize the different subject matters of *zhi*.<sup>9</sup> In this light, Hall and Ames' translation of *zhi* as 'realization' helps to reinforce the point that *zhi* is irreducibly performative (Hall and Ames 1987: 50–6; cf. 15.3; 15.4).

Similar assumptions underlie the notion *ren*. The hallmark of an exemplary person is not simply her ethical beliefs, virtues or moral dispositions but her capacity to realize them. In some conversations, Confucius comments on those who are unable to manifest their commitments (e.g. 4.5; 4.6; 4.7). The fundamental concern is not with possession of information but rather with actions that are effected *as manifestations of* an exemplary life. To understand Confucian moral epistemology in terms of realization of the self in particular contexts highlights the distinctiveness of Confucian *ren*. The upshot of this conception of *ren* is that it defies classification either as virtue ethics in the traditional Aristotelian sense, or solely in terms of character. In his articulation of Confucian ethics, Joel Kupperman compares Confucian with Aristotelian virtue ethics, although he is careful to draw a fundamental distinction between the two. According to Kupperman, in Chinese philosophy, the focus is on "a general state of being a virtuous person" that "involves mostly (although not always) 'narrow' character traits, which involve a strong tendency to function well in certain kinds of choices in certain kinds of situations" (Kupperman 2009: 252, 253). To conceive of character traits as "narrow" is to expect that a person may not necessarily manifest each virtue consistently across a range of situations. For example, a person might exhibit temperance in her personal relationships but not while at work. This conception of virtue contrasts with that typically articulated in Aristotelian ethics: there, particular virtues take center stage and are assumed to be consistent across different situations.

The focus on the *realization of ren* also cuts across debates on virtue ethics in another way. Instead of focusing primarily on the person *qua* moral agent, Confucian ethics also attends to actions and the contexts within which particular virtues or ethical dispositions are realized. *Ren* sits at the intersection of a person and her actions; in the language of western moral philosophy, it concerns *both* agency and action. This presents a richer and more realistic picture of the moral life

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<sup>9</sup> E.g. *zhitianming* 知天命, to apprehend and realise the ordinances of heaven (16.8); *zhiren* 知人, to understand people and respond to them appropriately (1.16; 12.22; 13.2; 14.30; 14.35); *zhiyan* 知言, to appreciate the use and force of speech (20.3). See Heatherington and Lai 2012, and Lai 2012.

than one that is solely agent-based (cf. Luo 2010; Lai 2006: 109–24). Importantly, it understands agency in the light of how a person responds in specific contexts.

It is important also to understand that the contexts we refer to here are not “moments of sharp moral decision” or to be understood in terms of “big-moment” ethics (Kupperman 1971: 194). Rather, the contexts relate to a person’s engagement with others in ordinary, daily activities (1.4). The measure of an exemplary person is not based on the collection of a few significant high-scoring runs on the scoreboards. Rather, this is a view of ethics that is not surprised to see some mistakes and failures rather than perfect instantiations of a particular virtue in every context. Over time, a person’s actions and behaviors in ordinary contexts and situations will allow us to understand whether a person has been exemplary. This, in turn, is determined on the basis of his contributions to the well-being of humanity, as discussed in the previous sections.

One striking characteristic of an exemplary life is a person’s equanimity and confidence, expressed in *Analects* 9.29 and 14.28: “an exemplary person is not anxious” (仁者不憂). The lack of anxiety is also a feature of the Confucian *junzi*; he is “. . . calm and unperturbed; [while] the petty person is always agitated and anxious” (7.37; trans. Ames and Rosemont 1998: 119. See also 13.23 and 15.2). Antonio Cua describes the enviable disposition of the *junzi*, who is at ease across different situations: “His *easeful* life is more a matter of attitude and confidence in his ability to deal with difficult and varying situations, rather than an exemplification of his infallible judgment and authority” (Cua 1971: 47).

In conclusion, we have seen that a Confucian exemplary life is not reducible to any one level of analysis in standard western philosophical discourse. The realization of an exemplary life is situated at the nexus of commitment and action. This opens up the possibility of *different manifestations* of exemplary lives. The Confucian exemplary person is not an abstractly defined ideal type. He or she is not simply a virtuous person, nor one who seeks only to fulfill norms, or to attain specific outcomes. This non-conceptual, concrete account of personhood contributes to contemporary debates in a number of ways. First, it attends to more realistic parameters, such as contextual appropriateness, for understanding the place of morality in a good life. Second, by focusing in part on the agent’s actions, it avoids rule-based or norm-driven morality. Third, it considers the enrichment of others’ lives as an important part of human excellence. And, finally, it supports different models of a life lived well.

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## Chapter 6

# Ritual and Rightness in the *Analects*

Hagop Sarkissian

*Li* 禮 and *yi* 義 are two central moral concepts in the *Analects*.<sup>1</sup> In classical Confucianism generally, and in the *Analects* in particular, *li* has a broad semantic range, referring to formal ceremonial rituals on the one hand, and basic rules of personal decorum on the other. What is similar across the range of referents is that the *li* comprise strictures of correct behavior. The *li* are a distinguishing characteristic of Confucian approaches to ethics and socio-political thought, a set of rules and protocols that were thought to constitute the wise practices of ancient moral exemplars filtered down through dynasties of the past. They constitute the core of the *Analects* ethical practice, and are importantly related to other moral concepts such as humankindness (*ren* 仁),<sup>2</sup> filial devotion (*xiao* 孝) and reverence (*jing* 敬).

However, even while the *li* were extensive and meant to be followed diligently, they were also understood as incapable of exhausting the whole range of activity that constitutes human life. There were bound to be cases in which one would either be unfamiliar with the relevant *li*, cases in which more than one *li* would seem to apply, or cases in which no rule of *li* would apply. As part of their reflections on the good life, the Confucians maintained another moral concept that seemed to cover morally upright behavior in these types of situations, where there was no obvious recourse to the *li*. This concept is that of *yi* or rightness.

In what follows, I will begin with a brief historical sketch to provide some context for the discussion that follows, and will then consider *li* and *yi* in turn. In the end, I will suggest how *li* and *yi* were both meant to facilitate the supreme value of social harmony that pervades much of the *Analects* and serves as its ultimate orientation.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of passages from the *Analects* in this chapter are the author's own.

<sup>2</sup> See Chap. 5 in this volume for more on the relationship between *ren* and *li*.

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## Background: The Ru and Rituals

There is a strong historical connection between the Confucians and ritual. While this historical connection is not directly of philosophical interest, exploring it (even briefly) will help to provide some context to explain why the notion of *li* ended up playing such a central role in Confucian social, moral, and political philosophy.

Confucius and his circle of companions and students were members of the *ru* 儒, a class of individuals that were charged, historically, with carrying out important court and clan functions. The *ru* had a particular expertise in the *li* – here understood as the rites, formal ceremonies, and other formal procedures of the nobility. Indeed the root meaning of *li* refers to such formal cultural rites as funerals, banquets, or sacrificial offerings of sheep at the first of the month (3.17). The *li* were understood to be different during different eras, such that Confucius could speak of the *li* of former dynasties like the Xia 夏, Shang 商 and Zhou 周, suggesting that they were different across these eras (2.23); Confucius laments that there are no records of the *li* of the Xia and Shang dynasties (3.9). The *ru* studied the *li* alongside other disciplines such as music, archery, poetry, and history (see, e.g. 16.5, 16.13, 17.21).

We see this expertise in numerous passages. For example, a regular refrain in the text concerns deviations from ritual form. Consider the extensive criticisms of the Ji 季 family, one of the Three Families (Ji-sun, Meng-sun, and Shu-sun) that had usurped power from the descendants of the decaying Zhou royal lineage. Confucius balks at the Ji family employing eight rows of dancers (3.1), performing the *yong* ode during sacrifice (3.2), and making a ritual trip to Mount Tai (3.5), seeing in all of these a usurpation of the former king's and feudal lords' ritual prerogatives. Confucius himself believed that deviance from proper ritual form was a harbinger of social decay and disorder (16.2). Throughout the text, we find Confucius criticizing changes in details of ritual such as where and when a person must bow and what material is appropriate for ceremonial garb (9.3), and what length of mourning is appropriate after the death of one's parents (17.21). Indeed, some of the rituals had decayed so much that Confucius himself would rather not witness them (3.10) and his students openly wondered whether one should bother with them at all (3.17). Given their expertise, such detailed observations should come as no surprise.

It's clear, then, that the *li* were a source of great preoccupation for the early Confucians. Some have taken the ubiquitous discussion of *li* as signaling a primary or overriding focus. According to such interpretations, the early *ru* were a tightly knit group of individuals interested almost entirely in mastering the formal songs, chants, and dances that comprised these rites and ceremonies, and were uninterested in other goals such as social or political reform (see, e.g., Eno 1990). However, while the *li* were indeed weighty and central to Confucian concerns (as we shall see below), the term itself refers to much more than formal rites and ceremonies. What's more, the role of the *li* was much greater than upholding details of received cultural tradition. Over time, many members of this group of individuals—the *ru*—would come to have concerns that extended far beyond

their roles as ritual masters. Beyond maintaining and perpetuating the rites, the *ru* would seek social and political reform. Part of their core conception of how to reform society was to have it shot through with observance of *li*. And just as the *ru*'s concerns were themselves broadening, so too was their conception of the nature and extent of *li*. The aim of those undertaking Confucian educational training was to become exemplary individuals known as *junzi* or noblemen, persons of moral and cultural distinction who could reform society, lead by moral example, and thereby restore harmony.

Out of this background the Confucian discourse on ritual grew and expanded, and with the erosion of ritual their reflections on its role in social and moral life became more rich and sophisticated. In what follows, I will trace the role of *li* starting with its importance in early childhood development, and continue through its ceremonial and ethical aspects, finally concluding with a discussion of *li* in government.

## Ritual and Family Life

When MENG Yizi 孟懿子 asks about filial devotion (*xiao*), Confucius says “Don’t disobey.” Moments later, Confucius clarifies his comment to another companion, FAN Chi 樊遲: “When they’re alive serve your parents according to *li*, when they die bury them according to *li*, and sacrifice to them according to *li*.” (2.5). The *li* are meant to stipulate norms of conducts across a wide range of human relations, so there are *li* that apply to family relations which must be followed strictly. But why are the *li* so important? A crucial reason for this concerns the role of the family in shaping the moral life of a child.

Much of one’s early life is spent in the company of one’s family. They play a vital role in cultivating one’s learned reactions and propensities, and honing one’s social and moral faculties. One’s earliest preferences and dispositions, cares and concerns, likes and dislikes, are all shaped profoundly by one’s familial environment. Consider, for example, that one’s foundational moral experiences are likely to occur under the supervision and guidance of one’s immediate family members. Children first acquire emotions in concrete episodes during childhood when parents or older siblings attend to the natural, biological reactions in the child and provide these reactions names keyed to the concurrent scenario, teaching the child that it is experiencing a particular emotion (de Sousa 1987, 2001). During such episodes, one is taught by one’s family what is appropriate to feel in a wide range of specific roles. The family is likely the first unit to introduce one to normative notions such as correctness and appropriateness, what one is expected or permitted to say and feel in a wide array of social roles and situations. This will occur through constant correction and intervention, encouraging certain attitudes and behaviors while censuring others. Much of this will, of course, consist of rote learning and imitation; a child cannot be expected to have the insight or understanding of a mature moral agent, so strict compliance (without understanding) is necessary at the outset (cf. Cua 1996; Lai 2006). Nonetheless, in learning these roles and

expectations—even in rote ways—norms of moral correctness become part of one’s psychological fabric, forming the basic dispositions and patterns of reflection and response that will color the rest of the person’s moral growth (Sarkissian 2010a). Since the *li* constitute society’s received wisdom concerning exemplary forms of conduct in particular roles, demanding strict compliance with the *li* not only shapes the emotional life of the child but also instills habits of personal comportment that reflect exemplary forms of conduct.

Consider, too, that families are naturally hierarchical and divided into particular stations and roles. The family mirrors how Confucians understand rituals functioning in social life—delineating norms according to social roles. The parent/child dyad is perhaps the most obvious of these relational roles, yet all family members were related to one another in strict ways. Children and parents, wives and husbands, older and younger siblings—each of these represents particular relationship dyads with attendant duties, obligations, and spheres of influence. Parents and elder siblings have obligations to nurture the younger members of the family, yet these younger members must be devoted and obedient in turn. Early family education includes the crucial dimension of learning family *roles*, where the child learns not only his own but also those of others he or she interacts with, such as parents, older siblings, and elders of the community, along with the duties, attitudes, and benefits that accrue to each individual according to their own particular position. It is precisely in the context of such clearly delineated roles that *li* can be expected to be articulated, stipulating how individuals ought to relate to one another.

Families thus prepare one to enter society with an understanding of oneself as always being related to others in determined ways, as an individual nested in networks of relationships governed by *li* and requiring certain excellences of character (Sarkissian 2010c). Ishani Maitra, writing about the function of etiquette and propriety generally, has noted that early childhood education in such strictures of correct behavior is largely aimed toward their accessibility—that is, to make them second nature.

A rule is highly accessible for a particular group in a given context if members of that group tend to apply the rule automatically, without conscious reflection on its appropriateness or usefulness. Some rules may generally be more accessible than others; and some may be more accessible in certain contexts than in other contexts. One reason to suppose that rules of etiquette are highly accessible, at least for some individuals, is that these are rules that are often taught from a very early age. (Maitra 2004: 200).

When Confucius tells FAN Chi that being *xiao* means behaving according to the *li*, then, we can understand this as one instance of the general way that the *li* were meant to delineate proper conduct in relational roles. The *li* of the family help one to occupy one’s place in society; a filial son, having properly observed the *li* and internalized them, will not defy his superiors (1.2), and will have the same reputation within the family as without (11.5). Some people said of Confucius, “Why did he not participate in government?” Confucius said, “What does the *Book of Documents* say of filial devotion? ‘Be filial, be only filial/Be a friend to your brothers/You will be an asset to those governing.’ [Being filial] is participating in government. Why this ‘participate in government’?” (2.21).

## Rituals as Sacred Rites

The *li* covered a diverse range of activities, among them formal religious rites. By engaging in formal rites linked to significant life moments (such as mourning rites, wedding rites, and sacrifices to one's ancestors) one can develop deep emotional connections with other individuals and foster a feeling of reverence for the spiritual dimension of human existence. The linkage between observing ritual and cultivating emotions such as humility and deference in the text is patent and undeniable; rituals require an emotional "presence" (3.12, 3.26), and emotional authenticity trumps procedural formality (3.4, 17.11).

But how are rituals connected with these emotions? Do ritual instill the emotions themselves? Or are emotions fostered in some other way? Philip Ivanhoe represents a standard way of interpreting the role of ritual when he writes that "one was not fully following the *li* until one performed each ritual with the appropriate attitude, but one could only develop these attitudes by practicing the *li*" (Ivanhoe 1990: 25). But how, exactly, does ritual develop the attitudes and emotions that are so central to ritual participation? One might think that rituals (or ritual procedures) themselves foster the feeling—that the particular gestures, incantations, or sequence of events of ritual ceremonies would evoke the appropriate emotions in the participant. Indeed, something about particular ritual forms was thought to be incredibly important and profound (e.g., the *Di* sacrifice mentioned in 3.11), and there is a marked bias against deviation from orthodox ritual form throughout the text.<sup>3</sup> (Similar sentiments are expressed toward music and orchestration, which is championed in its orthodox form and denigrated in its heterodox form, e.g., 15.11, 17.11, 17.18).

However, ritual forms themselves cannot be sufficient to elicit the emotions. It's clear in numerous passages of the *Analects* that the *li* could be observed without any emotional presence at all. Consider, for example, the infamous exchange between Confucius and his exasperating student Zaiwo 宰我, who protests against observing the traditional 3 year mourning period for his deceased parents (17.21). Zaiwo believes the lengthy, barren, and relatively solitary lifestyle demanded of mourners would hinder their educational practices, and might even lead them to lose ground in their studies of ritual and music. Shouldn't 1 year—the completion of the natural four season cycle—be enough? Confucius responds that if Zaiwo would feel at ease ending the mourning period and returning to normal life after 1 year, then he should do so. It seems as though, in this instance, the feelings are lacking and so the ritual is meaningless without them. We can also infer that the barren and simple mourning lifestyle would not be sufficient to make Zaiwo feel a greater sense of loss for his parents.

If ritual forms are not sufficient to foster the emotions that are so often cited in conjunction with them, how to rituals bring forth emotional development? An answer is suggested by Bryan Van Norden, who defines rituals as "learned human

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<sup>3</sup> See the section on Ritual and Flexibility, below.

activities that is regarded as sacred” (Van Norden 2007: 102). Following Emile Durkheim, he notes that an important aspect of such sacred rituals is their independent authority or force, which practitioners themselves inject into the rituals.

Because ritual is seen as sacred, it is regarded as having an authority that is not reducible to that of human individuals. This raises the question of what it is for something to be “sacred.” To regard something as sacred is to think that the proper attitude toward it is awe or reverence. (Van Norden 2007: 102).

Rituals are supposed to be approached with a feeling of reverence, and this feeling of reverence in turn imbues the ritual with a kind of sacred authority. Put another way, without one’s own emotional commitment the ritual will itself lack the characteristic feeling of reverence. The reverence is rooted in the feelings brought to the ritual by the participant, who must be taught what feelings are appropriate for the ceremony. While the ceremony itself must be well suited to evoking the emotions it is meant to express (for example, solemn music for mourning, festive music for celebrations), the practitioners must themselves infuse it with the requisite emotional presence. Rituals are likened to a coloring or decorating on top of a clean, pure foundation; they come after the emotions, not before (3.8). First comes knowledge, virtue, dignity, and this is perfected through ritual participation (15.33).

A novice might not feel any deep emotions during ritual participation. However, over time and with the encouragement of teachers, family members, and other ritual participants, the individual can be taught to foster the emotions for the ceremony. Rituals require coordination and cooperation amongst individuals who will be participating in various capacities, and such participation can foster feelings of community and co-dependence. Rituals demand from each participant appropriate commitment and spirit, lest the ritual itself fail to exemplify the feelings and attitudes associated with it. Over time, the ceremony, the individuals, and the emotions become intrinsically connected. At this stage, the ceremony itself may seem to demand or literally wrench the emotion from the participant, fostering feelings of humility and deference to it. According to Van Norden, it is this authority of ritual—this transcendence—that allows rituals to maintain and strengthen ties within a community.

[A]s we participate in an external order maintained by human agency yet characterized by sacrality, we internalize values expressed by that order. This is, I take it, part of the force of [Confucius’s] comment that, “To overcome oneself and to turn toward the rites is to become humane” (12.1). In other words, humans are originally resistant to ritual, so one must “overcome” one’s original self and “turn” around, turn toward ritual. (Van Norden 2007: 111–112)

## Ritual Propriety, Personal Restraint, and Decorum

Van Norden focuses on holy rites—rituals that must be regarded as sacred and approached as such. As mentioned at the outset, the *li* refer to a broad range of norms of conduct from formal ceremonies to more general strictures of proper

behavior. Consider, for example, a handshake. This is certainly a kind of ritual, and was offered by Herbert Fingarette as a modern Western analogue to Confucian ritual propriety—something similar to bowing which, in Confucius’s time, would certainly count as *li* behavior (Fingarette 1972). Indeed, such standards of proper behavior were also captured by the *li*, and such standards could cut across a wide range of life situations quite distinct from sacred ceremonies. The *li* thus characterize how one ought to conduct oneself with regards to general demeanor and overall decorum. Herbert Fingarette finds this a distinguishing characteristic of Confucius’s teachings, that he uses “the language and imagery of *li* as a medium within which to talk about the entire body of the mores, or more precisely, of the authentic tradition and reasonable conventions of society.” (Fingarette 1972: 6).

When we submit to ritualized demeanor and decorum, we do so out of a desire to signal to others that they are within the scope of our moral concern, that we acknowledge them as meriting consideration and respect. Observing the rites in everyday exchanges can be considered a “formal enactment of respect for the community, its tradition, and its members,” whereby we “forestall conflict, misunderstanding, disorientation, and surprise, protecting ourselves and each other from shame and insult” (Haines 2008: 478). To comport oneself according to the *li* in the presence of others signals that one cares. Refusing to do so, or neglecting to do so, signals the opposite—that others are not worthy of one’s moral attention.

The overall cohesion and cooperativeness of a society will hinge upon the success of the innumerable small interactions of its individual members. The *Analects* emphasizes the importance of conduct in such microethical situations, which are frequently occurring situations in everyday life in which the stakes are seemingly low but in which there are nonetheless potential conflicts of interest between the individuals involved.<sup>4</sup> Microethical situations are often strategic in nature—that is, the outcomes for each person involved depends on the actions of the others. (Think about finding a parking spot, or waiting in line at the bank, or accidentally bumping into a distant acquaintance at a local store, or deciding how to divide up menial tasks at the workplace: these are all mundane sites of potential conflict.) It is precisely in these everyday interactions that one must regulate oneself and try to exemplify an excellence reflecting the spirit of ritual.

It’s likely that when philosophers think of morality and ethics, they do not often think of these kinds of situations, which do not seem to reflect morality’s importance and seriousness. For Confucius, though, these situations are the very basic and essential stuff of moral life, where one’s comportment and style can exert tremendous influence on others (Kupperman 2002; Olberding 2007). It is one’s conduct in close contact with particular people in everyday situations that is of paramount importance to constructing a thriving society where individuals and their interests are fulfilled in effortless fashion.

We can understand the importance of the outcomes of such microethical situations through the notion of self-fulfilling prophecies (Sarkissian 2010b).

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<sup>4</sup> My usage of the term *microethics* is indebted to Adam Morton (Morton 2003).

In any social exchange, when we approach one another, we signal to one another our values, commitments, and intentions through our demeanor, facial expressions, and tone of voice. This happens even before we start talking; our overt behavior will trigger certain emotional reactions in others, making certain responses from them more likely to occur than others; a respectful demeanor will make it more likely that others act favorably toward us, whereas a stern demeanor might make them reticent or defensive. Once such emotions are activated, they guide the processing of any subsequent information, influencing how others perceive and interpret them. If initial impressions elicit favorable emotions, then subsequent behavior might be interpreted in this light; if initial impressions elicit irritation or suspicion, this too will color future impressions. Such automatic processes initiate spontaneously and inescapably upon the individual's encountering appropriate stimulus conditions (you can't ignore cues within your visual field, for example), where the environment directly causes mental activity. In psychology, this has been called the perception-behavior link (Bargh and Chartrand 1999).

From the Confucian standpoint, one must be mindful of how one comports oneself, for these actions can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies. Much of what determines whether an individual is willing to be cooperative, accommodating, or otherwise disposed to expend energy in forging relations with others will hinge on these first moves. Favorable first interactions are conducive to forging productive relationships, and vice-versa. By failing to be mindful of one's comportment and its effects on others, the possibility for reaching agreeable outcomes with others can be excluded from the outset. Ritual thus requires a degree of self-control or self-mastery, and such metaphors are used in various parts of the *Analects*. For example, YAN Yuan 顏淵 [YAN Hui 顏回] expresses gratitude toward Confucius, crediting him with enlarging himself with learning, while restraining him with the rites (9.11). The nobleman "studies broadly in culture, restrains himself through the rites, and does not overstep bounds" (6.27; cf. 12.15). Generally, those who restrain themselves seldom err (4.23). In a famous exchange with Yan Yuan, Confucius characterizes this ability to self-regulate as the core to humankindness (*ren*).

Yan Yuan asked about humankindness. The Master said, "Discipline yourself and turn to the rites—this leads to humankindness. If, for one day, you discipline yourself and turn to the rites, the world would turn toward humankindness as well. Humankindness is in you—how could it come from others?" Yan Yuan asked, "I beg you for some details." The Master said, "If it's not *li*—don't look at it. If it's not *li*—don't listen to it. If it's not *li*—don't speak of it. If it's not *li*—don't act on it." (12.1)

Ritual decorum does require some individual creativity and style. Within the general parameters set by the *li* there would be considerable room for personal variation. Perhaps some forms of rituals would admit of variation to a greater degree than others. Hosting banquets, choosing gifts, making conversation—all of these would be amenable to personal appropriation and creativity. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont emphasize that "full participation in a ritually-constituted community requires the personalization of prevailing customs, institutions, and values. What makes ritual profoundly different from law or rule is this process of making the tradition one's own" (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 51).



Nonetheless, even while emphasizing the creative and personal aspects of Confucian ethical conduct, Ames and Rosemont note that

... personal refinement is only possible through the discipline provided by formalized roles and behaviors. Form without creative personalization is coercive and dehumanizing law; creative personal expression without form is randomness at best, and license at worst. It is only with the appropriate combination of form and personalization that community can be self-regulating and refined. (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 52)

Indeed, Book X of the *Analects* is perhaps best understood as capturing just these peculiarities of ritual performance by Confucius himself—his ability to infuse ritual observance with personal style. Take, for example, Confucius asking many questions upon visiting the Great Ancestral Temple of the Duke of Zhou 周公 even while presumably having detailed knowledge about it himself (10.21; cf. 3.15). As Kurtis Hagen notes, this may be an example of *li* behavior, but it is likely not acting according to some stipulative rule “dictating that one has to ask lots of questions in the Great Ancestral Temple, or even in temples in general” (Hagen 2010).

Rather, Confucius’s conduct was ritually appropriate (*li*) in the sense that this was a situation in which being inquisitive, and genuinely acting accordingly, expressed a proper sense-of-ritual. More generally, the point could be that one has to be deferential when one is in unfamiliar surroundings. (Hagen 2010: 7)

Edward Slingerland makes a similar point, arguing that the most straightforward meaning of this anecdote is that comporting oneself according to the *li* demands that “one ask polite questions upon entering someone else’s ancestral temple, or that one not display one’s superior knowledge of ritual” (Slingerland 2003: 23).

## Ritual Mastery

While such metaphors of self-restraint and personal effort are key aspects of ritual behavior, the *Analects* maintains that through devoted practice one can develop a capacity to observe the *li* in an effortless fashion. Indeed, the wonderfully terse autobiography of Confucius in *Analects* 2.4 suggests that after a prolonged period (55 years) of study and self-cultivation, Confucius himself had achieved a state of advanced virtuosity, allowing him to assent to his emotional prompts without hesitation and without encountering friction or resistance by others:

The Master said: At fifteen I set my heart on learning; At thirty I took my position [in society]; At forty I had no doubts; At fifty I understood the commands of Heaven; At sixty my ears were attuned; At seventy I could follow my heart’s desires without transgressing norms.

This passage represents a kind of regulative ideal that mastery of the *li* is meant to facilitate. The passage states that Confucius set his mind on a course of study or cultivation at the age of 15, and pursued it for a span of 55 years. While rituals are not mentioned here explicitly, we can assume that they would constitute a large part of the formal learning during this time span. After such extensive study, Confucius

was able to cultivate a state of being such that he could follow his immediate inclinations in all of life's predicaments without transgressing social norms. A number of attempts have been made to account for this type of virtuosity.

Chenyang Li has advanced a metaphorical interpretation of *li* as cultural grammar, and hence ritual mastery as mastery of a cultural grammar (Li 2007). Just as grammar or syntax provides rules regulating the construction of sentences and phrases, ritual propriety can be understood as providing the rules governing all forms of ethical, social, and political norms of behavior. They provide the basic rules and norms of human behavior in society:

According to the interpretation I present here, a culture is analogous to a language, a person in general observance of *li* in a culture is analogous to someone who follows the grammar of a language that he or she speaks, and a person of *ren* is analogous to someone who has mastered a language (Li 2007: 317).

Li extends this analogy in a number of ways. Children have to be taught the rules of grammar and so too must they be taught the rules of propriety. One way of doing both is through imitation or rote memorization. Studying grammar is necessary for linguistic competence, and studying *li* is necessary for cultural competence. Grammars are relatively stable yet also admit to changes, as do the *li*:

We usually do not learn *li* in abstract forms, nor do we usually learn grammar in abstract forms. One becomes proficient in practicing *li* by following patterns of human activity in daily life, as one becomes grammatically proficient by using linguistic patterns. Although a person who has become skillful in performing *li* does not have to think about it all the time—one can act naturally in accordance with *li*—when someone does not behave appropriately, we will quickly notice that he or she violates some rules of *li* (Li 2007: 318).

Similarly, Karen Lai has claimed that the mature, skilled moral exemplar

does not view the behavioral requirements embodied in *li* as constraints on his behavior. *Li* are no longer cumbersome and restrictive. But they are indispensable because they create the conditions for appropriate expressions of the self. . . the expression of attitudes, intention, and emotion within the boundaries of meaningful action (Lai 2006: 76).

At this point, observance of *li* proceeds forth from an internalized sense of it, and not a conscious application of it. Sarkissian has drawn from research in neuroscience to suggest how prolonged ritual performance might facilitate such effortless behavior through an accumulation of somatic markers that might expedite effortless navigation through social life (Sarkissian 2010a). Social experience provides individuals with a diverse repertoire of mental images that are triggered when one encounters new situations analogous to those previously experienced. These images will be tuned to the relevant situation type, and will be marked with a certain feel or emotional valence, attracting one to certain types of behaviors while distancing one from others. These images thus serve as emotional markers that work as a kind of 'biasing device', limiting the extent to which a person will need to consider or reason through the demands of the current situation:

The accrual of these markers over time fine-tunes and accelerates the decision-making process; at the limit, the correct course of action would come to mind immediately, with compelling emotional valence. . . familiarity with a broad range of emotions, facilitated

through exposure to literature, art, and social rituals, will allow one to perceive values in a wide range of scenarios, thus improving the likelihood of responding appropriately in any particular situation (Sarkissian 2010a: 7).

In accounting for the effortless ease of such exemplars, it is important to keep in mind the efficacy of rituals themselves. Rituals can be conceived as social scripts with predetermined sequences of actions. Thus, rituals would have an efficacy of their own that would be prompted by the correct invocation of a ritual form—for example, a greeting such as a bow. This would, under normal circumstances, lead to automatic and therefore predictable reciprocation in others. According to Fingarette, what is distinctive about ritual or ceremonial acts is the way they effortlessly steer social intercourse; in the appropriate setting, all that is needed is an initial ritual gesture, and everything else ‘just happens’ (Fingarette 1972: 8). Fingarette points out that in a “well-learned ceremony, each person does what he is supposed to do according to a pattern. My gestures are coordinated harmoniously with yours—though neither of us has to force, push, demand, compel, or otherwise ‘make’ this happen”; “the truly ceremonial ‘takes place’; there is a kind of spontaneity. It happens ‘of itself’” (Fingarette 1972: 9). These features are what lead Fingarette to characterize the *li* as ‘magical’.

Given their mastery, the *junzi* would be able to invoke the correct ritual gestures and avail themselves to its efficacy, triggering patterns of response and reciprocation in an effortless fashion. As A.C. Graham has noted,

The ritual act, influencing through interrelations which the agents do not analyse, does have an efficacy different in kind from the act calculated as means to an end. The man of Potency [*de*] who has, not an abstract knowledge of conventions, but an effortless skill and grace in operating with them, although ‘doing nothing’, does enhance the order around him. (Graham 1989: 25)

Deploying the right rituals therefore helps us get a grip on the ‘magical’ ability of virtuous exemplars such as Confucius at 70.

## Ritual Government

We have noted that the rituals originally referred to the rites and ceremonies of the clan royalty. They were observed on important occasions throughout the year and were part of the core religious practices of court life, including sacrifices to ancestors. This might suggest that rituals were a distinct part of court life disassociated from other, more mundane aspects of rulership or governance. However, this would be highly misleading. In the *Analects*, ritual is often described as constitutive of a good or ideal form of government. For example, while commenting on how to guide or lead (*dao* 道) the people, Confucius claims that the proper way to regulate them is through ritual:

Confucius said, “Guide them with government, order them with punishments, and the people will become evasive and have no sense of shame. Guide them with virtuous charisma, order them with ritual, and the people will feel ashamed and pattern themselves to the good” (2.3).

Here, Confucius contrasts two different systems of guiding or leading society. On the one hand, one could make extensive use of laws and punishments to delineate the norms of proper and improper conduct and spur the people along to socially desirable behavior. The use of laws and punishments were prevalent during Confucius's time, and were considered by many to be appropriate means to order the populace during a time of increasing population, greater social mobility, and more centralization of political and military power. As the ruling class was engaged in constant infighting, and ambitious, upwardly mobile peasants vied with existing members of the social elite for positions of power and influence, traditional clan-based forms of governance were being overturned. In tumultuous times, many thinkers saw an increasing need for objective and explicit laws and standards to properly regulate social behavior. Such laws and standards were promulgated on bamboo strips and bronze vessels and were seen as important tools of governance: they could be applied universally to all individuals regardless of their hereditary or social background; they would be clear and unambiguous; and they would be backed by strict punishments to insure their efficacy. During a time of social and political turmoil, the use of laws and punishments had widespread appeal.

Yet the early Confucians recorded in the *Analects* rejected these notions. From their perspective, such forms of regulation and guidance were exceedingly poor. There were several reasons why Confucians rejected penal law and advocated the *li* as the core component of their political vision. First, the use of laws and punishments was thought to lead to undesirable behavioral consequences among the commoners. Faced with the fear of being punished people will simply do all they can to evade them. But this provides no real leadership or guidance. A set of prohibitions outlawing certain actions will fail to advance laudable or ideal forms of conduct. Worse still, explicit laws will promote a practice of disputation and litigation. If such laws are to be applied to any particular instance of conduct it will require interpretation, hence individuals will resort to disputation and litigation in order to advance their own interpretations and avoid punitive consequences. This generates sophistry, glib or clever talk, and a general inclination toward self-interested and evasive behavior, seeking exceptions for oneself rather than conformity to a shared purpose (Hansen 1993: 64–65). Confucius tells YAN Yuan that he is as capable of handling litigation as anyone else, but what is necessary is to create a state of affairs where litigations is non-existent (12.13). Sor-hoon Tan observes that from the Confucian perspective, “laws are at best necessary evils. At their worst, laws undermine efforts at achieving a polity of virtuous people” (Tan 2011: 470).<sup>5</sup>

As an alternative, Confucius recommends guiding the people through observing rituals. What could this mean? How could one govern through observing the rites? It may not seem obvious, but once we take into account a widely shared assumption

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<sup>5</sup> Additionally (and more prosaically) any increase in the use of penal law would pose a direct threat to the power and authority of the Confucians themselves. As experts of *li* their livelihood depended on its perpetuation. If government turned to penal law, what need would there be to consult the Confucians?

found throughout the early Chinese corpus—namely, that people will naturally emulate or imitate those above them in the social hierarchy as a principal way of learning and adopting new behaviors (see, e.g., Munro 1969)—the role of ritual will be easier to understand. Such emulation can occur either actively or passively: actively, individuals might choose to imitate others out of a desire to exemplify the admirable qualities they possess; passively, an individual might mimic the behavior of others not out of any conscious desire or intention but simply through being exposed to their example repeatedly. Either way, the widespread belief among thinkers of this time was that individuals are influenced by their environments, and will behave quite differently depending upon what models they are presented with. Thus, when Ji Kangzi 季康子 (one of the heads of the Ji family of Confucius's home state of Lu) asks Confucius about governing, Confucius replies, “If you were not so covetous yourself your people would not steal—even if you rewarded them for it” (12.18), and that if Ji Kangzi took the lead in correcting his comportment, no one would dare do otherwise (12.17; cf. 12.22).

The *Analects* was compiled during a period of great upheaval and social unrest. According to the psychological model just sketched, much of this unrest could be attributed to bad role models among the elites; poor behavior among the people reflects poor behavior among the ruling class. Thus, properly guiding the population must begin by reforming the behavior of the elites of society. The ruling class embraces ritual propriety and the people become reverent (13.4) and easily enlisted into service (14.41). Ruling with ritual is ruling without difficulty (4.13). This is a form of virtue politics—the idea that bringing about a state of harmony and order in the general population requires virtuous individuals in positions of power who, through the excellence of their character and moral example, influence others toward moral goodness. Indeed, the *Analects* places so much emphasis on the role of virtue in government that it is easy to characterize their entire political vision as hinging upon it. A virtuous and charismatic ruler, in particular, was believed capable of transforming the entire world by sheer power of his *de* 德—the charismatic influence of his moral example:

The master said, “One who governs by means of his *de* is comparable to the Pole Star, which occupies its place and receives the homage of the myriad lesser stars” (2.1).

The master said, “Majestic! Shun 舜 and Yu 禹<sup>6</sup> possessed the whole world without even managing it” (8.18).

The master said, “Someone who ruled without even acting (*wuwei* 無為)—was this not Shun? What did he do? He made himself reverent and took his proper position facing south—that is all!” (15.5).

The Confucians had some reason to believe in this. After all, according to their basic psychological model, people emulate those above them in the social hierarchy. If the kingpin of the system—the ruler—were to comport himself in a virtuous manner then the emulation could continue down through the ranks of ministers, officials, village leaders, etc., creating a linked chain of virtuous behavior throughout the land. This

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<sup>6</sup> Mythical heroes and sage-rulers of antiquity, venerated by the Confucian and Mohist schools.

would allow the ruler to govern ‘effortlessly’—by just sitting on the throne (as it were). In the words of Bruce and Taeko Brooks, “if the ruler has the right qualities, those below will *spontaneously* acquire those qualities. We might call this the *assent* of the governed; their capacity to respond to good influence” (Brooks and Brooks 1998: 94).

Governing by *li*, then, is governing without resorting to threats of violence. Indeed, laws and litigation will be unnecessary (12.13). Ritual is thus associated with an exemplary form of government whereby people are made pliant, obedient, and willing to serve. Having been presented with inspiring and admirable behavior from those above, the people will be ashamed of acting poorly, and will naturally turn toward the good. In these ways, the ruling class would, through manifesting the excellence of the moral traditions as captured in the *li*, elicit paradigmatic responses from the rest of the population, engendering feelings of admiration, fondness, and gratitude in them. Once these further psychological assumptions are made apparent, and as one keeps in mind the hierarchical, clan-based social political system that was practiced during Confucius’s time, the Confucian notion of ruling by ritual gains some degree of plausibility.

Ritual propriety also applied to diplomatic relations, including state visits, banquets, signing of treaties, and ways of accommodating foreign visitors. In each of these strategic and potentially risky situations, the *li* provided guidelines meant to facilitate positive interactions. The importance of maintaining the *li* at the interpersonal level thus finds an analogue at the international level. As David Wong notes, in political negotiation, when one is trying to navigate a course between conflicting values, norms, and ends, agreement in practice will oftentimes be difficult to secure (even when agreement in theory seems possible), because “the process of coming to agreement presupposes a willingness to listen, to consider and to give weight to the other participants’ views. This willingness depends on a significant degree of mutual respect that may not be possible without the ritual” (Wong 2000: 209). Members of the government at all ranks are routinely enlisted to negotiate difficult issues, not only within their own jurisdictions but also with foreign dignitaries as well. During such strategic encounters it would be paramount to allow for negotiations to proceed amicably so that mutually agreeable outcomes can be secured on a peaceful and reasoned basis. As William Haines puts it, “cooperation without coercion needs mutual confidence and an agreed plan. In the visible coordinations of ritual we refresh and observe our shared sense of the attractions of harmony, renewing our confidence in our mutual commitment” (Haines 2008: 474). This would be especially important when the individuals might occupy different ranks or social stations, where inequalities between individuals can be recast as a “shared adherence to a stable common way rather than a conflict of interest that threatens both parties” (Haines 2008: 474).

Political discourse during Confucius’s time had eroded considerably, and kings and feudal lords were often more content to settle their differences through warfare rather than diplomacy. (This was, after all, the beginning of the Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國) period (453–221 B.C.E.) of Chinese antiquity.) In such a rancorous political environment, observing proper ritual protocols would maximize the potential at forging fruitful cooperative endeavors that might otherwise be derailed if individuals are not encouraged to trust or feel well disposed toward one another.

## Rituals and Flexibility

Confucius and those in his circle reveal not only a detailed knowledge of ritual, but also a strong aversion to deviation from received ritual forms. In the *Analects*, ritual conservatism is the norm. Conservatism is so prevalent that the sole instance where Confucius accepts a departure from received tradition is noteworthy. This is his approval of a change from hemp hats to silk hats as part of ceremonial garb (9.3). The reason seems to be that such a deviation does not detract from the meaning or substance of the ceremony, and instead reflects practical considerations.<sup>7</sup> Even here, where Confucius seems to approve of a change in ritual, one should be very cautious to draw any general tendency toward flexibility. First, Confucius is approving an existing modification of the rites, and not initiating a change himself. Second, the change seems very trivial. During a time when ritual observance was declining, this would not be the place to pick a fight. Third, in the very same passage he rejects another existing modification—bowing on top of the stairs of the royal temple, not below—because this signals arrogance; in the apt words of Brooks and Brooks, “the ‘below’ option implies *asking* permission to ascend; the ‘above’ *presumes* it” (Brooks and Brooks 1998: 51).

This passage suggests that the conservatism toward *li* is tied importantly to its general function. If the *li* are to have meaning and efficacy they must remain relatively stable across time and must express values and commitments in a clear, unambiguous way. “The power of communally accepted forms of cultural expression to shape and guide behavior largely hinges upon their communal acceptance. It is only under very specific conditions that traditional rituals can be changed without significantly dissipating this power” (Wilson 1995: 274). Such dissipation in power of ritual can be understood as threatening communal well-being and social coordination, leading to fragmentation. As Stephen Wilson notes, ritual ‘liberalism’ (as it were) would have dire consequences for the individual who wishes to originate new ritual forms:

Taking a public ritual like hand-shaking and deciding that for oneself it will dignify hostility and ill will rather than greeting of friendship... has two serious consequences for one’s flourishing. First, it all but guarantees that no one will understand what one is seeking to convey in such a gesture...

A second consequence of substantially altering public rituals to fit one’s private specifications is even more significant—to turn one’s back on much of what one’s culture deems human is to turn one’s back on any possibility of a fully human life in that community (Wilson 1995: 274).

On this reading, we can understand the importance of ritual stability apart from the content of any particular ritual tradition. Ishani Maitra has made similar comments about other meaning-bearing ritual practices, such as rules of etiquette. Rules of

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<sup>7</sup> One might wonder how silk is more practical than hemp. Brooks and Brooks comment that production of silk is difficult and that its prevalence has deep political significance. “Silk is labor-intensive, monopolizing rural women at weaving time and rural families at silkworm-tending time; it implies an above-subsistence agriculture and a systematic platooning of the rural populace” (Brooks and Brooks 1998: 51).

etiquette must be elaborate and wide-ranging, but the end of social cohesiveness relies more on their stability than their particular form:

[T]o realize the characteristic end of etiquette, there must be in place rules of etiquette governing a range of social interactions. But notice that, to realize this end, what is needed is some set of rules or other. Social cohesiveness would be equally well served by any number of alternate sets of rules (perhaps within some limits). In this sense, rules of etiquette are arbitrary. Moreover, they are generally perceived as such. Insofar as we participate in the practice because we value the end of social cohesiveness, this perceived arbitrariness need not undermine our willingness to abide by these rules (Maitra 2004: 200–201).

Of course, Confucius would likely disagree that there was anything arbitrary about the beauty of the Zhou rituals, but from our own perspective such considerations help explain the ritual conservatism that is so prominent in the text.

Finally, we might infer that for Confucius there was simply no other comparable standard available, no other culture or tradition, to match that of the waning Zhou dynasty. Without any serious competitors, maintaining the integrity of received ritual forms would be paramount. Confucius did not select the *li* from a rich marketplace of options. Rather, the choice for him seemed to have been to follow the *li* of the Zhou or to abandon them for clearly inferior forms of social arrangement, such as the use of laws and punishments. Hence, the conservatism might reflect, at a more basic level, a desire to foster the only real hope for a flourishing, harmonious world. Fingarette has championed this view. On his reading, Confucius “never once entertains” the possibility of conflicts of value, culture, and custom of which we are so aware (Fingarette 1972: 57). Confucius seems aware only of a *li* that has been passed down through the ages, and that has its seat in his own state of Lu. For Confucius, “there is no *genuine* option: either one follows the Way or one fails” (Fingarette 1972: 21).

## ***Yi* 義 or Rightness**

The *li* seem to permeate all aspects of the *Analects*. They provide norms of conduct within the family and among social relations. They constitute the basis for proper government. They are tied to important religious practices and conventions. And they capture the best wisdom passed down through ancestral lines until the present. The *li* are the first thing one ought to consider when trying to exemplify the highest standards of human excellence (12.1). As D.C. Lau puts it, “the rites were a body of rules governing action in every aspect of life in the word repository of past insights into morality. It is, therefore, important that one should, unless there are strong reasons to the contrary, observe them” (Lau 1979: 20). Following the *li* is obviously paramount from the Confucian perspective.

However, while the *li* were extensive, and while one could spend a lifetime trying to master them, they fell short of covering every conceivable life situation. First, the *li* were most obviously applicable in certain settings and situation types—formal occasions such as meals, social and political gatherings, athletic competitions, and



religious ceremonies. In these stable, repeating situation types, individual duties and demands would be explicitly delineated and readily available through consulting the requisite texts and experts. Apart from such situations, the *li* would also dictate, in a general way, matters of etiquette and comportment that would apply to individuals occupying certain roles. For example, the *li* attending to individuals in their roles as hosts or guests would have broad applicability across a range of occasions. Second, there would always be cases of conflict, where more than one rule of *li* would seem to be applicable. For example, as we noted above, the *li* of filial piety requires a son to maintain a deferential attitude towards his father; however, he may also dissent if his father deviates from proper conduct (4.18). But when is it appropriate to dissent? In what manner? Should the son keep the matter to himself? The answers to such questions are not provided by the *li* themselves. Take, as another example, the injunction to avoid lengthy trips abroad when possible (4.19). While one might follow this as a rule, there may be occasions that seem to warrant such lengthy trips. When is it acceptable to leave one's family for an extended period? What types of reasons would justify the violation of this norm of conduct?<sup>8</sup> These questions admit of no easy answers. Nonetheless, in spite of there being no *li* (perhaps one would say meta-*li* at this point) to guide one in these instances, an exemplary person must continue to act in a way that exemplifies the spirit of ritual propriety, even if this entails acting contrary to ritual propriety (Ivanhoe 2000: 2).

It is in these situation types, where there is no standard *li* applicable to one's situation, that the notion of *yi* or rightness plays such a crucial role within early Confucian deliberations of ethical conduct. As Benjamin Schwartz puts it, *yi* denotes appropriate behavior "in the vast sea of unique life situations where more often than not there is no simple 'covering' rule of *li*" (Schwartz 1985: 79). As with many other normative concepts in the *Analects*, rightness (*yi*) is a quality associated with morally exemplary persons. Confucius extols his disciple Zizhang 子張 to continuously follow or move towards what is right (12.10) and tells Zilu 子路 that the nobleman puts rightness as his highest priority (16.23). This exaltation of rightness appears elsewhere as well. For example, we are told that the nobleman is neither for or against anything save what is right, which he follows invariably (4.10). Similarly, Confucius says that "the nobleman takes rightness as essential, enacts it by means of ritual propriety, brings it forth through modesty, and completes it with sincerity," suggesting that rightness has primacy amongst these various virtuous qualities (15.18).

The concept of rightness is often tokened in contexts where the nobleman might compromise himself owing to desires for profit or fame. Confucius states that riches and honors by means of what is not right were nothing to him (7.16), and tells Zilu that in order to become a perfected person one need have three qualities, one of which is thinking of rightness when seeing an opportunity for gain (14.12; cf 19.1). We are told that the nobleman converses about what is right, as opposed to the petty

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<sup>8</sup> An edifying discussion of these issues having to do with tensions in discharging filial duty can be found in Elstein 2009.

person who only speaks of profit (4.16), and that the petty person will seek profit through robbery because his boldness is not tempered by a sense of what is right (17.23). In 16.10, Confucius outlines nine things that the nobleman focuses on, ending with the comment that the nobleman thinks of rightness when he sees an opportunity for acquisition. In 16.23, we are told that petty people who have the quality of being daring yet lack a sense of what is right will end up committing robbery. Finally, Confucius contrasts having notoriety or fame with being distinguished, which can only be secured through rightness (12.29).

We might clarify the relationship between ritual and rightness in a number of ways. Rituals seem to govern strictures of conduct on certain types of occasions and for individuals occupying certain roles. Thus, rituals can be known or stipulated in advance. Rightness, by contrast, seems largely to do with those life situations where one lacks an obvious rule of propriety that one could follow, yet nonetheless must exemplify the high standards of personal excellence that is embodied in the *li*. It should now perhaps be apparent that rightness is most often a quality or property of actions and not persons. In the words of D. C. Lau, “rightness is basically a character of acts and its application to agents is derivative. A man is righteous only in so far as he consistently does what is right” (Lau 1979: 27). This entails that rightness is highly situation-specific or particularistic in character.

A pressing question remains: how does the nobleman know which action is *yi* and which is not? If there is no default *li* script, how does the nobleman know how to proceed? Some have characterized it as a situation-specific practical judgment. Tu Wei-Ming 杜維明, for example, describes *yi* as “a practical judgment based upon a holistic evaluation of objective conditions. The man of righteousness (*yi*), unlike the man of profit, is resolved to be just in an equitable and open way” (Tu 1981: 52). But how to do so? There are places in the *Analects* where Confucius advocates the use of a kind of analogical reasoning. Consider, for example, his injunction of the ‘negative golden rule’ or ‘silver rule’—do not do to others what you yourself would not desire (12.2)—and the virtue of reciprocity (*shu* 恕 4.15, 5.24). We should not treat others in ways that we ourselves would object to if the tables were turned. This injunction is given famous formulation in the following central passage of the *Analects*:

Zizhang asked “Is there a single word that might serve a guide for one’s entire life?” The Master said, “Wouldn’t that be ‘understanding’ [*shu* 恕]? What you do not desire, do not impose on others” (15.24; c.f. 5.12, 6.30).

*Shu* refers to an ability to see the similarities between individuals, to view others as one would view oneself, and to extend to others a sympathetic understanding that one naturally has toward oneself. Elsewhere, Zigong 子貢 asks Confucius about humankindness, and in answering this question Confucius says that those who possess humankindness take “what is near at hand”—namely, themselves—as an analogy when thinking of others (6.30). If we think of these passages alongside the general injunction to think of rightness when tempted by profit or fame, it seems as though analogical reasoning might be especially useful in situations that lack an obvious *li* imperative: when tempted by personal gain or benefit, think of how this

would affect others, and do not act in ways that you yourself would find objectionable. Those who reason in such a fashion might thereby enhance their abilities to choose actions that are *yi*. In Ivanhoe's words, *shu*

... helps one avoid becoming a slave to the *li*. It insures that individuals will have an active sense of their co-humanity with others. It guarantees that people will run the rules and not be run by the rules. One is to see oneself as dedicated to serving others according to the rituals, but one is also to see oneself as responsible for the well-being of others (Ivanhoe 1990: 128).

Apart from such models relying upon practical reasoning of one kind or another, there are other proposals that rest upon a more basic, intuitive faculty that accrues to individuals who have observed ritual propriety and dedicated themselves to exemplary conduct. For example, Joel Kupperman believes Confucius requires the virtuous agent to “gravitate” to the appropriate action; “what he ‘feels like’ doing is what is right” (Kupperman 1968: 184). Similarly, Philip Ivanhoe calls it an “intuitive sense of the Way” (Ivanhoe 2000: 1), and attributes some of this intuitive sense as resulting from prior ritual practice. “Rituals... guide one to develop a sense for what is right. This sense is necessary for a refined understanding of ritual. One develops this sense by continually reflecting upon the ultimate goal of ritual, the harmonious functioning of a society of human beings” (Ivanhoe 1990: 24). Though this comment is about proper execution of ritual, similar considerations would explain the sources of *yi* in the *Analects*. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames have also put forth such an interpretation, arguing that

... actions that realize *yi* are not performed in accordance with strict guidelines. Such actions are, at least to some degree, spontaneous, novel, and creative. ... The articulation of *yi* with respect to a given situation involves the emerging awareness of what is or is not appropriate in that situation and how one might act so as to realize this appropriateness in its highest degree (Hall and Ames 1987: 102).

## Conclusion: *Li*, *Yi*, and Harmony

The first appearance of *li* in the *Analects* occurs in 1.12, where Youzi 有子 makes the following statement:

When it comes to the practice of ritual, the harmony is what is valued. That was the beauty of the *dao* of the Former Sages, why great and small all followed it. There was something they did not practice—namely, knowing the value of harmony and going straight for it. If you don't restrain the practice with ritual propriety, that too is unacceptable.

Out of all the statements concerning ritual in the *Analects*, this one is perhaps the most appropriate as a summarizing position. It articulates many of the aspects of the *li* noted above: The *li* were valued, above all, because when practiced they effected harmony throughout the world. The importance of *li* is ultimately underscored because of its crucial—and irreplaceable—role in fostering social harmony. The word harmony (*he* 和) seldom appears in the text, but harmony is the regulative ideal which most of the teachings of the *Analects* were meant to bring about.

Harmony is a state in which each person exemplifies the virtues that obtain to them within their particular place in society. In exemplifying these virtues they harmonize with others.

There is great beauty in this Confucian vision of a society in which each person exemplifies the excellences of their particular roles and lives in harmonious union with others. According to Chenyang Li, harmony “presupposes the existence of different things and implies a certain favorable relationship among them,” and “a harmonious relationship presupposes that [the individuals] have different perspectives and different views on various issues” (Li 2006: 584, 586). Confucius claims that an exemplary person “harmonizes and does not seek mere agreement,” whereas a petty person “agrees but does not harmonize” (13.23). Li expands on this passage:

For Confucius, a sensible person should be able to respect different opinions and be able to work with different people in a harmonious way. A major function of *li* 禮 (rites, rituals of propriety) is precisely to harmonize people of various kinds. . . . Confucius and Confucians see a direct connection between *li* and *he*. They take *li* to be a central aspect of government and believe that through the good use of *li*, good government results in a harmonious society (Li 2006: 586–587).

Harmony relies upon attitudes of trust and goodwill, of community and shared purpose, that cannot be brought forward at whim; they must be cultivated. Rituals “foster a common bond between the living participants, a sense of community that is rooted in the past and stretches onward into the future” (Wong 2000: 209). We’ve noted throughout that the *li* are central to developing social and moral virtues such as humankindness, filial devotion, and reverence. These attitudes are crucial to facilitating harmony; without them, harmony is not in the offing. As Wong puts it, “One reason why harmony cannot be sought for its own sake is that aiming directly at harmony lacks the power of summoning forth attitudes that may be shaped into mutual respect between the participants” (Wong 2000: 209). These attitudes can best be instilled through shared practices; the *li* constitute such shared practices.

Ultimately, then, the *li* are tied directly to the most central value Confucians recognize—living in a harmonious world—and *yi* helps insure that one does so in the situations where one’s commitment to this goal might be most strongly compromised.

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# Chapter 7

## Family Reverence (*xiao* 孝) in the *Analects*: Confucian Role Ethics and the Dynamics of Intergenerational Transmission

Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr.

### “Family Reverence” (*xiao* 孝) and the Primacy of Relationality

A quick survey of the chapter titles in the Table of Contents of this present volume should persuade the reader of the centrality of lived roles and relations in defining the philosophical narrative as it is recounted in the pages of the *Analects*.<sup>1</sup> Beginning from the enormous value Confucius invested in the term (*ren* 仁)—which we translate as “consummate conduct”—it is the relationality of persons rather than their individuality that is primary in describing, analyzing, and evaluating their quality as people and the efficacy of the social institutions of family and of community in which they live their lives.<sup>2</sup> Several other essays in this anthology take up the matter of moral philosophy, but we must note quickly here that by focusing on the dependent relationality of persons rather than their independent individuality, Confucius is not a moral philosopher in the same way, if at all, that Aristotle, Immanuel Kant or John Stuart Mill are moral philosophers, or almost every other

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from the *Analects* in this chapter are based on our translation, Ames and Rosemont 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier we have translated *ren* as “authoritative conduct,” and others have rendered it “benevolence,” “humaneness,” “human-heartedness,” and the clumsy and sexist “manhood-at-its-best.” It would probably be best to provide a competent gloss for the term, and thereafter simply transliterate it; but herein “consummate conduct” captures fairly well what we are saying about *xiao*, and about the roles in which people endeavor to live *xiao* throughout their lives.

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Western moral philosopher for that matter. Indeed, we would go so far as to say that the Master has no moral theory as such; the *Analects* instead provides us with a *vision* of the moral life, a narrative vision of interrelational and embodied, consummate conduct (*ren*).

An important *dramatis persona* in the *Analects* who in his own conduct underscores this primacy of relationality is Confucius's protégé, Zengzi 曾子, Master Zeng, who throughout the classical corpus is the paradigmatic figure most closely associated with the fullest expression of "family reverence" (*xiao* 孝)<sup>3</sup>:

Zengzi was gravely ill, and when Meng Jingzi 孟敬子 questioned him, Zengzi said to him, "Baleful is the cry of a dying bird; felicitous are the words of a dying person.

There are three habits that exemplary persons consider of utmost importance in their vision of the moral life: By maintaining a dignified demeanor, they keep violent and rancorous conduct at a distance; by maintaining a proper countenance, they keep trust and confidence near at hand; by taking care in their choice of language and their mode of expression, they keep vulgarity and impropriety at a distance. As for the details in the arrangement of ritual vessels, there are minor functionaries to take care of such things" (8.4).

In this passage, Master Zeng, clearly aware of his own impending demise, begins by exhorting the listener to pay serious attention to what he is saying, for he believes that his last words as he utters them on his deathbed are of real consequence.

Master Zeng's message then is that all three of the habits of deportment considered by exemplary persons to be vital to the moral life—that is, a dignified demeanor, a proper countenance, and a commitment to effective communication—are essential to the productive growth of interpersonal relations. And it is this growth in relations that is the substance of Confucian ethics. On the other hand, the failure to cultivate such dispositions precipitates vulgarity, impropriety, and violent and rancorous actions—behavior that as an immediate source of diminution and disintegration in relations—is for the Confucian the substance of immoral conduct. In contrast with this vital concern about the quality of relations, the material aspect of a refined life—the arrangement of ritual vessels, for example—is perceived to be of marginal significance.

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<sup>3</sup> Zengzi is best remembered as a proponent of *xiao*—the devotion and service that the younger generation directs to their elders and ancestors, and the pleasure that they derive from doing so. A natural extension of this affection for one's family is friendship, and Zengzi is portrayed in the *Analects* as being able to distinguish between the sincerity of his fellow student, Yan Hui 顏回, and the rashness of another student, Zizhang 子張. In exploring the meaning and function of *xiao* in the *Analects* by recourse to those seminal passages that shed light on this untranslatable term, we will also be able to appeal to the references to Zengzi himself where he appears as the personal embodiment of *xiao*. *Xiao* has conventionally been rendered "filial piety" in English but we translate it as "family reverence." What recommends "family reverence" as a translation is that it in degree disassociates *xiao* from the duty to God implied by "piety" and from the top-down obedience that is assumed in *paterfamilias*. "Family reverence" also retains the sacred connotations that are certainly at play in the ritualized culture of ancestral sacrifices. For details of our semantic and philosophical analysis of this term, see Rosemont and Ames 2009: "Introduction."



## Associated Living, Virtuosity, and Confucian Role Ethics

Heeding Master Zeng's dying words, we will begin this chapter on family reverence (*xiao*) from the assumption that within the interpretive framework of the *Analects*, associated, interpersonal living is taken to be an uncontested, empirical fact.<sup>4</sup> Every person lives and every event takes place within a vital natural, social, and cultural context. Association being a fact, our different roles lived within family and society are nothing more than the stipulation of specific modes of associated living: mothers and grandsons, teachers and neighbors. While we must take associated living as a simple fact, however, the consummate conduct that comes to inspire and to produce virtuosity in the roles lived in family, community, and the cultural narrative broadly, is an achievement; it is what we are able with imagination to make of the fact of association.

The means and the goal of healthy living is an achieved equilibrium in which we are able to make the most of the transactional human experience by achieving proper measure in our social and natural activities, and in so doing, to avoid both excess and insufficiency in giving and getting, in doing and undergoing. As explained by anthropologist Zhang Yanhua:

Harmony defined here is related to the Chinese sense of *du* 度 (degree, extent, position). . . . In other words, in a dynamic interactive environment, harmony is brought about when each particular unfolds itself in its unique way and to an appropriate *du* such that "each shines more brilliantly in the other's company" (*xiangde-yizhang* 相得益彰) (Zhang 2007: 51).

Parents, for example, may dote on their children but shouldn't fawn over them; young children must learn to be obedient without being servile; siblings should assist each other without demanding payback, criticize each other without mean-spiritedness. Love, sadness, affection, and joy may be expressed in many ways, and every youngster learns the social conventions of interacting with strangers from learning and participating in the homely little rituals of family life from greetings to leave-takings to the sharing of food together.

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<sup>4</sup> And a negative implication of this claim would be that the notion of the autonomous individual is a modern fiction that has little relevance for this classical Confucian text. The concept of the autonomous individual that underlies modern moral and political philosophy has at least two malevolent effects. First, it enables libertarians, growing in their numbers in the U.S., Europe, and Asia, to claim moral purchase in justifying an unfettered human freedom as the basis of political justice, and then to reject any conception of social justice that retards such freedom as fundamentally immoral. The notion of the autonomous individual thus continues to provide a moral basis for a more or less *laissez-faire* free market capitalist global economy that is exponentially compounding gross inequalities of human well-being within and between nation states.

The second reason the concept of the autonomous individual is pernicious is its pervasiveness in the consciousness of Western intellectuals, entrenched at a depth that makes it almost impossible for them to see any alternative to an individualism so defined except a more or less faceless collectivism. Indeed, we would claim the assumption that the essential characteristics and actions of human beings are best evaluated by treating them as fundamentally free, autonomous, and rational individuals has itself become an unquestioned ideology.

It is thus that the familial and social roles themselves come to have normative force, serving as guidelines for how we ought to proceed and what we should do next. Indeed, it is this continuing process of elevating and refining our lived roles and relations to make the most of associated living that prompts us to describe Confucian morality as an ethics of roles, and to claim that Confucian role ethics is, in our view, a *sui generis* orientation with no proximate moral counterpart in Western philosophy.

In this ongoing collateral and radial process of associated living, cultivation of one's unique person within one's specific and often changing relations is the root from which a canopy of interdependent personal bonds grows to define the various social spheres of family, lineage, neighborhood, community, and village, each of which makes its own contribution to the prevailing social ethic. As the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) enjoins us, in the singularly important project of becoming consummate persons, personal cultivation is fundamental, and we must give it our highest priority:

From the emperor down to the common folk, everything is rooted in personal cultivation. There can be no healthy canopy when the roots are not properly set, and it would never do for priorities to be reversed between what should be invested with importance and what should be treated more lightly (*Daxue* 大學 1969: 2b).

In Confucian role ethics, social and political order emerges from and is dependent upon personal cultivation within the institution of the family. The renowned sociologist Fei Xiaotong 費孝通 reflects upon the contemporary configuration of the Chinese kinship-based sociopolitical model of governance that can be attested to as early as the canons and the bronze inscriptions of the early Zhou 周 dynasty.<sup>5</sup> He contrasts those rule-governed social organizations that function with clearly defined boundaries and that are constituted by groups of discrete individuals—what he calls “the organizational mode of association” (*tuantigeju* 團體格局)—with the Chinese kinship model that he likens to “the concentric circles formed when a stone is thrown into a lake” (Fei 1992: 63). We might note that Fei's analogy is reinforced by the fact that the character for “ripples” (*lun* 淪) is cognate and homophonous with the graph for “relational order” (*lun* 倫) where the assumption is that a life well-lived is the rippling process of extending (*tui* 推) oneself outwards in increasingly capacious social circles to participate fully in defining the order of the cosmos itself.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Yiqun Zhou argues “The home, where one engaged in daily practices of kinship-centered moral precepts and religious ceremonies, was the site for the most fundamental education in Zhou society” (Zhou 2010: 147).

<sup>6</sup> This process of cosmic co-creativity is the defining theme of the *Zhongyong* 中庸—a text that we have translated as *Focusing the Familiar* to underscore family and community relations as the ultimate source of cosmic growth. Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), the Southern Song philosopher who compiled the *Four Books*, takes the *Zhongyong* as the fourth and highest expression of the Confucian project. The cosmic proportions of a sage such as Confucius is pervasive in the literature. For example, *Analects* 19.24 reads: “The superior character of other people is like a mound or a hill that can still be scaled, but Confucius is the sun and the moon that no one can climb beyond.” See also Ames and Hall 2001: 30.

Fei provides us with a terminology that is useful in clarifying the implications of a tradition in which primacy has been given to kinship and relationality. He notes that the term “relational order” (*lun* 倫) denotes not only specific family and social relations themselves (husbands and wives, rulers and subjects), but also the meaning that it is possible to achieve in these same relations (nobility or baseness, intimacy or remoteness). That is, *lun* refers to both the specific roles themselves and the process of growth and refinement within the roles that we are describing as Confucian role ethics.<sup>7</sup> We might note that the considered translation of the English word “ethics” in the modern Chinese and Japanese languages as it is derived from early Han 漢 dynasty sources is *lunlixue* 倫理學 (Jp. *rinrigaku*)—that is, “the study of the meaningful coherence achieved in human relations.” This being the case, we would have to allow that the expression “*lunli*” itself means “role ethics,” and that to say “Confucian ethics” is in fact to say “Confucian *role* ethics.”<sup>8</sup>

Further, Fei Xiaotong would claim that the predominant pattern of kinship relations in hierarchically defined roles and relations—what he calls “the differential mode of association” (*chaxugeju* 差序格局)—that “is composed of webs woven out of countless personal relationships” produces its own distinctive kind of morality (Fei 1992: 78).<sup>9</sup> Fei insists that “Confucian ethics cannot be divorced

<sup>7</sup> That *lun* 倫 means “class,” “category,” and “order” as well as “relations” might seem somewhat odd at first blush, but it suggests that classification is dependent upon analogy and association rather than on some essential feature or characteristic. The later Wittgenstein is making a similar point when he insists that words are not defined by core meanings present in all uses of that word. Rather, we should approach words historically and contextually, mapping them through “a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein 1953: 66). Wittgenstein surrenders his earlier concern for certainty and exactness and fixed boundaries when he introduces the expressions “family resemblances” and “language games”—that is, when he appeals to similarities and associations rather than strict identity and formal definitions.

<sup>8</sup> That is, to say “Confucian role ethics” more explicitly in Chinese as *ruxue juese lunlixue* 儒學角色倫理學 would in fact make “role” redundant. See Liu 1995: 316 for the Han dynasty sources of this term *lunli*.

<sup>9</sup> In their comparison of Greek and Chinese philosophy and science, Geoffrey Lloyd and Nathan Sivin add their authority to an analogous contrast in modes of inquiry that has long been argued for: that is, a proclivity of the early Greeks for an exclusive dialectic in pursuit of apodictic truth and a classical Chinese search for a relationally constituted, inclusive harmony and consensus:

The dominant, but not the only, Greek way was through the search for foundations, the demand for demonstration, for incontrovertibility. Its great strengths lay in the ideals of clarity and deductive rigor. Its corresponding weaknesses were a zest for disagreement that inhibited even the beginnings of a consensus, and a habit of casting doubt on every preconception. The principal (though not the sole) Chinese approach was to find and explore correspondences, resonances, interconnections. Such an approach favored the formation of syntheses unifying widely divergent fields of inquiry. Conversely, it inspired a reluctance to confront established positions with radical alternatives (Lloyd and Sivin 2002: 250).

Lloyd and Sivin underscore the primacy and dominance of relationality and synthetic growth in this classical Chinese worldview as producing the predominance of a distinctive mode of inquiry. Such a claim reinforces Fei Xiaotong’s argument that an emphasis on hierarchical kinship relations also produces a distinctive kind of morality, a family-centered relational conception of moral competence we have termed Confucian role ethics.

from the idea of discrete centers fanning out into a weblike network” (Fei 1992: 68). This being the case, simply put, for Fei “no ethical concepts. . . transcend specific types of human relationships” (Fei 1992: 74). That is, kinship as the root of human relations is defined by the values of “family reverence” (*xiao*) and “fraternal deference” (*ti* 悌). And friendship as the way of extending this pattern of kinship relations to include non-relatives is pursued through an ethic of “doing one’s utmost” (*zhong* 忠) and “making good on one’s word” (*xin* 信).<sup>10</sup> All of these ethical values are achieved within the specific personal relationships of family and community.

This ethics of roles also has important political implications for Confucius. A well-known passage in the text has him using the specific roles themselves as guidelines, claiming that the proper use of these names is as necessary for effective governance as it is for achieving a flourishing family. When he is asked about effective governing by Duke Jing of Qi 齊景公, he quite simply replies: “The ruler must rule, the minister minister; the father father, and the son son” (12.11).<sup>11</sup> The Duke is delighted, exclaiming that if we do not live our roles effectively, social and political order is lost utterly.

There are solid warrants for interpreting this passage as more concerned with the roles and the ideals expressed through them than with their names merely as linguistic units, while not neglecting the latter. Throughout classical Confucianism, the contention is that the proper and effective use of language (*zhengming* 正名) is the substance of relationships, and is basic to the flourishing community in all of its overlapping dimensions. Using language properly is how we achieve what is most *appropriate* in our associations, and hence what is most *meaningful*. Indeed, both of these qualities of conduct—appropriateness and meaningfulness—are captured in the Confucian term *yi* 義, a central vocabulary in this tradition’s vision of the moral life. This power of language as the primary source for effecting social order is not lost on Confucius:

“Were the Lord of Wey to turn the administration of his state over to you, what would be your first priority?” asked Zilu 子路.

“Without question it would be to insure that names are used properly (*zhengming*).” replied the Master.

“Would you be as impractical as that?” responded Zilu. “What is it for names to be used properly anyway?”

“How can you be so dense!” replied Confucius. “Exemplary persons defer on matters they do not understand. When names are not used properly, language will not be used

<sup>10</sup> See for example *Analects* 1.4 and 1.8. There is an ambiguity in the expression “associates and friends” (*pengyou* 朋友) as it is used in the documents of the Western Zhou and Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu* 春秋) period where these texts do not distinguish between non-related friends and agnatic male relatives—that is, paternal relatives such as brothers, uncles, nephews, cousins, and so on. Some have argued that *pengyou* becomes a term commonly used to denote non-kin friends specifically only in the Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國) period (453–221 B.C.E.). See Zhou 2010: 110–111, 137–139.

<sup>11</sup> For an explanation of why our rendering of this passage concludes ungrammatically, see the Introduction to our translation of the text, Ames and Rosemont 1998: 28–44.

effectively; when language is not used effectively, matters will not be taken care of; when matters are not taken care of, the achievement of a ritual propriety in roles and relations and the playing of music will not flourish; when the achievement of ritual propriety and the playing of music do not flourish, the application of laws and punishments will not be on the mark; when the application of laws and punishments is not on the mark, the people will not know what to do with themselves. Thus, when exemplary persons put a name to something, it can certainly be spoken, and when spoken it can certainly be acted upon. There is nothing careless in the attitude of exemplary persons toward what is said” (13.3).

In these two passages, the Master focuses on how the proper use of names conduces to achieving meaning in those relations that constitute a thriving family, community, and polity. He does not appeal to value terms, he offers no abstract principles, he does not warn us of using euphemisms. That is, he does not urge us to refrain from describing mediocre things as “good”, he does not exhort us to be honest and temperate, he does not recommend that we avoid using “collateral damage” to describe the killing of civilians. Rather, he observes that our roles and relations require that we relate to each other effectively. It is not, however, just by means of our verbal conduct that we relate to each other, important though that clearly is, but also through non-verbal consummate conduct exemplified in the performance of the other dimensions of our roles. Thus, we should also understand Confucius as exhorting us in these passages, especially in 12.11, “See here, you know what it is to be a good father (minister, ruler, son); now be one!”

In understanding more deeply how deference in social and political relationships functions without degenerating into servility or even an untoward humility we might want to reflect on the nature of hierarchy that holds between “those above” (*shang* 上) and “those below” (*xia* 下). Even though the graphs certainly carry these meanings, readers can appreciate the text more if they see Confucius describing interpersonal conduct not between individuals, equal or otherwise, but largely between *benefactors* and *beneficiaries*. And when we keep in mind that we are all of us benefactors and beneficiaries much of our daily lives, the negativity usually associated with the hierarchical nature of the early Confucian family system can perhaps be replaced by a more appreciative attitude, for the hierarchy—if that is even the proper term for the relationship—is not at all elitist or exclusive. And we do not simply have the roles of benefactor and beneficiary with different people, but not infrequently with the same persons: We are the beneficiary of our parents when young, move to being their benefactor when they become infirm; we are beneficiary of our friend when we need her help, benefactor when she needs ours. These, too, are empirical facts about our lives as we live them.

## Family Lineages as the Mode of Cultural Conveyance

It is because the entry point for developing moral competence in the Confucian vision of the moral life is family relations that *xiao* as “family reverence” has a singularly important place in the *Analects*. But before we turn to *xiao* itself, we first must clarify the nature and significance of the institution of family within this

Confucian context. Again, Fei Xiaotong draws a contrast between the nuclear “family” that for anthropologists takes its major significance from being the site of reproduction, and the dominant historical pattern of premodern Chinese families as lineages of persons with the same surname (*shizu* 氏族), and by extension, as clans (*jiazu* 家族) made up of several lineages who share the same surname. While lineages also have the function of reproduction, Fei insists that within the Chinese experience they serve as “a medium through which all activities are organized” (Fei 1992: 84). That is, in addition to the perpetuation of the family, lineages have complex political, economic, and religious functions that are expressed along the vertical and hierarchical axes of the father-son and mother-daughter-in-law relationships. Lineage relations are again reinforced socially and religiously through the institutions of ancestor reverence, a continuing practice that archaeology tells us dates back at least to the Neolithic Age (Keightley 1998).<sup>12</sup>


Of course, given the fact that the structure of Chinese family lineages have changed dramatically over time, such generalizations must be qualified by time and place—by regional and temporal variations. Having said this, Zhou Yiqun marshals scholarly consensus behind her claim that premodern Chinese society was “for several thousand years largely a polity organized by kinship principles” (Zhou 2010: 19). In weighing the extent to which social order was derived from and dependent upon family relations, Zhou insists that in contrast with the Greeks, “the Chinese state was never conceived as a political community that equaled the sum of its citizens,” and that “the relationship between the rulers and the ruled was considered analogous to the relationship between parents and children” (Zhou 2010: 17–18 n51). She cites the late Qing scholar Yan Fu 嚴復 who claimed that imperial China from its beginnings was “seventy percent a lineage organization and thirty percent an empire” (Zhou 2010: 19 n55). It is this persistent family-based sociopolitical organization of Chinese society that has within this antique culture, late and soon, elevated the specific family values and obligations circumscribed by the term *xiao* to serve as the governing moral imperative.


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<sup>12</sup> In the early Shang, the ancestors—at least those of the king and the noble families—were believed to be directly and significantly responsible for the good or ill fortune in the lives of their descendants, necessitating a propitiating of them through sacrifice. This belief died out only slowly, which helps to explain *Analects* 2.24: The Master said, “Sacrificing to ancestral spirits other than one’s own is being unctuous.” A part of the genius of Confucius was to see and appreciate that these ritual sacrifices could provide a good deal of meaning to human lives, and serve as a binding force in society overall—even when the supernatural *raison d’être* for their performance was no longer credited, at least among the intelligentsia. A not dissimilar sentiment was expressed by the American philosopher George Santayana: “I reject altogether the dogma of the Roman Church; but rejoice in the splendor and the beauty of the Mass.” Yiqun Zhou in her analysis of the dominance of kinship and the inalienable bond between ancestors and their progeny in early Zhou society points out that “Nearly one-sixth of the *Odes* pertain to ancestral sacrifices, including the ceremony proper and the subsequent feast. These pieces demonstrate the central importance of the ancestral banquet for our understanding of the Zhou discourse of sociability (Zhou 2010: 104). And further, that “ancestor worship entails not only memorial rituals that are regular, systematic, and continuous, but also, more important, incorporation of the dead into a descent group as permanent members endowed with an essential role in forging group solidarity” (Zhou 2010: 112).


## “Family Reverence” (*xiao*) as the Governing Moral Imperative

With the primacy of kinship relations in family lineages in mind, what then does *xiao* denote? The character translated “familial reverence” (*xiao*) is constituted by the combination of the graph for “elders” (*lao* 老) and that for “son, daughter, child” (*zi* 子), encouraging an existential rather than a formulaic understanding of what this particular combination of images would convey. Like *ren* that requires us to access and to build upon our own existential sense of what it would mean to become consummate as a “person” in our relations with specific others, *xiao* too has immediate reference to our lived experience in a narrative of succeeding generations as we remember our own parents and grandparents, and attend to our own children and grandchildren. In fact, if we examine the earliest form of the character “elders” (*lao*) found on the oracle bones, it depicts a old person with long

hair leaning on a walking stick  that later in the Small Seal script becomes

stylized closer to its present form of 老 as . In comparing this character for

“elders” with the earliest form of the character for “family reverence” (*xiao*) found

on the oracle bones , the image of a youth has taken the place of the walking

stick as a source of support on which the elders can lean. *Xiao* is certainly the support that succeeding older generations enjoy from the progeny that follow, but it is also the vital process whereby the younger generation is transformed into and becomes a novel yet persistent variant of those to whom they have deferred. The older generation literally lives on in the bodies and in the lived experience of the generations that follow.

The centrality of *xiao* to the Confucian project of becoming consummate in one’s conduct (*ren*) becomes immediately apparent on examining one familiar passage from the *Analects*:

Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having set, one’s proper path in life (*dao* 道) will emerge therefrom. As for family reverence (*xiao* 孝) and fraternal deference (*ti* 弟), these are, I suspect, the root of becoming consummate in one’s conduct (*ren* 仁) (1.2).

What does it mean to take the practical activities of revering family members (*xiao*) and of deferring appropriately to elders (*ti*) as the *root* (*ben* 本) of becoming consummate in one’s conduct as a person (*ren*)? In the first instance we must remind the reader that when Confucius insists again and again on the importance of obedience when young or when in an official capacity, and on the weight of deferential conduct throughout one’s life, he is not teaching manners, or worse, servility, to children. His listeners are all *adults*. And while he is surely claiming that these patterns of interpersonal behavior are necessary for family flourishing and societal harmony, he is equally guiding his protégés toward a path of spiritual

self-cultivation in which appropriate conduct expressed through a reverential attitude to family elders is a mark of refinement:

Those today who are filial are considered so because they are able to provide for their parents. But even dogs and horses are given that much care. If you do not respect your parents, what is the difference? (2.7).

But such reverence and deference only begins with family; it must become a pattern of conduct that, with unrelenting attention, is extended to all members of the community:

Zhonggong 仲弓 inquired about consummate conduct. The Master replied, “In your public life, behave as though you are receiving honored guests; employ the common people as though you are overseeing a great sacrifice. . .” (12.2).

Treaders of the way must, in other words, attend carefully at all times to the appropriateness of their conduct with others, *and* cultivate the proper attitude toward that conduct, and those others, at the same time.<sup>13</sup> Confucius elaborates upon this point further:

Deference unmediated by ritual propriety is lethargy; caution unmediated by ritual propriety is timidity; boldness unmediated by ritual propriety is rowdiness; candor unmediated by ritual propriety is rudeness (8.2).

On our reading, such *xiao* and *ti* activities as a practical expression of *ren* are not descriptive of a human nature *ab initio*. If we take “human nature” as the product rather than the ultimate source of human conduct, are we not putting the cart before the horse?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> In earlier work (Rosemont 2001) we have argued that despite great theological and metaphysical differences the world’s religions have a number of interesting parallels, one among them being the provision of a variety of instructions very similar across the traditions for how to practice approaching the sacred from our decidedly profane daily lives—*spiritual disciplines*, as we believe they are—in their sacred writings that adherents may follow in order to live with dignity, learn to maximally appreciate the pleasures of this earth that come to them, and learn as well to deal with the sorrows that must also attend every human life. Above all they proffer paths for developing a sense of *belonging*, an attunement with something larger than oneself, the experience of which may legitimately be described as religious experience, in our opinion. Because the texts of classical Confucianism also contain such instructions, we take it to be a religion on all fours with the others, despite the absence of any theology, or much metaphysics. There are, moreover, no churches, monasteries, nunneries, ashrams, synagogues, or mosques in early Confucianism, but as our quotes from the *Analects* throughout this essay demonstrate, the basics of the spiritual discipline are centered in another edifice—that is, the family home—thus making “family reverence” all the more felicitous as a translation for *xiao* than “filial piety.” Cf. fn.1.

<sup>14</sup> Much commentarial ink has been spilled on trying to argue against the claim of this passage that *xiao* as the root produces *ren*. Zhu Xi in his commentary on the *Analects* worries over this problem, and cites the interpretation of his philosophical predecessors, the Cheng brothers 二程, that disputes this claim. The Cheng brothers argue for a distinction between “becoming *ren*” (*weiren* 為仁) and “practicing *ren*” (*xingren* 行仁), insisting that *ren* as integral to human nature must be prior to *xiao*, and that *xiao* only enables us to “practice” *ren* rather than to “become” *ren*. See Ames 2011: 88–90.



To us, these passages make the point that human nature and the cultivation of ourselves as persons are inseparable from the context of the roles we live within family and community, and that they are constantly undergoing change and development. Relationally constituted persons are born into their family and community relations—they do not exist exclusive of them, nor can they grow without them. By locating the notion of human nature within the relational cosmology that serves as interpretive context for the *Analects*, we can argue that terms such as “root,” “potential,” “cause,” and “source” that are sometimes taken to be unilateral and exclusive terms generally associated with a given human nature have to be reconceived as referencing a collateral, reciprocal and reflexive process. That is, taking “root” as our example, the tree and its roots are an interactive and organic whole, and they grow together or not at all. While the root may be thought to grow the tree, the tree also in turn grows its roots. The *Record of Ritual* (*Liji* 禮記) version of the *Great Learning* that we cited above as setting the Confucian project of personal cultivation concludes this seminal text by declaring that giving priority to achieving personal excellence is wisdom at its best. In the words of the text itself:

This commitment to personal cultivation is called both the root and the height of wisdom (*Liji*: 43.1/164/30).

Here again, personal cultivation as the “root” and its product, wisdom, are to be perceived as an organic whole that in growing together are two ways of viewing the same phenomenon. Said another way, just as individual persons are abstractions from the concrete reality of their continuing friendship, root and wisdom are abstractions from the concrete process of becoming consummately human within the relations of family and community. *Ren* has no meaning or possibility independent of our family and community relations.<sup>15</sup> In sum, in addition to thinking of *xiao* in terms of root and source it will perhaps will be best understood fundamentally as a resource—a resource for consummate conduct at the aesthetic, ethical, social, and spiritual levels.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> The graph *zhi* 知, uniformly translated as “to know,” “knowledge,” or “wisdom,” is less abstract than these English terms, as each of us has argued elsewhere (Hall and Ames 1987; Rosemont 2012). In our *Analects* translation we used “to realize,” and “realization” for *zhi* whenever possible in an attempt to convey the performative as well as the cognitive dimension of knowing—that is, the importance of the activity and experience of knowing. If “to finalize” is to make final, then “to realize” can be taken as “to make real.”

<sup>16</sup> The contrast with Soren Kierkegaard on these planes of living could not be more stark. Without denigrating the work of the great Dane in any way, it is clear that his planes are exclusive: once you leave the aesthetic life for the ethical, you do not—cannot—return; and to leave the ethical plane for the religious requires “a leap to faith” of great proportions. The Confucian planes on the other hand are always subject to change, are intertwined, mutually dependent and interdependent, and they must be integrated throughout our lives. See Kierkegaard 1985, especially “The Preamble of the Heart.” The reader might also want to contrast our treatment of *xiao* with that of Philip J. Ivanhoe, who takes it to be a virtue in the philosophical (Aristotelian) sense of the term. See Ivanhoe 2004.

## “Family Reverence” (*xiao*) as the Inheritance and Conveyance of Meaning

This understanding of the root and the tree as a symbiotic process stands in contrast to thinking of the root as an independent, single source, and reflects the holistic cosmological assumptions that require a situated answer to one of our most fundamental and perennial philosophical questions: “Where does meaning come from and how is it conveyed?” In the Abrahamic traditions, the answer is simple: Meaning comes from a Divine source beyond and independent of the individual: Yahweh, or God, or Allah provides us with a continuing vision of life’s purpose, and we must return to this source when we lose our way. For the Confucian project, on the other hand, without appeal to some independent, external principle, meaning arises *pari passu* from a vital network of meaningful relationships. A personal commitment to achieving relational virtuosity within one’s own family relationships is both the starting point and the ultimate source of personal, social, and indeed, cosmic meaning. That is, in cultivating our own persons through achieving and extending robust relations in our families and beyond, we enlarge the cosmos by adding meaning to it, and in turn, this increasingly meaningful cosmos provides a fertile context for the project of our own personal cultivation.

We must bear this alternative meaning of “root” and “source” in mind when we reflect upon a passage in which Confucius in the *Analects* describes himself in the following terms:

The Master said: “Following the proper way, I do not forge new paths; with confidence I cherish the ancients—in these respects I am comparable to our venerable Old Peng” (7.1).

Many commentators across the centuries have read this passage as a portrait of Confucius as a cultural conservative. As early as the *Mozi* 墨子, for example, Confucius is taken at his word as being wholly a transmitter, and is criticized roundly for offering the world a lifeless conservatism:

Again the Confucians say: “Exemplary persons follow and do not innovate.” But we would respond by saying: “In ancient times, Yi introduced the bow, Yu introduced armor, Xizhong introduced the carriage, and the tradesman Qiu introduced the boat. Such being the case, are today’s tanners, smiths, carriage-makers, and carpenters all exemplary persons, and are Yi, Yu, Xizhong, and the tradesman Qiu simply petty persons? Further, since whatever it is the Confucians are following had to be introduced by someone, doesn’t this mean that what they are in fact following are the ways of petty persons?” (*Mozi* 1948 63/39/19; see also 81/46/50).

This Mohist criticism of Confucianism is alive and well in the commentarial tradition that extends down to the present day. The contemporary political philosopher, Hsiao Kung-chuan 蕭公權 [Xiao Gongquan], describes this ostensive Confucian conservatism at length as “emulating the past” (*fagu* 法古) (Hsiao 1979: 79–142). More recently, Edward Slingerland, in interpreting this same passage from the *Analects*, aligns himself with a retrospective understanding of a Confucianism that harkens back to the Golden Age of the Zhou dynasty. He observes:

It is more likely that transmission is all that Confucius countenanced for people in his age, since the sagely Zhou kings established the ideal set of institutions that perfectly accord with human needs (Slingerland 2003: 64).

*Contra* this conservative reading of Confucius—a position that we disagree with fundamentally—we want to suggest that this passage speaks rather to Confucius’s understanding of the nature and the dynamics of intergenerational transmission. And in this process of transmission, the patterns of deference captured in the notion of “family reverence” (*xiao*) serve as a key factor.<sup>17</sup> Borrowing the language of the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), we would argue that Confucius as he is remembered historically is in fact a particularly good example of the cosmological assumptions that grounds this canonical text. He, like the *Yijing*, assumes that the unfolding of the natural and cultural narratives can best be expressed in the language of “persistence and change” (*biantong* 變通) and of “ceaseless procreation” (*shengsheng buyi* 生生不已). That is not to deny that with Confucius’s reliance upon the core canons of the tradition, he is an effective transmitter of the persistent and abiding “common sense.” At the same time, however, with his own contribution to the development of a specific philosophical vocabulary, he is also a source of novel insight. Indeed, appreciating his modesty in demurring at the suggestion that he has been an innovator, we still have substantial evidence to comfortably assert that Confucius was both a transmitter and someone who sought to break new ground.

In broad strokes, Confucius does self-consciously continue a tradition that reaches back into the second millennium B.C.E.:

The Master said: “The Zhou dynasty looked back to the Xia 夏 and Shang 商 dynasties. Such a wealth of culture! I follow the Zhou” (3.14).<sup>18</sup>

But at the same time, Confucius has also been responsible for introducing, redefining, and reinvesting in such key notions as *ren* (consummate conduct), *junzi* (exemplary person), *yi* (optimizing appropriateness), and *li* 禮 (achieving propriety in one’s roles and relations) as an authorized philosophical terminology. Again, it is Confucius who promotes personal cultivation as defining of the

<sup>17</sup> Translating *shu* 述 as “to follow the proper way” enables us to maintain the “path” (*dao*) metaphor that it suggests and that is a key to a coherent reading of the text. Throughout the early corpus, the term meaning “to initiate” (*zuo* 作)—translated here as “forge new paths”—is frequently associated with the term “sageliness” (*sheng* 聖). Hence Confucius’s description of himself might be read as an expression of modesty. “Old Peng” is Peng Zu 彭祖, a minister to the court during the Shang dynasty whom legend has it lived to be some 800 years old. With the name “Peng Zu”—literally “Peng the Ancestor”—and with his remarkable longevity, Old Peng is certainly emblematic of historical continuity.

<sup>18</sup> See also *Analects* 8.20: Shun 舜 had only five ministers and the world was properly governed. King Wu 武王 also said, “I have ten ministers who bring proper order to the world.” Confucius said, “As the saying has it: ‘Human talent is hard to come by.’ Isn’t it indeed the case. And it was at the transition from Yao 堯 monarchy to Shun 舜 that talented ministers were in greatest abundance. In King Wu’s case with a woman, perhaps his wife, among them, there were really only nine ministers. The Zhou, with two thirds of the world in its possession, continued to submit to and serve the House of Yin. The excellence of Zhou can be said to be the highest excellence of all.”

Confucian project and who grounds Confucian role ethics and the vision of the consummate life in “family reverence” (*xiao*).<sup>19</sup>

To ground a vision of the consummate human life in “family reverence” is to assert that each succeeding generation is the teacher of the generation that is to follow. It is important to keep this idea of generational continuities and changes *via* lineages in mind when reading the *Analects*, for (at least) two reasons. First, while Confucius regularly cites the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) and the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), and urges his disciples to read and re-read them, he lived when oral instruction was still the norm in education. As Michael Nylan has argued, China did not become a true “manuscript culture” until the Han (202 B.C. E.-220 C.E.)—several centuries after the death of Confucius—with the appearance of libraries, archives, book shops, and other signs of such a culture (Nylan 2011). Thus, just as with other schools of thought in early China, early Confucianism as a “school” is probably best understood in terms of lineages transmitted orally—personally and interrelatedly—beginning with the Master himself and his own disciples, some of whom later took on disciples themselves, and continuing, with the dominant pattern of education not being book learning, but formal and informal discussion among and between a group of learners centering around a talented teacher. Today’s reader would be well advised to attempt to recapture this sense of learning through direct conversation that is reflected throughout and definitive of the *Analects*; the task is not easy, but surely worth a try.

A second reason for attending carefully to the idea of lineages (and roles) for teachers and students no less than for family and clan members is that at least six of the disciples who appear in the received *Analects* went on to establish their own lineage, and thus “school,” which they saw as originating with the Master. Consequently there can be no “orthodox” interpretation of classical Confucianism in general nor of the *Analects* in particular. The text, although uniformly read and revered, did not itself achieve full canonical status until well over a millennium after achieving its present form when the interpretation of the text by the great Neo-Confucian scholar Zhu Xi 朱熹 became “orthodox,” and a basis of the imperial civil service examinations for over 700 years.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This being the case, it is not surprising that Zhu Xi 朱熹 canonizes the *Analects* as the second of the *Four Books* for the explicit reason that it not only provides the fundamental vocabulary of the tradition, but it also provides a narrative example of personal cultivation that is at the heart of the Confucian project described in the first of his *Four Books*, the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學).

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, before Zhu Xi’s time it is not even accurate to refer to “Confucianism” at all—there is no graph for it in classical Chinese—because it was basically the learning of the literati or “gentle-folk” (*ruxue* 儒學). And thus it bears repeating, we think, that the classical texts that have been classified as “Confucian” should be read on their own, and not as collectively cohering as to have a “correct” interpretation that it is ours to find; there are far too many inconsistencies among and between them, the *Mengzi* 孟子 and the *Xunzi* 荀子 being among the more notorious examples. At the same time, if its use be clear, “Confucianism,” especially in its classical forms, may be conceived as an extension of the *xiao* dynamic, where each generation inherits the cultural tradition, uses it to address the pressing issues of the age, and thus reauthorizing it, passes it along to the next generation with the recommendation that they do the same.

The Master himself may be an exception to the rule of school lineages and oral transmission of their *dao*; we do not know who his teachers were, or indeed, even if he had any. When asked who was the teacher of Confucius, his student Zigong 子貢 replies:

The way of Kings Wen and Wu has not collapsed utterly—it lives in the people. Those of superior character have grasped the greater part, while those of lesser parts have grasped a bit of it. Everyone has something of Wen and Wu’s way in them. Who then does the Master not learn from? Again, how could there be a single constant teacher for him? (19.22).

The source of Confucius’s education, then, has been the aggregated culture of the generations that have preceded him as it lived on in the people of his own day. As he says when confronted by a perilous situation in Kuang:

With King Wen 文王 long dead, does not our cultural heritage reside here in us? If *tian* 天 were going to destroy this legacy, we latecomers would not have had access to it. If *tian* is not going to destroy this culture, what can the people of Kuang do to us! (9.5).<sup>21</sup>

## “Family Reverence” (*xiao*) and the Embodying (*ti*) of Propriety (*li*)

One way of understanding the dynamics of “family reverence” (*xiao*) as intergenerational transmission is to appeal to two cognate characters that are integral to the continuities of the family lineage: *ti* 體 (“body,” “embodying,” “forming and shaping,” “category, class”) and *li* 禮 (“ritual,” “achieving propriety in one’s roles and relations”).

In the pre-Qin documents, the graph for “body” (*ti* 體) appears with three alternative semantic classifiers—“bones” (*gu* 骨), “lived, vital body” (*shen* 身), and “flesh” (*rou* 肉). We can appeal to these different ways of writing the graph as a heuristic for attempting to give full value to the notion of one generation “embodying” the one that comes before.<sup>22</sup> We must allow that *ti* with the “bones” classifier (*gu*) references the “discursive body” as a process of “structuring,” “configuring,” “embodying,” and thus “knowing” the world not only cognitively and affectively, but also viscerally. Each of us inherits a worldview and a cultural common sense, and collaborates with the world to discriminate, conceptualize, and theorize the human experience, embodying and giving form to our culture, our language, our habitat.

*Ti* with the “lived body” classifier (*shen*) highlights another dimension of embodying experience by referencing the vital, existentially aware, lived-body in

<sup>21</sup> According to the biography of Confucius in Sima Qian 司馬遷 (1959: 1919), Confucius had left Wey and was on route to Chen when he passed through Kuang. The people of Kuang had recently been ravaged by Yang Huo, also from the state of Lu, and mistook Confucius for him. See also 11.23.

<sup>22</sup> For a fuller discussion of this sense of embodiment, see Ames 2011: 102–113. For more on the *ti* body, see Sommer 2008.

its dynamic social relations with others. Experience always has a subjective dimension, an inside as well as an outside, and we come to understand and express what it means to become fully human intuitively as well as objectively through the actual process of becoming human.

And *ti* with the “flesh” classifier (*rou*) references the carnal body—the body as flesh and bone. The modalities of our experience are rooted in and are always mediated through a unique localizing physicality, and are temporally and spatially constrained by this fact.<sup>23</sup> And all of our thoughts and feelings are grounded in a complex physical sensorium that makes specific demands on our conduct, and that registers our pleasures and pain.

At the most primordial level, the body *via* these three mutually entailing modalities—the discursive, vital, and carnal bodies—serves as the bond that correlates our subjectivity with our environments and that mediates the processes of thinking and feeling with our emerging patterns of conduct. Human procreativity is the birthing of distinctive and unique persons from those who are genealogically prior. At the same time, within the ongoing, ceaseless process of embodiment, the many prior progenitors persist and live on in this continuing process of transforming into someone else. That is, while persons emerge to become specifically who they are as unique individuals, the parents and grandparents of such persons continue to live on in them, just as they too will live on in their descendants. The focus-field language that we have proposed as a way of thinking about the relationship between particulars and the totality seems immediately relevant to this kind of holography in which the entire field of the physical and cultural experience is implicated in the narrative of each person.

This “living on” is not meant merely rhetorically. A very large number of people, we suspect, look very much like one of their great-grandparents, which, thanks to photography, can be seen directly in several ways. Change the hairstyle, the dress, and then squint a bit, and today’s Susan looks very much like her great-grandmother. Susan will also bear the surname of one of those great-grandparents, and perhaps her ancestral look-alike was also named Susan, the source of her given name. And if Susan keeps alive any memories she may have of her great-grandmother, then here, too, the earlier Susan may be said to be “living on.” But even more obvious and significant than this physical transmission are the continuities of the cultural tradition itself—its language, institutions, and values.<sup>24</sup>

In the Confucian tradition, the body is understood as an inheritance we receive from our families, and as a current in a genealogical stream that reaches back to our most remote ancestors. It brings with it a sense of continuity, contribution, and belonging, and the religious significance that feelings of felt worth inspire. To show respect for

<sup>23</sup> A popular written form of the character for “body” (*ti* 體) that has become the standard script in Japanese and the simplified Chinese form is (*ti* 体) that combines the character “person” (*ren* 人) and the graph for “root” (*ben* 本).

<sup>24</sup> The sense of immortality implied by the expression “living on” is difficult to see if the body is taken as “belonging” only to an individual. The *Xiaojing* makes clear that for Confucius, it does not, as evidenced in the several quotes below in fns. 38–40. See also Rosemont 2007.

our own bodies—both the physical body and its function as the residence of the cultural corpus that they bequeath to us—is to show reverence for our ancestors and the relationship we have with them, while disregard for our bodies is to bring shame upon our family lineages. What is significant in this reflection on our embodied persons is that physically, socially, and religiously, our bodies are a specific matrix of nested relations and functions that are invariably a collaboration between our persons and our many social, cultural, and natural environments. “Nobody” and no “body”—not the discursive, vital, or the carnal body—does anything by itself.

In this Confucian tradition, we can correlate “body” (*ti*) and its cognate character “achieved propriety in one’s roles and relations” (*li*) by arguing that they express two ways of looking at the same phenomenon: That is, these two characters reference “a living body” and “embodied living” respectively. The notion of *li* denotes a continuing, complex, and always novel pattern of invested institutions and significant behaviors that is embodied, authored, and reauthorized by succeeding generations as the persistent cultural authority that serves to unify the family lineages (*shizu*) and clans (*jiazu*) as a specific lineage of people (*minzu* 民族). For this holistic Confucian philosophy, our unique persons in their physical and narrative entirety penetrate so deeply into human experience that it would be nonsense to try to separate out some reality that stands independent of them. Said another way, reality is our lived, embodied experience and nothing else.

## “Family Reverence” (*xiao*) and Transmitting the Cultural Body Intact

It should be clear that what we are referencing here is not simply the transmission of a physical lineage. But it is that, too. The living body and our embodied living is the narrative site of a conveyance of the cultural corpus of knowledge—linguistic facility and proficiency, religious rituals and mythologies, the aesthetics of cooking, song, and dance, the modeling of mores and values, instruction and apprenticeship in cognitive technologies, and so on—through which a living civilization itself is perpetuated. Our bodies are certainly our physicality, but they are so much more. They are also the conduits through which the entire body of culture is inherited, interpreted, elaborated upon, and reauthorized across the ages.

There is an important passage in the *Analects* in which Zengzi on his deathbed surrounded by his students expresses a deep sense of relief in having preserved his body intact:

Zengzi was ill, and summoned his students to him, saying, “Look at my feet! Look at my hands!

The *Book of Songs* says:

‘Fearful! Trembling!

As if peering over a deep abyss,

As if walking across thin ice’ (*Shijing* 195, Cf. Karlgren 1950).

It is only from this moment hence that I can at last know relief, my young friends” (8.3).

It is clear that Zengzi is rejoicing in the fact that he has reached the end of his life without having desecrated his physical form, and that he is able to return this carnal body to the ancestors intact. But the first chapter of the *Classic of Family Reverence* (*Xiaojing* 孝經) in providing us important commentary on understanding this exchange between the dying Zengzi and his students suggests that we might want to read “body” in a broader cultural sense:

Confucius was at leisure in his home, and Zengzi was attending him. . . . “It is family reverence,” said the Master, “that is the root of personal excellence, and whence education itself is born. Sit down again and I will explain it to you.

Your physical person with its hair and skin are received from your parents. Vigilance in not allowing anything to do injury to your person is where family reverence begins<sup>25</sup>; distinguishing yourself and walking the proper way in the world; raising your name high for posterity and thereby bringing esteem to your father and mother—it is in these things that family reverence finds its consummation. This family reverence then begins in service to your parents, continues in service to your lord, and culminates in distinguishing yourself in the world.”

We would argue that Confucius in elaborating upon the importance of *xiao* here is not simply referencing respect for the body in its physical sense, but is also alluding to its function as the site of intergenerational cultural transmission. He reinforces the claim in the *Analects* that *xiao* is indeed the “root” of human excellence, and perhaps playing with the cognate relationship between the character *xiao* 孝 and “education” (*jiao* 教), defines the substance of Confucian education as the serious responsibility of each generation to transmit the culture that they have inherited in its fullness and without diminution to the generation that follows.

Thus, keeping the “body” intact is the inclusive process of embodying the tradition, drawing upon it creatively as a resource for distinguishing oneself in the world, and contributing to its cultural resources by establishing a name for oneself and one’s family that will be remembered by posterity. The body of the cultural tradition is embodied in each generation as it is perpetuated for those that follow.

## Conclusion

We opened this chapter with the claim that in the interpretive context of the *Analects*, mutually beneficial associated living is an uncontested empirical fact. We now want to close it by enumerating several corollary entailments that can be drawn from the primacy of lived relations as the ground of Confucian role ethics,

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<sup>25</sup> The *Liji* 禮記 (*Record of Rites*) 25.36/128/6 says:

The Master said: “Among those things born of the heavens and nurtured by the earth, nothing is grander than the human being. For the parents to give birth to your whole person, and for one to return oneself to them whole is what can be called family reverence. To avoid desecrating your body or bringing disgrace to your person is what can be called keeping your person whole.”



corollaries readily illustrated by passages from the *Analects*. There is a fundamental uniqueness of persons as they are defined by their specific patterns of relations,<sup>26</sup> an interdependence among persons as they live these relations,<sup>27</sup> a correlative, engaging and reflexive nature to all personal activity,<sup>28</sup> and an underlying processive, provisional, and emergent conception of both the natural and the social order.<sup>29</sup> And as we have seen, there are also mutually entailing historical and cosmological implications that follow from this primacy of relations. For example, there is the holistic, unbounded, and nested nature of relationships, a holographic conception of person as defined in focus-field rather than part-whole terms, and Confucianism as a philosophical aestheticism that registers all relationships as being relevant in degree to the totality of the effect.

Because many of the relationships are among and between family members, much of the totality of the effect will be seen therein. But the relationships must also extend outward from family (and clan) to the larger social order. The relationships will be intergenerational, as we have noted earlier, and understood in terms of roles between benefactors and beneficiaries. And these totalities in turn will go beyond social to authentically religious effects. The *Analects* consistently seems to be saying that a full and flourishing human life requires that some of our relations be with those younger than ourselves, others with our peers, and still other relations with the generations that have preceded us. And it is in this religious sense that we interpret the Master's autobiographical response when asked by his disciple Zilu what he would most like to do:

I would like to bring peace and contentment to the aged, share relationships of trust and confidence with friends, and to love and protect the young (5.26).

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<sup>26</sup> *Analects* 15.36: "The Master said, 'In striving to be consummate in your person, do not yield even to your teacher.'"

<sup>27</sup> *Analects* 6.30: "As for consummate persons, they establish others in seeking to establish themselves; they promote others in seeking to get there themselves. Correlating one's conduct with those near at hand can be said to be the method of becoming consummate in one's conduct."

<sup>28</sup> *Analects* 7.8: "The Master said, 'I do not open the way for students who are not driven with eagerness; I do not supply a vocabulary for students who are not trying desperately to find the language for their ideas. If on showing students one corner they do not come back to me with the other three, I will not repeat myself.'" And 7.22: "The Master said, 'In strolling in the company of just two other persons, I am bound to find a teacher in them. Identifying their strengths, I follow them, and identifying their weaknesses, I reform myself accordingly.'"

<sup>29</sup> *Analects* 9.17: "The Master was standing on the riverbank, and observed, 'Isn't life's passing just like this, never ceasing day or night!'" 2.11: "The Master said: 'Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new—such a person can be considered a teacher.'" and 15.29: "The Master said: 'It is the person who is able to broaden the way, not the way that broadens the person.'"

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# Chapter 8

## Language and Ethics in the *Analects*

Hui Chieh Loy

### Introduction: Virtue and Eloquence

Readers of the *Analects* do not have to go far into the text to notice Confucius drawing a curious connection between language and virtue:

The Master said: “It is rare indeed for clever speech and an ingratiating appearance to accompany *ren* 仁” (1.3).<sup>1</sup>

The line is repeated verbatim in *Analects* 17.17. Elsewhere, in *Analects* 5.25, the Master professes that he—concurring with the moral paragon Zuo Qiuming 左丘明—considers to be shameful such things as “clever speech, an ingratiating appearance, and a profuse solicitousness” (we will have more to say about this passage below). In *Analects* 15.27, “clever speech” is singled out as being liable to ruin *de* 德 (“moral power”). A similar thought comes up again when we turn to another word that refers to being clever or skillful in speech in the *Analects*: *ning* 佞, “eloquent”:

Someone said: “Yong [Zhonggong 仲弓] is *ren* but not eloquent.” The Master said, “What need is there for him to be eloquent? One who disputes with others with a ready wit will frequently incur the enmity of others. I do not know if Yong is *ren*; but what need is there for him to be eloquent?” (5.5).

In 15.11, the Master will also advise, regarding the government of a state, to keep eloquent men (*ning ren* 佞人; “glib talkers”) at a distance. And finally, in 17.18, he expresses his detestation of the “smooth tongues” (*li kou* 利口) who undermined state and family.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations of passages from the *Analects* in this chapter are the author’s own. The following editions were consulted: Legge 2006; Waley 1938; Yang 1984 (modern Chinese translation), Lau 1992; Leys 1997; Ames and Rosemont 1998, and Slingerland 2003; and also the collation of the traditional commentaries on the *Analects* in Cheng 1996.

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Note that the *ren* which appears in some of these passages (1.3, 5.5, 17.17) probably refers not to the attribute “benevolence”, i.e., one aspect of virtue that might, in suitable contexts, be contrasted with other aspects such as wisdom and courage (see 6.22, 9.29, 14.28) and explained in terms of caring about other people (*ai ren* 愛人; 12.22) or empathy (see 6.30, 12.2). Here, it more probably has a broader sense, referring to the “all-encompassing ideal for human beings” which includes within itself the various particular aspects of virtue (as in 14.4; see Shun 1997: 23–24).<sup>2</sup> In other words, clever or skillful speech is said to conflict with virtue in general, not just a particular dimension of virtue.

The relevant passages also do not appear to have built the morally problematic character of clever or skillful speech into the very connotation of *qiao yan* 巧言 and *ning*—hence my translations “clever speech” and “eloquent” rather than, for example, D. C. Lau’s “cunning words” and “facile tongue”. Both *qiao* and *ning* can be taken in a morally neutral way without any negative connotation (Wang 1993: 777, 944–945). We probably should not take Confucius to be making the tautological point that a morally problematic cleverness, or cunning, in speech is . . . morally problematic,<sup>3</sup> but the substantive and potentially controversial point that being clever or skillful in speech is somehow incompatible with moral virtue.

The question now arises: What does Confucius of the *Analects* have to say, in general, about the relationship between language and speech, on the one hand, and moral virtue or the good society (since the early Chinese philosophers don’t seem to sharply separate the concerns of ethics from those of politics), on the other hand? Taking a stab at answering this question is the aim of this study.

The essay will proceed as follows. Section “[Hypocrisy, the tribute that vice pays to virtue](#)” continues with what Confucius has to say about the manners of speech that are detrimental to virtue, and those that are consistent with or required by virtue. Not only does Confucius denigrate clever or skillful speech, he commends a carefulness or even slowness in speech—the speech of an agent who places a premium upon being able to live up to his verbal self-representations. The underlying concern lies in the fact that a person’s words—as with his external appearance or observable behavior—can be used to put up a false front so as to make him seem better than he really is. And this is a fact that, given the right conditions, we can readily expect the less-than-virtuous to exploit.

Section “[Correcting names](#)” extends the reconstruction of Confucius’ teaching on the link between language and virtue presented so far to issues relating to the so-called doctrine of “correcting names” reported in *Analects* 13.3. I will argue that elements of the doctrine are implied by other parts of the *Analects*. Nonetheless, pending a good response to the doubts about the textual provenance of *Analects*

<sup>2</sup> The distinction between the broader and narrower sense of *ren* is captured in some translations. Simon Leys, for instance, renders *ren* “goodness” in 1.3 but “humanity” in 12.22; James Legge has “True Virtue” for the first, and “benevolence” for the second. And in YANG Bojun’s modern Chinese translation, it is “仁德” in the former but just “仁” in the latter.

<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, both *qiao* and *ning* will take on derogative senses not least thanks to what Confucius is reported to say about them; Nivison 1998: 751–752; Slingerland 2003: 2, 41.

13.3, the most that can be concluded is that the *germs* of a concern with language issues are already present in the earlier version of Ruist thought exemplified by the *Analects*.

Section “[Language and ethical guidance](#)” changes tack to (more briefly) consider a different dimension of what Confucius has to say about the connection between language and virtue—his attitude towards the efficacy of verbal doctrines (*yan* 言) as a fit vehicle for conveying the Way and an adequate guide for proper conduct. On this issue, the position of Confucius is a mean between Mohist confidence on the efficacy of *yan*, on the one hand, and Daoist skepticism upon the same, on the other hand.

## Hypocrisy, The Tribute That Vice Pays to Virtue

As the brief survey of passages in the Introduction demonstrates, cleverness or skill in speech is deprecated in the *Analects*. It turns out that Confucius commends other qualities of a person’s speech. Consider the following passages, all of which are about the character of the speech of the *junzi* 君子, the moral gentleman:

The Master said: “The gentleman does not seek a filled stomach in eating, nor does he seek comfort in his lodgings. He is diligent [or “quick”] in affairs but cautious in speech. He goes to those in possession of the Way so as to have himself put right. Such a person can properly be called ‘eager to learn’” (1.14; cf. 2.18).

Zigong 子貢 asked about the gentleman. The Master said: “He first puts into action what he is going to say, and only then says it” (2.13).

The Master said: “The gentleman desires to be slow in speech but diligent [or “quick”] in action” (4.24; see also 13.27).

The Master said: “The gentleman would consider it shameful if his words exceeded his actions” (14.27; see also 4.22).

There are different things going on in these passages that ought to be distinguished. First, they highlight a recurring theme in the *Analects*—the coordination and contrast between a person’s speech (*yan*) and deeds (*xing* 行). The assumption throughout is that the two would tend to match each other in the case of an exemplary moral agent. This issue is normally discussed in the *Analects* under the rubric of “trustworthiness” (*xin* 信)—the disposition to live up to one’s word (e.g., 13.20).<sup>4</sup> Now, to say that someone is *xin*, strictly speaking, is not to say something about the quality of his speech. In the first instance, *xin* qualifies a person’s behavior—it says that he lives up to his word in his actions. Of course, once a person is known (or believed) to be *xin*, his words would be considered credible and thereby trusted (also *xin*; verbal) by his listener (e.g., 5.10, 12.7, 19.10). But this does not detract from the more basic point that being trustworthy is a function of an agent conducting himself in a certain way—in a way that keeps

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<sup>4</sup>For an analysis of the role that this concept plays in Confucius’ ethics, and how it differs from the notion of trust familiar from contemporary discussions, see Wee 2011.

faith with his words. The attribute *xin* says something about the quality of the agent's words only indirectly.

The important thing to notice in the passages cited previously, however, is that Confucius seems concerned *both* with how a person speaks *and* how he acts. This second thought is highlighted by *Analects* 1.14 and 4.24, which say something about a virtuous person's *manner of speaking*—that it tends to be “cautious” or “slow” (see also Ames 2008: 37–38). In *Analects* 13.27, Confucius goes as far as to say that “being slow in speech is close to *ren*”. The term translated “slow in speech” (*na* 訥) in *Analects* 4.24 and 13.27 is revealing: the early commentator BAO Xian 包咸 (ca. 6 B.C.E. to 65 C.E.) explains it to mean *chi dun* (遲鈍)—roughly, being slow in thought and action, being slow to react, obtuse (Cheng 1996: 279). In other words, the very opposite of the skill or cleverness of speech that Confucius found problematic.

With the above in mind, the characterization of Confucius' very careful and deliberate manner of speech in such passages as *Analects* 10.1, 10.3, 10.10 and 10.26 now seems better motivated. Given the implied ritual context for these passages, however, the most accurate way to think about what's going on in them is to say that Confucius—as he counseled the disciple YAN Hui 顏回 in *Analects* 12.1 to do—does not speak except in accordance with ritual propriety. In *Analects* 14.13, a disciple is asked if it is true that the Master “never spoke, never laughed and never took anything?” The disciple explains that “The Master spoke only when it was the appropriate time to do so, and so people do not tire of his speaking.” Nonetheless, the existence of the exaggeration suggests that Confucius has a reputation for being the very *opposite* of loquacious.

To sum up the discussion so far, a person's verbal behavior seems to be a fit subject of ethical evaluation for Confucius. As pointed out earlier, the focus on a person's speech in the *Analects* (e.g., that it be “careful” or “slow”) can be distinguished from a related concern with his behavior, even such behavior as relating to his words, for example, that it lives up to them. The question now is: Why might Confucius think that being clever or skillful in speech is ethically problematic, or that being careful or slow of speech is a commendable thing?

One recurring thought is that since immodest claims are difficult to live up to (14.20), a person who cares at all about the integrity of his verbal self-representations would take the utmost care in the way he speaks. Consider this passage:

SIMA Niu 司馬牛 asked about *ren*. The Master said: “As for the person of *ren*, he would be slow in speech. “He is slow to speak—is that enough to say that he is *ren*?” The Master said: “When something is difficult to do, how can one not be slow to speak about it?” (12.3).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> According to SIMA Qian's 司馬遷 biography of Confucius' disciples, SIMA Niu is “garrulous and impetuous” (*duo yan er zao* 多言而躁), which suggests that the Master's comment was meant to be especially pertinent to him (Sima Qian 1959: 2214–2215; Ames and Rosemont 1998: 250 n191).

Both the gentleman (14.27) and the men of antiquity (4.22) are said to consider it shameful if their words should exceed their actions. Commenting on *Analects* 4.24 (quoted previously), ZHU Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) cites an eminently sensible observation of XIE Liangzuo 謝良佐 (1050–1103), that it is exactly because talk is cheap that the gentlemen desires his speech to be slow; and it is exactly because actually doing things is often hard, that he desires to be diligent or quick in action (Cheng 1996: 279). In sum, we can think of a first answer to why being careful in one’s speech is a commendable thing—this is really the flip side of a concern with *xin*. If *xin* is about living up to one’s words, being careful in one’s speech is about making sure that one’s words are such that one is capable of living up to them. In both cases, the underlying motive is to be a person who has an integrity or consistency between how he appears to others and how he actually is.

Note, however, that *xin* is at best a “secondary virtue” in the economy of Confucius’ ethical teaching (Slingerland 2003: 6), even if it is one important enough to be listed as an item in a list of headings characterizing Confucius’ teaching (7.25, 17.6). In *Analects* 1.12, the disciple Youzi 有子 is quoted as saying that just as being reverential is close to ritual propriety (*li* 禮), so likewise trustworthiness is close to moral rightness (*yi* 義). That is, consistently living up to one’s word is the sort of thing that, in a wide range of circumstances, counts as a practical way for an agent to be moral. But to say that it is close to *yi* is also to imply that it is not the same as *yi*: sometimes, morality might demand that we go against our own word (see Lau 1973: 331–332; cf. Wee 2011: 521–523). After all, we might have made an unwise commitment. In *Analects* 13.20, Confucius says that a person who: “Insists on keeping his word and seeing his actions through in what he does” can still be properly counted as a proper man of service (*shi* 士), albeit of a lower rank, despite the fact that he shows a stubborn pettiness. A further suggestion is given by *Analects* 5.25, mentioned previously:

The Master said: “Clever speech, an ingratiating appearance, and a profuse solicitousness—ZUO Qiuming 左丘明 considers them shameful, I too consider them shameful. To be friendly with someone while harboring resentment towards him—ZUO Qiuming considers that shameful, I too consider that shameful” (5.25).

Arthur Waley sees a courtly context in the passage, and comments that the mentioned behavior “is the sole way to preferment” in such a setting. And since both ZUO Qiuming and Confucius are “incapable of stooping to such conduct”—they considered it shameful—they are therefore “unfitted for Court Life” (Waley 1938: 114). LI Zehou 李澤厚 locates the passage within the context of political activity more generally but suggests an otherwise similar point.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, we could surmise that the *objects* of the insincere overtures highlighted in the second half of

<sup>6</sup>“This touches upon the incompatibility between ethical behavior and politics. ‘To be friendly with someone while harboring resentment towards him’ is the *modus operandi* of politicians, without which there wouldn’t be any ‘politics’ to speak of. There is a saying during the Cultural Revolution: ‘There is no honesty to speak of when doing politics’” (Li 1999: 139; translated from the Chinese).

the passage are meant to be people from the hands of whom one could receive material benefits—the rich and the powerful—if only they are well disposed to one. In other words, the courtly context—or more generally, any context in which there exists a differential in power such that those without stand to gain preferment from those with by pleasing them—creates a powerful incentive regime for self-interested agents to make the maximal effort to please those in power by adopting an ingratiating posture. In such a context, clever and skillful speech—or more specifically, speech that is skillful in gaining other people’s favorable disposition towards the speaker—is seldom anything but the tools in trade of an insincere flatterer, or so the passage suggests. Putting *Analects* 1.3 and 17.17 within the same courtly context, we can see how skillful speech of this sort—implying the “self-interested use of intelligence and language to disguise real feelings and ulterior motives” (Raphals 1992: 30)—can only be *rarely* the correlate of virtue.

Note that the passages do not require us to see the words spoken as being themselves ethically commendable or reprehensible. Rather, the thought is that the quality of a person’s verbal behavior—whether it is careful and slow, or clever or skillful—reveals something about his *character*. A virtuous person, being deeply aware that talk is cheaper than virtuous conduct, is disposed towards a corresponding care or reservation in his speech. Both an utter carelessness in one’s words and a studied glibness—especially where they implicate one’s self-representation—suggests a person who fails to consider it shameful that his words exceed his.

Interestingly enough, the *Analects* records Confucius’ own education on the relationship between a person’s speech and his character:

Zai Yu 宰予 [Zaiwo 宰我] was in bed in daytime. . . The Master said, “In the beginning I used to take on trust a man’s deeds after having heard his speech. Now having heard a man’s speech I go on to observe his deeds. It was on account of Yu that I have changed in this respect” (5.10).

So Confucius catches Zaiwo—known to be an eloquent speaker (11.3)—sleeping in daytime, when presumably, he should have better things to do. One wonders if by his comment, the Master hints that he has been misled by the latter’s eloquence. In any case he has now discovered that he was naïve to have trusted Zaiwo on account of his words alone. As he says elsewhere, “the *junzi* does not recommend a man on account of his speech, nor does he dismiss his speech on account of who the person is” (15.23). The lesson, however, is not that what a person says bears no relation with his true character. As Confucius will say in *Analects* 20.3: “One cannot know men, unless one knows [their] speech.” Keep in mind that “knowing people” (*zhi ren* 知人) in the *Analects* often involves *appreciating* their *abilities* and *character*, usually within a political context (cf. 1.1, 11.26, 12.22; see also Shun 1997: 27). Confucius’ appreciation of Zaiwo’s character is surely different if he knew only the latter’s speeches, or only his deeds, as compared to knowing both. Zaiwo is revealed for the kind of person he is precisely by the mismatch between his deeds and his speeches. And all this is possible because words, as with a person’s external appearance or observable



behavior, can be used to put up a false front. And when there is something to be gained by putting up such a false front, then one can readily expect the less-than-virtuous to avail themselves of the means.

In *Analects* 11.26 we have an extended example of how the Master exposed two disciples for the sort of characters they are by way of analyzing their speeches. Here, we read about an occasion in which Zilu 子路, Zengxi 曾皙, Ranyou 冉有, and GONGXI Hua 公西華 were attending to Confucius. Reminding them that they were often lamenting how their abilities were not appreciated by the powers that be, Confucius asked them what they would do should they receive such an appreciation and, by implication acquire a measure of political power. This is what happened next:

Zilu promptly replies: “If I were to administer a state of a thousand chariots, placed between powerful neighbors, invaded by armies and troubled by repeated famines, give me three years and I could give the people courage and a sense of direction.”

The Master smiled at him,<sup>7</sup> and said, “Qiu [Ranyou], what about you?”

He replied: “If I were to administer an area sixty or seventy *li* square, or even fifty or sixty *li* square, within three years I could bring the population up to an adequate level. As for ritual and music, I would leave that to abler gentlemen.”

“Chi [GONGXI Hua], what about you?”

He replied: “I do not say that I have the ability, but I am willing to learn. On ceremonial occasions in the ancestral temple, or in diplomatic gatherings, I should like to, dressed in my ceremonial cap and robes, assist as a minor officer in charge of protocol.”

...

The three went out and Zengxi stayed behind. Zengxi said: “What do you think of what the three said?”

“Each man is but stating what he has set his heart upon.”

“Why then did you smile at You [Zilu].”

“It is by ritual that a state is administered, and yet his speech was without modesty. That is why I smiled at him.”

“Was it only Qiu who was not concerned with a state?”

“Where have you ever seen ‘an area sixty or seventy *li* square, or even fifty or sixty *li* square’ that was not a ‘state’?”

“Was it only Chi who was not concerned with a state?”

“What are the ‘ceremonial occasions in the ancestral temple’ and ‘diplomatic gatherings’ if not the affairs of the feudal lords? If Chi plays the minor part, who then can play the major?” (11.26; excerpted).

In the passage, we see something of Confucius’ own interest in and ability to “appreciate words,” *zhi yan* 知言; or rather, his ability to appreciate the motives of his disciples—what they have truly set their heart upon—through an appreciation of their speeches (see 20.3). In fact, we probably should not assume that Confucius’ initial question was completely innocent: WANG Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692), commenting on

<sup>7</sup> The character *shen* 哂 (here translated “smile”) seems to take a sense that ranges all the way from “smile” (*wei xiao* 微笑; Yang 1984: 120 and He Yan in Cheng 1996: 800) to something more audible, though probably still short of a guffaw (e.g., MA Rong 馬融 in Yang 1984: 120). Modern translations, both English and Chinese, tend to go with “smile,” though I suspect that something a little more conspicuous might be intended in the passage. In any case, it was a reaction sufficiently noticeable to arouse Zengxi’s curiosity and moderate Ranyou and GONGXI Hua’s replies.

the passage, says that the Master *guided* (*you* 誘; or is it “enticed”?) them by the formulation of his initial question that they should speak freely (WANG 1990: 673).

Both Ranyou and GONGXI Hua interpret Confucius’ enigmatic response to Zilu’s speech as a rebuke. As Confucius himself explains to Zengxi, this interpretation is not without grounds. Zilu, in his frank expression of grand ambition (“If I were to administer a state of a thousand chariots”), reveals himself to be immodest in the very character of his speech. Apart from the fact that Zilu’s implied political aspirations fail to make the all-important connection to ritual, the very immodesty of his speech smacks of ritual impropriety (4.13).<sup>8</sup> Having noticed Confucius’ implicit criticism of Zilu, Ranyou and GONGXI Hua were more cautious in their responses. Each attempts to appear even more detached from any hint of unseemly craving for public honors, and goes to some lengths to conceal his own ambitions in seemingly prosaic talk of small aims. But as Confucius’ subsequent analysis reveals, their ambitions are little different in kind from that of Zilu.

Ranyou speaks of administering “an area sixty or seventy *li* square, or even fifty or sixty *li* square.” Words such as “state” or “government” are carefully avoided, closing with a modest deferral to “better gentlemen” to attend to ritual and music. But as Confucius points out subsequently to Zengxi, even an area this small is still a “state.” In fact, the *Mengzi*, which belongs to a later era when the scale of things was far larger, speaks of a territory of “almost fifty *li* square” as being sufficient for Kingly government (*Mengzi* 3A1; cf. 1A5, 1B11 and 2A3 in Lau 1984). In other words, Ranyou, for all his effort at modesty, does not even choose a territory small enough to truly conceal his ambitions. In any case, if the reference to “better gentlemen” might be construed as an awareness of his own limitations, it barely conceals the implication that in administering the territory and “bringing the population up to an adequate level,” he will also be doing so without ritual or music.

The problem with Zilu is not that his speech does not match how he really is, or for that matter, what he is capable of. On the latter point, note that in *Analects* 5.8, Confucius estimates that both Zilu and Ranyou are quite capable of doing the sort of things they say they aspire to achieve in 11.26, even though the evaluation is itself shot through with some ambivalence. Zilu’s issue is that his frank expression of grand ambition reveals him for the immodest person that he is: someone who either fails to understand or is simply unwilling to give the deference that goes with ritual the central role it is supposed to play in governing a state. But this immodesty goes hand in hand with a transparency and lack of dissimulation that probably explains why Confucius considers Zilu—and not Ranyou or GONGXI Hua—close to virtue (11.15; Olberding 2011: 155–161). Zilu’s case is thus an illustration of why a mere integrity or consistency between a person’s words and his true character or actual conduct, is both related to but not equivalent with virtue.

The problem with Ranyou, in contrast, lies exactly in the mismatch between his self-representation as opposed to what he has set his true heart upon. His speech is

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<sup>8</sup> As BAO Xian says, “It is by ritual that a state is administered, and ritual prizes modesty. The speech of Zilu was immodest, hence [Confucius] smiled at him” (Cheng 1996: 814).

calculated to be modest but by that very token hides beneath its surface as great an immodesty as that of Zilu. A similar analysis can be made for GONGXI Hua: Just as Ranyou, he chose to phrase his ambition modestly—he seeks merely to be a minor officer in charge of protocol in the ancestral temple and diplomatic gatherings. But as the Master points out, that so-called “minor part” is in fact a critical aspect of the affairs of the feudal lords. In other words, what GONGXI Hua seeks is exactly to be close to the center of power. Once again, the Master’s rhetorical question implies a “no” to Zengxi’s inquiry as to whether it was only the third disciple who was truly “not concerned with a state”.

The examples of Ranyou and GONGXI Hua suggest a further way to flesh out how a person’s words may “exceed” or fail to match his conduct. In sum, their problem is that of *hypocrisy*. But as Rochefoucauld reminds us, hypocrisy is the tribute vice pays to virtue. Ruth Grant aptly explains the matter: “Hypocrisy only occurs where people try to appear better than they are. The pretense is only necessary where people need to be thought of as good and to think of themselves as good. Where there is. . . hypocrisy, there is a public moral standard and a significant moral impulse” (Grant 1997: 53; see also Loy 2011: 222–227). In other words, hypocrisy makes sense only given the background of an acknowledgement that there is a genuine distinction between virtue and vice, and secondly, when it pays the agent to have at least a reputation for virtue. So Ranyou chose words calculated for the appearance of modesty, having witnessed Confucius’ implied rebuke of Zilu’s speech. But in order for there to be a point to what he does, there must be an acknowledged difference between being modest as opposed to being immodest. After all, there wouldn’t be a point to describing something that one is doing as an *x* rather than a *y* unless one would rather that people believe one is doing one as opposed to the other. Ranyou’s preference further presupposes that blame and sanction are being attached to a reputation for one and praise and reward to the reputation for the other. Or more generally speaking, that it is less costly or demanding to attempt to appear to be virtuous without actually being so—remember that talking is often cheaper than actually doing—than to actually be virtuous.

Now, as argued above, hypocrisy pays precisely when there is a public moral standard and significant moral impulse. But there is more to this: The more demanding the prevailing moral standards are, the more personally costly it will be for individual agents to actually meet the standards, and thus the greater the recognition for those who meet them. What this means is that, everything else being equal, the payoff for having the reputation for meeting those stands without having actually met them becomes that much greater than that for having the *reputation* by meeting them. In short: the higher the prevailing standards, the greater the incentive for hypocrisy. The ever-present possibility of, and incentive towards hypocrisy is thus the natural corollary of there being a public moral standard and significant moral impulse.<sup>9</sup> Conversely (or one might say, perversely), making the prevailing moral standards less demanding makes hypocrisy a less rewarding strategy, thus incentivizing honesty.

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<sup>9</sup> See Grant 1997: 34–42, the section titled “The Possibility of Honest Politics” for an insightful discussion.

## Correcting Names

Ranyou and GONGXI Hua are hardly the only people in the *Analects* faulted by the Master for the things they say. In the passage below, Confucius indicts his whole generation:

Ziyou 子游 asked concerning filial piety (*xiao* 孝). The Master said: “Nowadays, by a ‘filial person’, it is meant that he is able to feed his parents. Even dogs and horses are provided with food; without reverence, by what shall we tell them apart?” (2.7).

The point is that what passes under the name of “a filial person”—nowadays as opposed to in the time of Confucius’ idealized antiquity—would have been no different from the kind of affection shown to animals. Now, one might be tempted to conclude that the Master’s real concern is not with how the term *xiao* is used by people, but that people actually take on attitudes and conduct themselves in ways appropriate to filial piety. That he is so concerned is taken for granted; but there seems to be more going on in *Analects* 2.7. In particular, there is a distinctively *linguistic* dimension to the Master’s concern. In this section, I want to explore in a more speculative fashion what it would mean to take seriously the idea that the Master has such an additional concern, especially as it relates to the so called doctrine of “correcting names” reported in *Analects* 13.3.

To see what has been left out if *Analects* 2.7 is taken as just another passage in which Confucius expresses his dissatisfaction with the present and says something about what filial piety really requires, contrast it with these passages in the close vicinity:

MENG Yizi 孟懿子 asked about filial piety. The Master said: “Never disobey.” FAN Chi 樊遲 was driving. The Master told him about the exchange, saying: “MENG Yizi asked me about filial piety. I answered, ‘Never disobey.’” FAN Chi asked: “What does that mean?” The Master said: “When your parents are alive, serve them in accordance with the rites; when they die, bury them in accordance with the rites and sacrifice to them in accordance with the rites” (2.5).

MENG Wubo 孟武伯 asked about filial piety. The Master said: “Give your father and mother no cause for worry other than illness” (2.6).

Zixia 子夏 asked about filial piety. The Master said: “Showing the right countenance on one’s face is the difficult thing. When there is work to be done the younger ones take on the burden, when wine and food are served the elder ones are given precedence—can such be considered filial?” (2.8).

Now, the three cited passages above give us a glimpse of what Confucius thought filial piety demands by way of conduct and comportment. Presumably they can each contribute something to a properly expanded and worked out definition of *xiao*, which will give us the conditions for the proper application of that term—conditions under which such and such “can be called filial” (*ke wei xiao* 可謂孝; cf. 4.20). The same holds for Confucius’ statements regarding other virtue terms in the *Analects*. By themselves, the above considerations do not require us to think of the Master as being concerned about how the virtue terms or virtue related terms are used beyond the basic aim of having people just get it right about what counts as proper filial conduct. That is, at one level, his focus would still be on

proper conduct and comportment. This would still be the case even when we discover passages in which he explicitly talks about the conditions under which it is proper to call someone “filial” (1.11, 1.14, 4.20), “cultured” (5.15, 14.18), or “wise” and “benevolent” (6.22, 6.30), or when he responds to questions from disciples about the conditions under which someone can properly be called an “officer” (*shi* 士) or be said to have “succeeded” (12.20, 13.20, 13.28).

Yet Confucius does choose to phrase his indictment in *Analects* 2.7 at least partly as a criticism of how people “nowadays” have been promiscuous in the way they use the term *xiao*. What they *call* “filial” does not measure up to what filial piety demands. Confucius seems at least as dissatisfied with the *mis-use* of the term *xiao*, as he is unhappy with the sub-filial behavior of people in his time. It’s not just that people have failed to live up to the ancient ideal, but that even as they have so failed, they have the gall to appropriate the virtue term to describe their own sub-filial behavior. Providing one’s parents with food is, presumably, what a filial agent does. But if that’s all that a person does, Confucius suggests, he hardly merits being called “filial”. This is a feature of Confucius’ concern with filial piety that is not exposed in *Analects* 2.5, 2.6 and 2.8.

At one level, the verbal misbehavior of people “nowadays” is continuous with, e.g., that of Zaiwo in *Analects* 5.10 or Ranyou in *Analects* 11.26. It is yet another way by which people’s words could “exceed” or fail to match their conduct, just on a more widespread scale. But at another level, 2.7—assuming that my reading is accepted—points to a new dimension to Confucius’ concern with people’s speech. To see this more clearly, imagine a person—let’s call him ‘Bob’. He lived in Confucius’ idealized antiquity. Ancient Bob attempted to pass off substandard behavior on his part—he fed his parents but not much else—as “filial piety.” To the extent that his behavior takes the form of an attempt to represent himself as being better, more virtuous, than he really is, it is a form of the hypocrisy discussed in the previous section. But as pointed out earlier, there would have been little point to this behavior unless the people of ancient Bob’s generation generally considered being filial praiseworthy and being unfilial blameworthy, where by “filial piety,” they meant a more demanding or costly pattern of conduct than what ancient Bob engaged in.

But now imagine Bob transported to the modernity of Confucius’ own time when by “filial piety,” all people mean is providing food for their parents. Modern Bob, ironically, is no longer hypocritical when calling his own behavior “filial.” In fact, his reputation for being “filial” could just as well be entirely honest and sincere—by the standards of what counts as “filial piety nowadays.” So ironically, a world populated by people who each apply the term “filial” in the same way as ancient Bob did is also one in which no one is fooled. The only thing to lose out is the old fashioned virtue of filial piety; and the only ones to take offence, old timers such as Confucius who recalls a more demanding usage. The problem with *ancient* Bob in his time is that of an agent who used words in a way calculated to make him appear better than how he is. His problem is comparable to that of Ranyou in 11.26 or Zaiwo in 5.10. The problem with *modern* Bob—or modern Bob’s generation—is that ethically significant terms in the community’s language have lost their ancient

and proper meanings. The problem is now with the ethical terminology of Bob's generation.<sup>10</sup>

But it would be more than that. Confucius' point in highlighting the strictly linguistic part of modern decadence is, presumably, to suggest that there is a connection between it and the more behavioral and attitudinal part of the decadence. Whatever is the direction of causation, the two go together. But if this is so, then the passages mentioned earlier in which Confucius talks explicitly about the conditions under which it is proper to apply this or that virtue-related term take on an added significance. They can be seen as part of Confucius' attempt to stem the tide of the linguistic part of modern decadence, or at least to inoculate his disciples and potential members of the elite against it. The connecting thought is that, for Confucius, reconstituting the virtue of, e.g., *xiao* in face of modern decadence cannot be separate from a rehabilitation of correct speech about *xiao*.

All this brings us to *Analects* 13.3 and its doctrine of "correcting names." In the passage, Confucius is asked by his disciple Zilu regarding what he would put first, should a certain prince of Wey 衛 employ him in government. He says it would be to "correct names" (*zhengming* 正名). In response to Zilu's expression of astonishment, he explains:

The Master said, "You! How boorish! The gentleman, when faced with something he does not know, is wont to keep his peace. When names are not correct then speech will not accord; when speech does not accord then affairs will not be effected; when affairs are not effected then ritual and music will not flourish; when ritual and music do not flourish then punishment will not hit the mark; when punishment does not hit the mark then the people will not know where to place hand or foot. Hence what the gentleman names surely can be put into speech, what he puts into speech surely can be done. The gentleman with regard to his speech, is careless about nothing" (13.3, excerpted).

Whatever else Confucius might mean by his words to Zilu, it does seem that *zhengming*—as it is referred to in the passage—is meant to be part of proper government. More generally, whether or not he has a well-defined political program or government policy in mind, the Master seems to mean something that is relevant to political rule and social order by the phrase *zhengming*. After all, the situation of names not being correct is presented as either correlating with or even causing ritual

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<sup>10</sup> A very graphic account of how ethical language can become systematically corrupted is found in Thucydides, in comparison to which *Analects* 2.7 and 13.3 are extremely tame. Describing the effects of the civil wars that swept Hellas during the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides says: "And in self-justification men inverted the usual verbal evaluations of actions. Irrational recklessness was now considered courageous commitment, hesitation while looking to the future was high-styled cowardice, moderation was a cover for lack of manhood, and circumspection meant inaction, while senseless anger now helped to define a true man, and deliberation for security was a specious excuse for dereliction. The man of violent temper was always credible, anyone opposing him was suspect. The intriguer who succeeded was intelligent, anyone who avoided both alternatives was undermining his party and letting the opposition terrorize him. Quite simply, one was praised for outracing everyone else to commit a crime—and for encouraging a crime by someone who had never before considered one" (Lattimore 1998: 169).

disorder, maladministration of criminal punishment, and people not knowing their proper place in the social order.

Now, assuming that Confucius and Zilu are portrayed as genuinely conversing with each other in the *Analects* 13.3, we should expect what each character says to be relevant as responses to the other. This implies that unless the Master is simply going off on a tangent in the final part of his response, we should also expect that whatever he has in mind in proposing to *zhengming* has something to do with the speeches (*yan*), especially of gentlemen. It is not entirely clear from the passage, however, whether it is the content of those speeches, or the manner of the gentlemen's speaking—including keeping one's peace instead of speaking at appropriate junctures—that is the issue. Correspondingly, it is not clear if "speech does not accord" (probably with ritual; 12.1) implies something about the content of the speech or the manner of speaking. But given the explicit talk about how "names" (*ming* 名) can be correct or incorrect, it would seem that the former, and not just the latter, is involved. In sum, the Confucius of *Analects* 13.3 draws a connection between speaking and naming, on the one hand, and virtue and politics, on the other.

These ideas in the passage—that the correct use of names and proper speech more generally have a direct connection with individual virtue and social and political order, and that it is part of the role of proper government to correct the use of names—lie at the heart of the so-called Ruist doctrine of *zhengming*. While interpretations about what it exactly involves differ—and the formulation I have adopted above is but one major one<sup>11</sup>—many scholars agree in seeing it as one of the key doctrines of Classical Ruist thought (see e.g., Fung 1952: 59–62; Hu 1963: 22; Schwartz 1985: 91–94; Graham 1989: 23–25; Hansen 1992: 66; and Makeham 1994: 35–50). Other students of the *Analects*, in contrast, doubt the very historical authenticity of *Analects* 13.3 itself, or consider the ideas found in it anomalous with respect to the text as a whole (Waley 1938: 21–22, 171–172; Creel 1951: 321–322; Brooks and Brooks 1997: 190; Van Norden 2007: 86–90).

Here, it is important to distinguish the following three questions: (1) Is *Analects* 13.3 historically inauthentic (i.e., did the purported conversation take place)? (2) Is the passage a later interpolation into the text, or belong to a later stratum of the text? And: (3) Are the ideas in the passage anomalous within the context of the *Analects* as a whole? I will not speak to the first two questions, but will propose a case for answering (3) in the negative. In fact, a very minimum case has already been suggested: If my proposed interpretation of *Analects* 2.7 above is accepted, then ideas relating to those found in *Analects* 13.3 are not only consistent with but are at least partially implied by ideas from other parts of the text. But can a stronger case not be made?

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<sup>11</sup> Liu 1978 contains a useful collation of traditional opinions on Confucius' *zhengming*. See Loy 2008 for an overview and for a defense of the interpretation assumed here as an interpretation of *Analects* 13.3.

There is a passage traditionally associated with the so-called doctrine of *zhengming* that might be helpful here. This is *Analects* 13.14, the one passage in the text in which Confucius literally *corrects* how a person (none other than Ranyou) used a term.<sup>12</sup>

Ranzi [Ranyou] returned from court. The Master said, “Why so late?” He replied, “There were *affairs of government*.” The Master said, “They could only be (private) *business*. If there should be *affairs of government*, even though I am not used (i.e., in office), I would get to hear of them” (13.14; emphasis added).

According to the commentarial tradition, Ranyou was then working for the Ji 季 family. There is good reason to believe that his so-called “affairs of government” were actually the partisan machinations of the Ji faction (cf. 3.1, 11.17 and 16.1) in their bid to usurp power in the state of Lu, hence Confucius’ chiding remark (see Cheng 1996: 913–916 and Slingerland 2003: 145). One thing to sort out first is whether Ranyou’s problem here is more like that of ancient or modern Bob. This will depend on how sincere he was in calling his business “affairs of government”.

The ancient Bob or hypocrisy interpretation requires that we attribute a degree of insincerity to Ranyou (and perhaps his pay masters as well). In calling them “affairs of government”, Ranyou (and his Ji employers) attempts to represent his activities to the Master as better than they actually are so as to avoid the latter’s untoward attention—and this wouldn’t make sense unless somewhere in his heart, he is aware that they really are just the partisan machinations of the Ji faction. On this reading, the situation in 13.14 becomes analogous to that in *Analects* 5.10 and 11.26. But if this is so, then, technically, what we have is the earlier discussed concern (section “[Hypocrisy, the tribute that vice pays to virtue](#)”), on the part of Confucius, with how the quality of a man’s speech can reveal something about his character. The Master exposes Ranyou for the hypocrite that he is by his rebuke in the hope, presumably, of showing him the errors of his ways. This, however, does not amount to a specific concern over the terms “affairs of government” and “(private) business” and thus would not corroborate the so-called doctrine of *zhengming*.

The modern Bob interpretation requires us to see Ranyou—and by implication, the larger Ji party—as being entirely sincere in calling their activities “affairs of government” rather than mere “(private) business”.<sup>13</sup> In fact, this seems much more plausible since Ranyou appears to be a true believer in the Ji clan’s cause (see 3.1–3.2, 3.6, 16.1), even one who was practically disowned by Confucius for his part in advancing their interests (11.17). On this interpretation, the possibility opens

<sup>12</sup> The passage has long been loosely associated with *zhengming* or more precisely *zheng ming fen* 正名分 in the commentarial tradition (see Cheng 1996: 913–916). Two other passages often associated with *zhengming* in the tradition are 6.25 and 12.11, neither of which is particularly promising. The first (“A *gu* that is not a *gu*! A *gu* indeed! A *gu* indeed!”) is simply too obscure. The second is not specifically about either an individual’s use of words, or the meanings of particular terms; see also Van Norden 2007: 91–95.

<sup>13</sup> WANG Fuzhi comments that as “the government of Lu has been long in the hands of the Ji clan, they began to consider the affairs of the state as the business of their own [house], eventually boasting that ‘the designs of our family *are* the affairs of state’.” (Wang Fuzhi 1990: 744)



up for us to see Confucius and Ranyou as working from differing assumptions about the conditions under which it would be proper to call something “affairs of government” rather than “(private) business”. The thought suggested by the conjunction of 13.3 and 13.14 is that, for Confucius, the government of Lu cannot return to order until and unless the use of such terms as “affairs of government” and “(private) business” among the relevant elite is rectified.

To return to the earlier question: Are the ideas in *Analects* 13.3 anomalous within the context of the *Analects* as a whole? Again, if my proposed reading of *Analects* 2.7 and my second (“modern Bob”) interpretation of 13.14 are accepted, it seems that ideas analogous to those found in 13.3 are implied by other parts of the text, though admittedly in a less explicit and more inchoate form. Note that even if such a conclusion is granted, the skeptics’ text critical judgments regarding the historical inauthenticity or its status as a later interpolation into the text have not been proven wrong. Still, granting the point about the lateness of *Analects* 13.3, it might suggest the following diachronic story—*precursors* to the ideas that are found in *Analects* 13.3 can be detected in other parts of the *Analects*. We can now see how it made sense for a later follower of the Ruist way to insert what came to be known as “*Analects* 13.3” into the text, or for that matter, for a Ruist thinker such as Xunzi 荀子 to write an essay “On Correct Naming” (*zhengming*; see Knoblock 1994: 113–138) that is explicitly concerned about language issues—because the germ of such a concern is already present in an early version of Ruist thought.

So much, however, hangs on my proposed reading of *Analects* 2.7 and 13.14, which undoubtedly is a thin reed upon which to support so much.<sup>14</sup> But even setting aside 2.7 and 13.14, there will still remain a partial continuity between being concerned about how people nowadays could be systematically misapplying certain virtue terms, on the one hand, and how individuals could speak in ways calculated to make them appear better than how they are—in other words, the partial continuity between the problem presented by modern Bob and his generation, on the one hand, and ancient Bob, the Ranyou of *Analects* 11.26 and the Zaiwo of *Analects* 5.10, on the other hand. There is thus a second even more minimal diachronic story to be told regarding how an earlier concern with how individuals can misuse words in particular contexts so as to make themselves appear better than they really are could have evolved into a more general concern with use of language, especially given the rise over time of opposing schools ready to appropriate key terms in the discourse for their own agendas.

At the very least, surely the sentiments asserted in the concluding line of *Analects* 13.3—“The gentleman with regard to his speech, is careless about nothing”—is amply corroborated in the *Analects* passages discussed earlier in section “[Hypocrisy, the tribute that vice pays to virtue](#)”. Leaving *Analects* 2.7, 13.3 and 13.14 aside, there will still remain the connections between how a man speaks and his moral character, so much so that knowledge of the former is an indispensable constituent of knowledge regarding the latter. Gentlemen, on

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<sup>14</sup> Conceivably, 17.11 might be given a reading close to that for 2.7.

Confucius' teaching, will still endeavor not to speak unless in accordance with ritual propriety (12.1), and consider it shameful should their verbal representations exceed their actual conduct (14.27). If this is so, then it will still follow that those who aspire to be gentlemen will have to cultivate the proper habits of speech and their instructors will, presumably, be involved in the task of correcting them when they fall short of the gentlemanly ideal—perhaps even in such situations as presented in 13.14. This thought, in conjunction with the typically Confucian premise that socio-political and ritual order comes about through the cultivation of gentlemen who will rule by means of ritual and the influence of virtue (2.3, 12.19), will still give Confucius a reason to think that getting the social and political elite to speak and name things in a proper way could, in specific contexts, be an urgent and necessary matter. There thus remains a case to be made for a set of concerns that, while not strictly equivalent to the *zhengming* doctrine, is strongly akin to it. These concerns will not support *zhengming* as a political program or policy in the usual sense, but as an aspect of elite ethical instruction. The politics come into the picture via the Confucian assumption that the way to bring about the actualization of the good society proceeds by way of the training of moral gentlemen.

Does the above reasoning show that “correcting names” is a *central* teaching of the *Analects*? Van Norden points out that even in the best case scenario the number of passages involved is very small (Van Norden 2007: 96), which does suggest that it is probably not as central a concern as what the traditional presentations of the *zhengming* doctrine might lead one to assume. But hopefully, I have said enough to show that Confucius of the *Analects* does teach that there is a vital connection between moral virtue and the use of language, even if this is but one small aspect of his overall teaching about virtue; and that this teaching forms part of the background in which the much more elaborate reflections of later thinkers can come into their own.

## Language and Ethical Guidance

This study has so far highlighted the connections Confucius of the *Analects* draws between moral virtue and the use of language especially as it pertains to agents' character. Something else that is suggested by the discussion of *zhengming* is the role of the moral *instructor*. Does the *Analects* have anything to say about the speeches—*qua* speeches—of Confucius as they pertain to his role as a teacher? Or more generally, about words—those of the teacher or otherwise—as a guide to proper conduct? To begin with, we do have these two curious passages about what Confucius the teacher is wont *not* to speak of:

Zigong said: “As for the Master’s cultural accomplishments—one can get to learn about it; but as for the Master speaking about human nature in connection with the way of Heaven—one cannot get to learn about it” (5.13).

The Master seldom speaks about profit in connection with Destiny or benevolence (9.1).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The translation of *yu* 與 in both passages as meaning something more than mere conjunction is based on the arguments of Boltz 1983.

Unfortunately, the two comments are simply too unexplained for them to be useful. In any case, it's probably more natural to think of them as saying something about the sorts of *topics* that Confucius the teacher avoided, rather than something about his speeches as an instructor per se.

A more promising avenue of inquiry opens up when we turn to a number of passages which speak of *yan* (nominal)—meaning verbal formulations meant for guiding action, rather than the more generic “words” and “speeches” normally contrasted with “deeds” or “conduct” that is assumed in the previous discussions (sections “[Hypocrisy, the tribute that vice pays to virtue](#)” and “[Correcting names](#)”). As David Nivison argues, the term means “a verbal package (often, but not necessarily, a short maxim or epigram) presenting a doctrine” in such texts as the *Mengzi* and *Mozi* 墨子 (Nivison 1996: 127–128; see also Tang 1986: 249–252; Cen 1978: 39–41; Shun 1997: 32, 116.). And as we shall see below, such a usage can also be found in several passages of the *Analects*. The ideas implied by them about language and virtue, however, come into sharper relief especially when the *Analects* is set against intellectual developments that came with Mozi 墨子 and his followers, and the so-called Daoist thinkers.

One curious thing about Mohist thought is the heavy emphasis put upon *yan*. For them, *dao* 道—the proper way to lead life and organize the community—can be explicitly formulated as *yan*. And, they further insist, such *yan* would answer to publically accessible objective standards rather than depend upon the private insights of moral exemplars. In one striking passage, Mozi is made to assert that his *yan* is “sufficient for use [i.e., for guiding action]” (*Mozi* 47.19; Johnston 2010: 673)—the implication probably being that it can do so “without the intermediation of sage teachers in possession of personal wisdom that resists transparent verbal formulation” (Loy 2011: 653). The so-called Daoist thinkers such as Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi 莊子, in contrast, occupy the other extreme in their skepticism regarding the ethical relevance of *yan*. The former, for instance, speaks of the sage practicing “a teaching that uses no *yan* [i.e., a wordless teaching]” (*Daodejing* 2, 43 in Lau 1989).

As I mentioned earlier, the use of the term *yan* to refer to something close to “doctrine” or “maxim” can already be found in several passages of the *Analects*. Consider the two passages below (I leave the term *yan* un-translated):

Duke Ding 定公 asked: “Is there such a thing as a single *yan* by means of which a state will prosper?” Confucius replied: “A *yan* itself cannot quite do that. There is a *yan* amongst men: ‘Ruling is difficult, and being a ministering subject is not easy (either).’ If (a ruler) understands how ruling is difficult, then is this not close to the case of a *yan* by means of which a state will prosper?” “Is there such a thing as a single *yan* by means of which a state will come to ruin?” Confucius replied: “‘A *yan* itself cannot quite do that. There is a *yan* amongst men: ‘I do not enjoy ruling at all, except for the fact that no one opposes my *yan*.’ If his *yan* is good and no one opposes it, is that not good? But if his *yan* is not good and no one opposes it, then is this not close to the case of a *yan* by means of which a state will come to ruin?’” (13.15).

Zigong asked: “Is there a single *yan* by which one may conduct himself throughout his life?” The Master said: “It is *shu* 恕: what you do not desire, do not impose upon others” (15.24).

(Other passages in which the term *yan* probably refers to something in the direction of “doctrine” or “maxim” include 9.24, 13.22, 14.4, 15.8, 16.8 and 17.8.) The question now is this: What is Confucius’ attitude regarding the relationship between such *yan* and virtuous conduct? What Confucius says in *Analects* 13.15 suggests that he would be skeptical regarding the possibility of a *yan* that is simply efficacious for guiding action, at least in relation to the proper governance of a state. That is, for Confucius, the closest one can get are useful rules of thumb.

The *yan* laid down in *Analects* 15.24 might appear closer to Mohist ambitions but a moderate skepticism may again be appropriate upon closer inspection. To see that, recall an important feature of Confucius’ way of teaching his disciples reported in *Analects* 11.22. The passage has Zilu and Ranyou asking Confucius an identical question: “Upon learning something, should one immediately put it into practice?” In replying to Zilu, Confucius asked rhetorically how one could do such a thing when one’s father and elder brothers are still alive. The implication is that Zilu ought to defer to the judgments of his elders rather than take the initiative himself (Slingerland 2003: 119). Ranyou, in contrast, was told to take the initiative and put into practice what he has learned. GONGXI Hua, probably having witnessed both exchanges, professed to be confused by the two apparently contradictory practical injunctions and asked the Master to explain. In response, Confucius says that because Ranyou has the tendency to hold himself back (cf. 6.12–6.13), he tried to urge him on. But since impetuous Zilu “has the energy of two men” (cf. 5.7), the Master thought it better to try to hold him back.

If taken as impersonal injunctions meant to be acted upon by anyone, what Confucius said to the two disciples contradict each other. That is, it would be impossible for the same agent to act upon both at the same time and in the same respect. (Presumably GONGXI Hua was sufficiently savvy in his logic to notice this, hence his perplexity.) Confucius’ response implies that despite the seemingly impersonal way those injunctions are phrased, he meant what he said to be addressed to each disciple given each person’s specific condition. Now, assuming that 11.22 reports a pervasive (or at least ever-possible) feature of Confucius’ verbal instructions to his disciples, we should be wary of hastily identifying *Analects* 15.24 as reporting a *yan* in the Mohist mold.<sup>16</sup> It is, after all, addressed to Zigong, a disciple singled out for his advanced understanding (see, e.g., 1.15, 6.8). In addition, it is striking that the formulation in 15.24 leaves out the *zhong* 忠 (roughly, “conscientiousness”, “devotion”) mentioned in 4.15 by Zengzi 曾子 as part of the one thread tying together all of Confucius’ teaching. One wonders if Confucius told Zengzi and Zigong different things, given their differing strengths and weaknesses (cf. 5.12).

Be that as it may, this much seems evidenced by the *Analects*. As far as Confucius’ actual pedagogical practices go, he seems to grant that specific verbal instructions—whether practical injunctions as in 11.22, maxim-like formulations as

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed analysis of *Analects* 11.22 and its implications for understanding Confucius’ manner of using language in instructing his disciples, see Xiao 2007.

in 15.24, rebukes as in 13.14, character reviews as in 5.9, and so on—could well be efficacious for guiding specific disciples in specific circumstances. In short, the efficacy of the verbal instruction—and thus *yan* more generally—in the ethical education of the disciples is, to a degree, taken for granted by Confucius throughout the *Analects*. In some cases, perhaps even many disciples could profit from a particular well-phrased *yan*. To give one example, Confucius' reflection that both learning from others without thinking on one's own, and thinking on one's own without learning from others lead to problems for the student (2.15) is presented without a specific audience or context, suggesting that it might well be one of those rules of thumb that is close to a single *yan* by means of which any student can come to advance in his studies. All this, however, is short of the Mohist ambition to lay down an impersonal *yan*, established by means of public and objective standards accessible to all and thus abstracting from the specific conditions of agents, and capable of properly guiding action without the intermediation of a teacher.

If Confucius would not have agreed with the Mohists, what would he have thought of the sort of skepticism regarding the efficacy of *yan* to guide action that can be found in the pages of the *Daodejing* 道德經 or *Zhuangzi* 莊子?<sup>17</sup> There is a passage that comes surprisingly close to the so-called Daoist position:

The Master said: "Would that I did not have to speak (*yan*)!" Zigong said: "If the Master does not speak, what then will the little ones transmit?" The Master said: "What does Heaven say? Yet the four seasons still go round and there are the hundred things still grow. What does Heaven ever say?" (17.19).

Considering that the passage comes just after *Analects* 17.17 and 17.18, it is entirely possible that Confucius was merely reinforcing his earlier condemnation of "clever speech" and "smooth tongues." But the passage does contain the additional thought of a Heaven that governs the natural world in an effortless (Slingerland 2003: 208) and *silent* manner—as though the condition of having to guide action by means of words is at most second best. It is as if Confucius is lamenting that it has befallen his generation to make do with the need for speech to guide action, and with the necessity to guard against the ever-present danger posed by clever, hypocritical speech by individual agents and more systemic forms of moral-linguistic decadence by entire generations. The reign of the *sages*, in contrast, is portrayed with similarly evocative image of efficacious non-action in 2.1 and 15.5.

But beyond *Analects* 17.19—which, admittedly, is found in a stratum of the *Analects* (Books 16–20) taken to be late by modern critics (Brooks and Brooks 1997)—there is not a lot to go by. The impression given by Confucius in the *Analects* is that he is skeptical of the feasibility or desirability of the Mohist agenda regarding *yan*, but this does not seem to be a generalized and all pervasive skepticism regarding the use of language in moral instruction. Least of all is it an argued skepticism the way the *Zhuangzi*'s "On Making Things Equal" can be so taken. Rather, what we see is that ethical cultivation in the *Analects*' scheme of

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of *Zhuangzi*'s skepticism regarding language and its polemical background in Mohism, see Eno 1996; Berkson 1996; and Schwitzgebel 1996.

things places such a high premium upon attention to the specificity of the individual agent and his context that doctrines that are meant to be addressed to an indiscriminate audience without the intermediation of a skillful teacher cannot but be sidelined. In the world of the *Analects*, Confucius' *yan* are efficacious for guiding the behavior of his disciples at least partly because they are the *yan* of a masterful teacher speaking to specific individuals. This is a teacher able to discern the motives and character of his disciples, at times by means of analyzing their speeches (recall 11.26 and 13.14), so as to "guide them step by step" (9.11). It is not an accident that the unique personality of Confucius intrudes upon every page of the *Analects*, and that there isn't a Confucian equivalent of the Mohist "Core Chapters" in which doctrine is methodically laid out and expounded. In short, perhaps the most that can be said is that Confucius of the *Analects* takes a position in a happy and commonsensical mean between the Mohists, on the one hand, and Laozi and Zhuangzi, on the other hand.

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## Chapter 9

# Uprightness, Indirection, Transparency

Lisa Raphals

Recent scholarship and the evidence of excavated texts calling into question the boundaries of traditional “schools” prompts us to reconsider the *Analects*.<sup>1</sup> A central issue in early Confucian thought is the problem of “straightness,” specifically issues of uprightiness, indirection and transparency in the *Analects*. A fundamental understanding of the “tradition” is the view that Confucius valued *zheng* 正 and completely rejected indirection in knowledge, language and ethics.

Many scholars (including the present author) have taken the *Analects* to recommend “uprightness” in this orthodox sense of moral correctness. I propose to examine this claim critically. Two stereotypes immediately affect our perception of “uprightness.” One is the expectation that Confucius was a “Confucian” in the specific sense that his views might be expected to align with those of Mengzi 孟子 or Xunzi 荀子. This we can dismiss *prima facie*. The other is the perception that Confucius valued *zheng*, understood as moral uprightiness or even orthodoxy, and rejected all indirection in knowledge, language and ethics. This claim warrants further examination.

The received view of the *Analects* draws on many references to two key terms – *zhen* 真 (“straightness”) and *zheng* 正 (“upright,” “to rectify”) – and takes them as broadly synonymous. I reconsider the use and meaning of these two terms in the *Analects*, and explore a reading that emphasizes the differences in their meaning, and a revised interpretation of *zheng*. I argue that *zheng*, understood as correct alignment, can refer to moral alignment (“uprightness”), but can also refer to

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<sup>1</sup>For important scholarship, see Slingerland 2000 and Csikszentmihalyi 2005. All translations from the Chinese in this chapter are the author’s own unless otherwise indicated. Pinyin transliteration for Chinese characters is used throughout, except in the cases of the names of authors who use other transliterations.

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“alignment” in broader physical, epistemological, and even cosmological senses. This understanding of *zheng* is linked semantically with *wuwei* 無為 (“acting without acting”), explicitly so at *Analects* 15.5.

This view of *zheng* as correct alignment is not unique to the *Analects*. This broader reading appears in pre-Confucian texts, specifically the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經). It also appears in chapters of Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國) texts datable to a period of roughly contemporaneous to the earliest estimates for the composition of *Analects*, especially the “Inner Cultivation” (*Nei ye* 內業) chapter of the *Guanzi* 管子.

This revised understanding of uprightness/correct alignment in the *Analects* has several important consequences. First, it helps clarify what seems to be a sustained, but understated, interest in indirection in the *Analects*, which traditional readings do not account for well. In particular, it helps us account for his positive attitude toward *wuwei*, and helps us reconcile that attitude with his repeated account of the “transparency” of the gentleman or *junzi*. Second, this account also clarifies the *Analects* account of the effectiveness of correctly performed ritual (*li* 禮). Third, it sheds incidental light on the puzzling depictions of Confucius in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, and highlights important differences between the *Analects* and later pre-Han Confucian works, specifically the *Mengzi* 孟子 and *Xunzi* 荀子.

I begin with an account of the two distinct senses of “uprightness” in the *Analects* represented by the two key terms *zhen* and *zheng*. In the second section I demonstrate the semantic continuity of this sense of *zheng* as alignment, drawing upon the *Shijing* (*Book of Odes*) and “Inner Cultivation” (*Nei ye*). In the third section I give an account of indirection in the *Analects*, including government and ritual. This account of indirection helps explain important differences between the *Analects* and later Confucian texts, and incidentally helps explain the puzzling portrayals of Confucius in the *Zhuangzi*.

## Two Senses of Uprightness: *zhi* and *zheng* in the *Analects*

The *Analects* repeatedly recommends uprightness or straightness. Straightness (*zhi* 直), by contrast, describes an attribute of a thing or person. Rightness in the sense of “correct alignment” (*zheng* 正) is typically the result of deliberate action either on external objects or one oneself. The etymological dictionary, the *Shuowen jiezi* 說文解字, describes the two words as etymologically related, but they are not identical (*Shuowen* 2B/1a, 12B/45a). *Zhi* can be used as “the straight” (2.19, 2.22, 16.4), or “straightness” (13.18, 14.34, 17.8, 17.16), as well as an adjective (5.24, 8.2, 12.20, 22, 13.18, 15.7). Most refer to moral straightness. The differences between *zheng* and *zhi* become apparent when we turn to the semantic field of their respective antonyms. Antonyms for *zhi* are “crooked”: *wang* 枉 (2.19, 18.2, 12.22; *Mengzi* 3B1) and *qu* 曲 (*Xunzi* 1/1).<sup>2</sup> Antonyms of *zheng* have a wider range, and include *jue* 譎 “craftiness” (14.15), *pian* 偏 “slant” (*Xunzi* 23/37), and *qi* 奇 “indirect” (*Sunzi* 5 p.69).

<sup>2</sup>This analysis is indebted to, but differs somewhat from Loy 2008.

## *The Importance of Uprightness (zhi)*

The *Analects* clearly emphasizes the importance of the virtue of upright or straightness (*zhi*). At 6.19 he states that “people are born for uprightness” (*ren zhi sheng ye zhi* 人之生也直) and if they survive without it, it is merely good fortune. The *Analects* cites a certain Historiographer Yu 史魚 as an exemplar of straightness. When *dao* prevailed in his state, he was straight as an arrow. But when it did not prevail, he was also straight as an arrow (15.7).<sup>3</sup>

The *Analects* seems to oppose straightness and upright to indirection or craft. At two points, Confucius specifically recommends setting the straight over the crooked. At *Analects* 2.19:

Duke Ai 哀公 asked: “How can we ensure that the people will be obedient?” Confucius replied: “Promote [lit. raise up] the straight over the crooked [*ju zhi cuo zhu wang* 舉直錯諸枉] and the people will be obedient. Promote the crooked over the straight and the people will not be obedient.”

The same phrase occurs again as a response to a question about wisdom by Fan Chi 樊遲 (12.22). Similarly, *zheng* (straightforwardness) is opposed to craft (*jue* 譎), for example in the account of Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公 and Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公 at *Analects* 14.15 (discussed above); and *ren* 仁 (benevolence) is opposed to *qiao* 巧 (cunning) at *Analects* 1.3.<sup>4</sup>

But another passage has occasioned much debate:

葉公語孔子曰：「吾黨有直躬者，其父攘羊，而子證之。」孔子曰：「吾黨之直者異於是。父為子隱，子為父隱，直在其中矣。」

The Duke of She said to Confucius: “We have among us people of upright conduct [*zhi gong*]. If the father steals a sheep, the son bears witness to it.” Confucius replied: “Among us we understand upright conduct differently than this. Fathers conceal things for their sons and sons conceal things for their father’s; it is in this that uprightness is to be found” (13.18).<sup>5</sup>

In this case, strict straightforwardness is not to be recommended, and Confucius does not approve of the son who turns in his father. We can give several accounts of this passage.

- (1) The passage is a defense of filiality. Upright conduct is a virtue, but filiality – by both father and son – takes precedence. It is on this reading that Herbert Fingarette argued that there is no real conflict of values in *Analects* 13.8 (Fingarette 1972).
- (2) Upright conduct is a virtue, but it has been misunderstood by people who do not realize that it is not always the best course of action. An analogue would be the “noble lie.” This reading is compatible with (1).

<sup>3</sup> For Historiographer Yu see *Han Shih Wai Chuan* 7.21, in Hightower 1952: 245–46.

<sup>4</sup> The context is a quotation from the *Shijing* (2.3.2) that: “It is rare indeed for a person of cunning words and an ingratiating face to be benevolent.”

<sup>5</sup> The phrase *zhi gong zhe* 直躬者 could refer to people of a certain type, or to a certain man named “Straight body” or “Upright Gong.”

- (3) Upright conduct is only a virtue in some situations. In others, indirect or other kinds of action are called for, including the situation described in the passage. An analogue would be the claim in Sunzi's *Art of War* that straightforward (*zheng*) strategies are best for some situations and indirect (*qi* 奇) strategies for others (*Sunzi* Ch 5, p. 69).<sup>6</sup> This reading is compatible with (2) but not with (1).

Of these three accounts, (3) is significantly different from the other two. It raises the possibility that Confucius took a kinder attitude toward indirection than prevailing readings allow. It raises the possibility that Confucius was actively sympathetic to the use of indirection.

### **Zheng 正 as “Correct Alignment”**

The term *zheng* has often been translated by the normative terms such as upright, rectify, straight, etc. In most cases, the text supports a descriptive reading of “pragmatically correct alignment” in several senses. Alignment refers literally to the correct orientation of one's physical person (*shen* 身) or a physical object.<sup>7</sup> For example, according to Confucius, a gentleman (*junzi*) must align his stance (*zheng li* 正立), that is assume an upright posture, before entering a carriage (10.17).

In other cases it refers to aligning an object. For example, a *junzi* maintains a dignified appearance by straightening his robe and cap (20.2); and does not sit if his mat is not aligned correctly (*bu zheng* 不正, 10.12). Similarly, if sent a gift of meat, he straightens his mat before accepting it (10.13). In the case of the mat, it is not clear whether the action described is smoothing wrinkles or, more likely, repositioning the mat to a correct alignment in a room or geographic orientation.

*Zheng* can also have extended meanings concerning the correct alignment or disposition of material objects. At 8.4 the *junzi* is advised to regulate or rectify his countenance (*zheng yanse* 正顏色) – literally to rectify his facial coloring – in order to encourage sincerity and trustworthiness in others. According to 10.8, if meat is not served with the right sauce or cut correctly (*ge bu zheng* 割不正), a *junzi* does not eat it. Finally, a *junzi* associates with others who follow *dao* in order to himself be set right by them (1.14).

### **Good Alignment and Good Government**

Several passages in the *Analects* identify good government with correct alignment. At 12.17, Ji Kangzi 季康子 asks Confucius about government. He replies that government consists of correct align; he said to govern means to align correctly.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion see Raphals 1992.

<sup>7</sup> For discussion of the semantic range of *shen* term see Lo 2003.

政者，正也。子帥以正，孰敢不正？

To govern [*zheng* 政] means to align [*zheng* 正]. If you set an example by [your own correct] alignment, who will dare not to be [correctly] aligned?

The subject returns in Book 13, when three students ask Confucius about government. At 13.3, Zilu 子路 asks what Confucius would take as his first priority if the Duke of Wei were to employ him in his government. Confucius responds: “It would, of course, be to align names correctly (*zhengming* 正名).” He elaborates by explaining that if names are not aligned correctly (*ming bu zheng* 名不正), speech does not will not accord with reality (*yan bu shun* 言不順), and things are not brought to completion successfully (*shi bu cheng* 事不成). As a result, ritual practice and music fail to flourish, punishments and penalties miss the mark, and the common people are at a loss as to what to do with themselves.

Other passages link correct alignment to effective government. At 13.6, Confucius says: when the ruler’s physical person is correctly aligned (*qi sheng zheng* 其身正), he does not give commands, but his orders are obeyed (*bu ling er xing* 不令而行). If he is not correctly aligned (*qi bu zheng* 其不正), no matter how many orders he issues, they will not be followed. Similarly another passage (13.13) advises government service requires no more than aligning oneself correctly (*zheng qi shen yi* 正其身矣). But those who cannot align themselves cannot correct (align) others.

At *Analects* 14.15, Confucius compares Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公, who was crafty but not correctly aligned (*jue er bu zheng* 譎而不正) with Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公, who was aligned correctly and not crafty (*zheng er bu jue* 正而不譎). Duke Huan (r. 681–643 BCE) and Duke Wen (r. 636–628 BCE) reigned as the first and second official hegemony, respectively. The traditional explanation is that Duke Wen treated the King of Zhou 周王 with arrogance to display his own power, while Duke Huan put public service above his private interests.<sup>8</sup> A different way to read the passage is as descriptive, rather than normative references to straight and crooked alignment in behavior, with clear preference for the former.

Finally, *Analects* 15.5, describes the sage-ruler Shun 舜 as governing without interventive action, simply by aligning himself to face south:

子曰：「無為而治者，其舜也？夫何為哉，恭己正南面而已矣。」

The Master said, “As for one who ruled by means of *wuwei* was it not Shun? How did he do it? He made himself reverent and aligned himself [in the ritually correct way] facing south, and that was all.”<sup>9</sup>

This last passage raises the possibility that correct alignment is itself a form of indirect action. But is such a speculation justified?

<sup>8</sup> On this point see Slingerland 2003a, b: 160.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Slingerland 2003a, b: 175: “[he] took his proper [ritual] position facing south, that is all.”

## **Zheng as Correct Alignment Before and After the *Analects***

This meaning of *zheng* as “correct alignment” appears in texts that predate and recently postdate the *Analects*. It first appears in the *Book of Odes*. One poem seems clearly to use *zheng* in the sense of moral rectification. Poem 191 laments injustices that seem to come from Heaven, and trouble the king, but adds that “he [the king] does not correct his heartmind [*bu cheng qi xin* 不懲其心] and is angry at those who correct him [*fu yuan qi zheng* 覆怨其正]” (*Shijing*, Poem 191 (*Jie nan shan* 節南山)).<sup>10</sup>

But several other poems in the *Book of Odes* use *zheng* to refer to correct alignment. Poem 106 uses *zheng* in the context of archery, and describes a noble who shoots at the target all day and “never departs from correct alignment” (*bu chu zheng* 不出正). The poem concludes its praise by stating that this prince is someone able to withstand disorder or rebellion (*yi yu luan* 以禦亂) (*Shijing*, Poem 106 (*Yi jie* 猗嗟)).<sup>11</sup> Poem 152 refers to a *junzi* 君子 “whose fine deportment is without fault” (*qi yi bu te* 其儀不忒) and who correctly aligns the countries of the four quarters (*zheng shi si guo* 正是四國) (*Shijing*, Poem 152 (*Shi jiu* 鳴鳩)).<sup>12</sup> Poem 207 is addressed to a *junzi*, here the aristocratic predecessor of Confucius’ “gentleman.” The *junzi* is enjoined not to view his office as permanent, but to fulfill his functions efficiently and quietly. To be heard by the spirits (*shen* 神) and receive felicity from them, he should “associate with the right [correctly aligned] and straight” (*zheng zhi shi* 正直是興) and “love the right [correctly aligned] and upright” (*hao shi zheng zhi* 好是正直) (*Shijing*, Poem 207 (*Xiao ming* 小明)).<sup>13</sup> Poem 253 remonstrates to the ruler of a kingdom in decline, and recommends that he “repress robbers and tyrants, do not let the straight be ruined [*wu bei zheng bai* 無俾正敗]” and “repress robbers and tyrants; do not let the straight be reversed” [*wu bei zheng fan* 無俾正反] (*Shijing*, Poem 253 (*Min lao* 民勞)).

In summary, we find the use of *zheng* as correct alignment in the *Shijing*, a book that clearly predates the *Analects*. The situation for later texts approximately contemporary to the *Analects* is more complex because of debates about the dating of the *Analects*. Contemporary Chinese scholars date the existence of the *Analects* as a book to the early to middle Warring States period, roughly 475–350 BCE. On BAN Gu’s 班固 (32–92 CE) account that the *Analects* was compiled by Confucius’ disciples in the *Hanshu* 漢書 (*History of the Han*) Bibliographic Treatise (*Hanshu* 30), the compilation would have been made no earlier than 429 BCE, 50 years after the death of Confucius. John Makeham has argued that the *Analects* was compiled

<sup>10</sup> Trans. modified from Karlgren 1950: 133–134. Several other poems use *zheng* in senses unrelated to the present discussion, e.g., Poem 189 (the main parts of a house), Poem 192 (the first month), Poem 194 (the established heads of state offices), and Poem 244 (determining the site of a capital).

<sup>11</sup> I read *bu chu zheng* 不出正 as “to not depart from correct alignment” which makes it possible to hit the target, in other words, to hit the target exactly and unerringly. Cf. Karlgren 1950: 69, who takes the phrase as “never hitting outside the (central) mark.”

<sup>12</sup> Karlgren (1950: 95–96) reads *zheng* as “corrects” in the sense of “sets an example to.”

<sup>13</sup> Karlgren (1950: 159) translates *zheng zhi* as “correct and straight ones.”

by later hands, and did not exist as a book prior to about 150–140 BCE, and was based on early “collected sayings” of the Master (Makeham 1996: 1–3).

This usage also figures importantly in the “Inner Cultivation” (*Nei ye* 內業) chapter of the *Guanzi*. The dating of both the *Guanzi* and the *Nei ye* are complex, but there is evidence that this chapter dates to the mid-Warring States, possibly no later than the beginning of the fourth century (ca. 400 B.C.E.). This date is less than a hundred years after the death of Confucius, and only a few decades after the 429 B.C.E. dating for the *Analects*. It is also contemporary to the oldest parts of the *Daodejing* 道德經 (See Rickett 1998: 32–39; Roth 1999; Graziani 2001).

*Zheng* appears in nine passages in the *Nei ye*. They are important for the present discussion because they clarify the meaning of “correct alignment” in its extramoral senses. One passage uses *zheng* in the sense of “correct” by advising the reader to “correct foolishness and disorder” (*yu luan zheng zhi* 遇亂正之) (*Guanzi* 16.5a4-7). All the others use *zheng* to refer to correct bodily alignment. Importantly, they link *zheng* to *dao* and *de*, to cultivation of the mind (*xiu xin* 修心), and to beneficial changes that come of themselves once correct alignment has been mastered. These passages, though later than the *Analects*, are important to Warring States understandings of indirect action because they make explicit the relationship of correct alignment (*zheng*) to effective ordering of the heartmind, the body and the state. These passages indicate four points. First, the ruling principle [literally “lord” *zhu* 主] of Heaven is correct alignment (*zheng*) (*Guanzi* 16.2a2-4).<sup>14</sup> Second, the means by which humans cultivate the heartmind and align the body is *dao*. This passage also explicitly links *dao* to *zheng* (*Guanzi* 16.2a2-4).<sup>15</sup> Two other passages specify that correct alignment is the precondition for stability, and for the arrival of power or virtue (*de* 德) (*Guanzi* 16.2a9-2b1; *Guanzi* 16.4a2-7).<sup>16</sup> Third, this alignment is explicitly physical. Only when the four limbs are correctly aligned and the blood and *qi* [in the body] are tranquil, is it possible to unify the awareness and concentrate the mind (*Guanzi* 16.4a2-7).<sup>17</sup> Another passage seems to describe a physical breathing technique to achieve balance and alignment (*ping zheng* 平正), and also longevity. The passage goes on to explicitly state that this balance and alignment is the source of human vitality (*sheng* 生) (*Guanzi* 16.4a11-b7). Finally, when the body is correctly aligned (and the heartmind is cultivated), benefits occur to the individual and the state. The myriad things appear in proper perspective (*Guanzi* 16.2b9-3a1).<sup>18</sup>

In summary, the evidence of the *Book of Odes* and the *Nei ye* show that Confucius’ use of *zheng* in the *Analects* is not unique to that text.

<sup>14</sup> “The lord [ruling principle] of heaven is alignment; the ruling principle of earth is balance (天主正,地主平).”

<sup>15</sup> “Dao . . . is that by means of which we cultivate the mind and align the body (道 . . . 所以修心而正形也).”

<sup>16</sup> “If you can be aligned, if you can be tranquil, only then can you be stable (能正能靜,後能定). If the body is not aligned, *de* will not come (形不正,德不來) . . . if you align your body and enhance your *de*, then it will gradually come of itself (正形攝德).”

<sup>17</sup> 四體既正,血氣既靜,一意搏心。

<sup>18</sup> 正心在中,萬物得度。

## Indirection in the *Analects*

We may now return to *Analects* 15.5, and the statement that Shun governed simply by aligning correctly and facing south (*zheng nan* 正南). This passage indicates that correct alignment is a form of indirect action. The passage is also the one occurrence in the *Analects* of a more familiar term for indirect action: *wuwei* 無為 or “acting without acting.” *Analects* 15.5 specifically describes Shun as “one who ruled by means of *wuwei*” (*wuwei er zhi zhe* 無為而治者). It shows that *zheng* is part of the same semantic field as a *wuwei*. This account of correct alignment also explains effective government, understood as a mode of indirect action. *Analects* 12.17 (discussed above) explicitly equates government (*zheng* 政) with correct alignment (*zheng* 正).

Edward Slingerland has argued that the concept of effortless and perfected action appears throughout the *Analects*, even though the term *wuwei* appears only once (Slingerland 2000, 2003b). The many occurrences of *zheng* in the sense of correct alignment are part of a semantic field of terms to express this concept.<sup>19</sup>

Traditional commentators give two distinct accounts of what ruling by *wuwei* might mean.<sup>20</sup> In what Slingerland calls “institutional *wuwei*,” the term refers to a ruler who need not act because he has chosen able ministers who administer government effectively without his intervention (Slingerland 2003a, b: 175–76).<sup>21</sup> This is clearly not the usage at *Analects* 15.5, because Shun ruled effectively by aligning himself and facing south, not by choosing able ministers. This passage describes a second possibility: a ruler has perfected himself and thus can transform others without deliberate action. In his commentary on this passage, the Ming scholar WANG Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) likens Shun’s ruling by *wuwei* to Confucius’ claim at *Analects* 7.1 that he does not innovate.<sup>22</sup>

In summary, the term *zheng* in the sense of correct alignment appears not only in the *Analects*, but in several texts associated with the early layers of Warring States Daoism. If we examine the *Analects* independently of preconceptions about a

<sup>19</sup> Slingerland (2000: 294–296) emphasizes the need to distinguish between the existence of a concept and the presence or absence of a particular term because the absence of a term does not indicate the absence of the concept. On his account, *wuwei* was not an exclusively Daoist term, and had pre-Confucian roots and. Slingerland argues that the concept of is an early and central theme in Chinese religious thought and was central to all Warring States philosophical thought. He traces it through the *Book of Odes* and the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), and argues that the term *wuwei* was adopted by later commentators to describe this kind ideal mode of action. Action by *wuwei* was also linked to early accounts of ordering the world through efficacious virtue (*de* 德). For *de* see Maspéro 1933. For some of the problems arising from this view of *de* see Billeter 1984 and Nivison 1997: 31–58.

<sup>20</sup> In particular, he argues that the idea of “ruling by not ruling” is a constant theme, but especially at 1.12, 2.19–2.21, 12.17–12.19, and 13.6.

<sup>21</sup> This is the interpretation of HE Yan 何晏 (c.190–249 CE). He was one of the founders of the “Mysterious Learning” (*xuanxue* 玄學) school of Daoist thought.

<sup>22</sup> In commentary to *Analects* 7.1. See Cheng 1996: 13.431–436.



“Confucian” lineage of the *Analects*, *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, we may find unexpected common ground with texts traditionally classified as Daoist: the *Daodejing*, the *Neiye*, and the *Zhuangzi*.

This account of *zheng* as an aspect of indirect action in the *Analects* has explanatory force in two important respects. First, it clarifies the *Analects* account of the effectiveness of correctly performed ritual. Confucius repeatedly criticizes ritual performance that follows outward rules without understanding or correct orientation. He specifically comments on misunderstood ritual in the *Record of Ritual* (*Liji* 禮記):

[One day] Confucius was standing among his followers, and he held his right hand placed above his left hand [before his chest]. His followers were also holding their right hands above their left hands [in the same way]. Confucius said: “My children, you are trying to imitate me. [I hold my right hand above the left because] my elder sister has died and I must accord with proper mourning ritual.” All the disciples placed their left hands above their right hands (*Li ji*, trans. after Couvreur 1913: vol. 1: 143).<sup>23</sup>

Here, the disciples imitated Confucius’ behavior without understanding the reason for it. In 16.13, Confucius advises his son Boyu 伯魚 to study the *Odes* in order to speak and to study the rites in order to “take a stand” (*yi li* 以立).<sup>24</sup> The passage does not clarify the meaning of the term “stand” (*li*). HUANG Kan’s 皇侃 (488–545 CE) commentary describes the rites as “the root of establishing one’s person” (*li shen zhi ben* 立身之本) (Cheng 1996: 1170). Establishing one’s person (*li shen* 立身) can be understood as “establishing oneself” in a social sense or as following correct formative models for behavior, but it also describes a basic orientation toward life. Herbert Fingarette argues that the rites are the basis of efficacious spontaneity. He defines them as magical in the sense of:

the power of a specific person to accomplish his will directly and effortlessly through ritual, gesture and incantation. The user of magic does not work by strategies and devices as a means toward an end; he does not use coercion or physical forces. . . .He simply wills the end in the proper ritual setting and with the proper ritual gesture and word; without further effort on his part, the deed is accomplished (Fingarette 1972: 3, cf. Fingarette 1991: 220).

In Fingarette’s account in a still influential book, Confucius understood that “the truly distinctively human powers have, characteristically, a magical quality” (Fingarette 1972: 6).<sup>25</sup> What Fingarette describes as magic could also be described as indirect action. On this account, the rites provide correct alignment in a moral and performative sense, and complement *zheng* in its sense of moral uprightness.

<sup>23</sup> For an example from the *Analects* see 2.7.

<sup>24</sup> Confucius’ son KONG Li 孔鯉 was also known as Boyu. He died at 50, and was the father of KONG Ji 孔伋, (ca. 481–402 BCE), better known as Zisi 子思.

<sup>25</sup> By contrast, David Hall and Roger Ames argue that ritual functions as a method for effecting order in the personal, the social, and the political dimensions of human life (Hall and Ames 1987: 157).

An account of indirection in the *Analects* also helps explain important differences between the *Analects* and later Confucian texts. One is its unmistakable sense of humor. As Christoph Harbsmeier remarked many years ago:

The *Analects* describe Confucius as an impulsive, emotional, and informal man, a man of wit and humor, a man capable of subtle irony with an acute sensibility for subtle nuances. It is hard to recognize this man from the *Analects* in the traditional commentaries, and it seems quite impossible to recognize him at all in the histories of Chinese philosophy (Harbsmeier 1990: 131).

If Harbsmeier's reading is right, Confucius was more impulsive, colloquial and even funny than most of the tradition credits. The account of *zheng* and indirect action presented here also explains some of his practicality. For example, at 5.10 he remarks:

I used to trust people's actions once I had heard their words. Now, when I have heard their words, I observe their acts (Cf. Lau 1992: 77; Harbsmeier 1990: 144).

The context is that he has found Zai Yu 宰予 in bed during the day, and he attributes the change to this encounter. Here he makes clear that Zai Yu's highly improper physical alignment provides the interpretive key to anything he might possibly say; you can't work rotten wood or sculpt dung!

The point is that this passage offers us a view of a Confucius who increasingly comes to prize physical configurations (of things and people) as more truthful than words. As he puts it at 17.19:

Confucius said: "I am thinking of giving up words." Zigong 子貢 said: "If you do not speak, what will there be for us, your disciples, to transmit?" The Master replied: "What does Heaven ever say? Yet there are the four seasons going round and round, and there are the myriad creatures, coming into being, yet what does Heaven ever say?" (Cf. Lau 1992: 46; Harbsmeier 1990: 155).

Harbsmeier reads this passage as remorseful irony, but our robust reading of *zheng* gives it a more coherent reading (which does not rule out remorseful irony!) Here Confucius acknowledges that "actions" – including the indirect action of correct alignment – speak louder than words. And if we follow the *Nei ye*, Heaven is specifically concerned with correct alignment (*zheng*).

Finally, an *Analects* that gives a strongly positive account of indirection also helps explain differences between it and the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*, both of which emphasize transparency and direct action. *Zheng* as correct alignment is a far cry from the "Rectification of names" (*Zhengming* 正名) chapter of the *Xunzi*, whose title presumably derives from *Analects* 13.3. A spontaneous and flexible *Analects* also helps account for the Confucius of the *Zhuangzi*. This is the Confucius who restrains YAN Hui 顏回 from going to Wei and discourses to him on the fasting of the heartmind (Chapter 4), who follows obscure teachers of indirect action (Chapter 5), who points out his disciple Zigong's misunderstanding of the real nature of ritual (Chapter 6), who explains that the skillful cicada catcher has unified his spirit and the skillful swimmer has forgotten the water (Chapter 19), and discourses on *wuwei* with Laozi 老子 (Chapter 21).<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> For translation of these passages see Watson 1964: 54–58 (chapter 4), 71–74 (chapter 5), 86–91 (chapter 6), 199–201 (chapter 19), and 224–225 (chapter 21).

In conclusion, the readings of the *Analects* advanced here would tend to align the *Analects* more closely with the *Daodejing*, *Nei ye*, and possibly even the *Zhuangzi*; and to drive a wedge between the *Analects* and the later pre-Han Confucians, specifically Mengzi and Xunzi. The issue of humor is different from, but consistent with the approach to physical alignment and the ethics it implies that I have discussed here.<sup>27</sup> What if Confucius and his disciples lived in a social environment that was both heterogeneous and “un-Confucian” in any sense that later ritualists and Confucians would recognize? (Harbsmeier 1990: 159).

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<sup>27</sup> He, I think, correctly observes that “the smile is all over the place in the *Analects*” (Harbsmeier 1990: 160), and it is conspicuously absent in the works of Mengzi and Xunzi.

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## Chapter 10

# Cultivating the Self in Concert with Others

David B. Wong

The teachings attributed to Confucius and embodied in the *Analects* raise central issues in moral psychology and moral cultivation.<sup>1</sup> Confucius' successors in the Chinese philosophical tradition, such as Mengzi 孟子, Xunzi 荀子, ZHU Xi 朱熹, and WANG Yangming 王陽明, addressed these issues in ways that from the perspective of Western analytic philosophy can be more readily grasped as arguments and positions taken on the goodness or badness of human nature, the role of special relationships in moral cultivation, and the relative roles of feeling, reflection, and reasoning in moral perception, judgment, and cultivation. But the teachings in the *Analects* do not take such a familiar form. They rather can be treated as a series of glimpses into how Confucius and his students engaged in their own projects of moral self-cultivation, or how (given the uncertainty of the provenance of the text and its possibly many layers from different sources) those projects might have been envisioned by others in the philosophical tradition. This chapter seeks to describe the way in which the outlines of a moral psychology arises from the text and how the text poses issues that came to be central to the Chinese philosophical tradition. It will be argued that the text provides exemplars of moral self-cultivation, that it makes emotion central to virtue and therefore makes emotional self-cultivation a central focus of moral development, that it highlights the relational nature of moral cultivation as a process that is conducted with others, that it raises difficult and crucial issues about the relation between intuitive and affective styles of action on the one hand and on the other hand action based on deliberation and reflection, and that it has some useful approaches to the problem of situationism that has been raised for virtue ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter employs the Ames and Rosemont 1998 translation of the *Analects*.

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## The *Analects* as an Enacted Project of Moral Cultivation

The *Analects* gives its readers glimpses into the lives of men who aspired to high public offices or to influence those in such offices. They believed that the decline of legitimate political and social order could only be reversed through a moral restoration of the character “of rulers and of those who served them. Such a restoration would be marked by the exercise and demonstration of *de* 德 (virtue), ethical excellence of such a charismatic power that it draws people to its possessors. Because the project of redeeming the kingdom is a project of moral and spiritual renewal, it is intertwined with striving after an individual spiritual ideal (Slingerland 2003b: 67).

Zilu 子路 asked about exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子). The Master replied, “They cultivate themselves by being respectful.”

“Is that all?” Asked Zilu.

“They cultivate themselves by bringing accord to their peers.”

“Is that all?” asked Zilu.

“They cultivate themselves by bringing accord to the people. Even a Yao 堯 or a Shun 舜 would find such a task daunting” (14.42).

Confucius and his students are carrying out their projects of moral cultivation in relation to each other. Confucius is of course the Master, and the others look to him to learn and also to learn how to learn in ways to be discussed shortly. But Confucius does not present himself as having no more to learn from his students. When one of his students points out that the Master has misjudged the character of Duke Zhao 昭公, Confucius wryly remarks, “I am so fortunate. If I go astray, others are certain to notice it” (7.31). Even a sarcastic rebuke he delivers to a censorious Zigong 子貢 takes advantage of Confucius’ self-presentation as someone who is seeking to learn: “It is because Zigong is of such superior character (*xian* 賢) himself that he has time for this. I myself have none” (14.29). In a remark about his favorite student that seems joking and affectionate but is perhaps also directed to the more sycophantic of his followers, Confucius remarks that YAN Hui 顏回 is of no help to him because there is nothing he says that YAN Hui does not like (11.4; see Harbsmeier 1990: 146). When Zigong observes that YAN Hui knows ten things upon learning one thing whereas he (Zigong) knows only two things upon learning one thing, Confucius remarks, “You [Zigong] are not his match; neither you nor I are a match for him” (5.9).

The special relationship between YAN Hui and Confucius helps to shed light on the relational nature of the moral cultivation conducted by Confucius and his students. The two share a deep and abiding love of learning, widely construed to include study and application of what one has learned (1.1). In suggesting what Zilu could have said about Confucius to the Duke of She 葉公, Confucius says, “Why didn’t you just say to him: As a person, Confucius is driven by such eagerness to teach and learn that he forgets to eat, he enjoys himself so much that he forgets to worry, and does not even realize that old age is on its way?” (7.19). When he does worry, Confucius names failing to carrying four things: to practice virtue (*de*), to

practice what he learns; to attend to what is right or appropriate in the circumstances (*yi* 義), and to reform conduct that is unproductive (7.3). The placing of learning and its practice in that list makes clear its centrality to the project of moral cultivation, especially that kind of learning and practicing that can transform the self. When Confucius singles out YAN Hui as the one student who truly loved learning, it is instructive how he amplifies that remark: YAN Hui never took out his anger on others and never made the same mistake twice (6.3). In a passage that resonates with Confucius' self-characterization as a person who sometimes forgets to eat in his eagerness to teach and to learn, the Master characterizes YAN Hui as of such a character (*xian*) that his joy is not affected by having only a bowl of rice to eat, a gourd of water to drink, and a dirty little hovel to live in (6.11).

AS SHUN Kwong-loi 信廣來 has pointed out, YAN Hui's joy (*yue* 樂) that is not affected by extreme poverty is not of the exuberant kind (Shun 2011). It rather connotes a movement with the ebb and flow of fortune and events beyond one's control. Starting with the correlative links between 樂 as joy and 樂 as music, we might say that YAN Hui's joy is like moving with the rhythm of whatever music that Heaven (*tian* 天) is playing in the situation. It is the kind of joy that ensures constancy of effort in the face of obstacles. Love of learning is a crucial quality for a successful project of moral cultivation because it provides for such constancy of effort. The *Analects* makes clear in various places why strong and constant motivation is needed in the face of resistance not only from circumstances but also from the self. At one point, with hyperbole that perhaps reflects Confucius' appreciation for and frustration with the magnitude of the motivational problem, he declares that he has yet to meet a person who is more fond of virtue than sex (9.18)! No wonder, then, that Confucius singles out YAN Hui among all his students for being able to go for 3 months without departing in his thoughts and feelings from *ren* 仁, the trait of the *junzi* 君子 sometimes associated with loving others (*ai ren* 愛人; 12.22), but most often treated as the all-inclusive and comprehensive virtue that includes all the particular virtues.

Their shared love of learning helps to account for Confucius' abandoned grief upon YAN Hui's death. He responds to his students' expression of concern about the extremity of his reaction by saying, "If I don't grieve with abandon for him, then for whom?" (11.10). When the other students gave YAN Hui a lavish burial, Confucius disapproved not only because it was improper for someone of YAN Hui's social station, but because Confucius wanted to bury him like a father would bury a son (11.11). In fact, Confucius and YAN Hui had a father-son like relationship. The father guided the son in his difficult journey to follow the father's teachings: "The Master is good at drawing me forward a step at a time; he broadens me with culture (*wen* 文) and disciplines my behavior through the observance of ritual propriety (*li* 禮)" (9.11). But the son serves as inspirational example for the father in his love of, and quickness in, learning, and in his ability to focus on *ren*.

This relationship of teaching and learning, mutual support, example, and inspiration fits the definition of Aristotle's character friendship, the highest form of friendship, in which friends value the moral excellence of each other's character and desire each other's well-being for their friend's sake (Aristotle 2002: Books 8 and 9).

However, there are three respects in which the portrait of Confucius and YAN Hui's relationship complements and goes beyond Aristotle's discussion of character friendship. First, it provides a vivid and concrete sense of how two character friends can appreciate each other's moral excellence. While Aristotle supplies a theoretical and abstract description of what character friendship is, Confucius and YAN Hui exemplify and enact that conception. They value each other especially for particular forms of moral excellence. Secondly, their relationship illustrates how character friends mutually support and sustain one another in their projects of moral cultivation. As indicated earlier, the sustained motivation to engage in moral cultivation is perhaps the central element necessary for any degree of success. Its rarity is a sign of the strength of the other motivations that oppose it. Is it any wonder, then, that two people whose moral excellence is especially notable for this necessary motivation should forge a deep bond of mutual commitment and support? Is it any wonder, moreover, that Confucius, upon losing his beloved YAN Hui, would grieve with abandon, having lost, using Aristotle's felicitous characterization of character friendship, "another self"?

The third respect in which the *Analects* portrait of Confucius and YAN Hui's relationship goes beyond Aristotle's discussion of character friendship has to do with how these two men are different. Friends not only share deep affinities, but can also bring at least different strengths to their relationship, such that each can contribute to the other's moral excellence in ways the other could not have achieved without that friend. Amy Olberding has deployed François Jullien's notion of the bland to suggest that YAN Hui's dullness as a character—he has no dramatic and attention-capturing traits such as Zilu's bull-in-a-china-shop's boldness, for example—is precisely one of his great strengths, in that it results from all one's qualities held in a kind of balance such that no one quality predominates. This balance or equanimity makes the bearer open to determination, ready to absorb the requirements of the situation and to respond accordingly (Jullien 1993; Olberding 2004).

Confucius' character is so different from YAN Hui's salutary blandness that one is tempted to call it "spicy." As Christoph Harbsmeier has pointed out, Confucius often comes across in the *Analects* as earthy, often self-deprecating, impulsive, given to outbursts that are often harsh or sweeping criticisms of politicians and of his students, but possessed of a short memory of his negative feelings and who is capable of appreciation and fondness for the strengths of the same students he criticizes (Harbsmeier 1990). An example of the earthiness and penchant for sweeping criticisms is the aforementioned 9.18, in which he says he has yet to meet a person who loves virtue more than sex. An example of a harsh criticism appears when Confucius observes Zaiwo 宰我 sleeping in the daytime. He says, "You cannot carve rotten wood, and cannot trowel over a wall of manure. As for Zaiwo, what is the point in upbraiding him?" (5.10). Confucius then says that Zaiwo taught him to hear what people have to say and then watch what they do, rather than assuming they would live up to what they say. But on the other hand, Zaiwo's eloquence is mentioned by Confucius in a context that presents it as a distinctive strength (11.3).

Confucius' persona is most appropriate for the "Master," one who has not only the authority and charisma but also the temperament to direct frank and if need be



harsh criticisms of those engaged in cultivation. At the same time, Confucius' humor, often self-deprecating, defuses what might otherwise be the alienating effects of his criticism of students. They know he is not only prepared to be criticized, but invites it through his own affectionate critique of YAN Hui as never disagreeing with him. Thus the way in which Confucius takes joy in questing after *ren* is not the same as YAN Hui's, and it is not the same in a way that is suitable to his role as a teacher and father figure to YAN Hui. While there might be a balance among the Master's traits, it is more like the balance achieved between strong and complementary flavors that retain their vividness and distinctness even as they combine to produce a whole that is attuned and responsive to the situation. If his outbursts appear intemperate, they are in fact suited to the situation. Or at least, this must be so of Confucius in the later stages of his life, if we accept the short autobiography of 2.4, in which Confucius says that at 70 he could give the desires of his *xin* 心 (heart-mind) free rein without overstepping the boundaries. The achievement of being able to give free rein to one's *xin* is great, considering that Confucius is often called upon to guide his students and hence take a more active stance designed to produce changes. He is an acute judge of others, as well as of his own strengths and weaknesses, and he guides each individual according to his assessment of that person's character. This is the thrust of 11.22, where he is described as telling the impulsive Zilu to consult father and elder brothers before acting upon something he has learned, and telling the diffident Ranyou 冉有 to go ahead and act.

The *Analects* thus shows a group with Confucius at the center, engaged in moral cultivation, each with a different configuration of strengths and weaknesses, not theorizing about it or giving philosophical justifications for it, but rather through their interactions providing a basis and inspiration for subsequent theorizing and justification by Confucius' successors in the Chinese philosophical tradition. The way in which Confucius and his students interact partly constitutes the character of the moral cultivation they are engaged in. In effect, then, the *Analects* provide an *exemplar* of the process of moral cultivation and of the way it is conducted in relationship with others—an exemplar of moral character emerging from interaction with others.

## Exemplarism

Sor Hoon Tan has pointed to the number and vividness of the persons in the *Analects* who serve as moral exemplars (Tan 2005). The text invites us to exercise our imaginations in envisioning what these people might have been like and what we ourselves might become in trying to emulate them. Use of the imagination, she points out, draws our attention to the particularities of virtue and engages our emotions and desires. Amy Olberding develops the notion of exemplarism into a Confucian epistemology, according to which we get much of our important knowledge by coming into contact with the relevant objects or persons (Olberding 2008).

Upon initial contact, we may have little general knowledge. But the encounter is so compelling that we seek to know more about the particular object or person. And this encounter may be the basis for more general knowledge we acquire. Confucius served as an exemplar to his students. Confucius pointed to YAN Hui as an exemplar of love for and astuteness in, learning. The interactions between Confucius and his students served as exemplars for Mengzi and Xunzi in their theoretical developments and defenses of Confucianism. Still later Chinese philosophy, and more recently a growing community in Western philosophy, has followed in this tradition.

Confucius' status as the primary exemplar of the *Analects* explains the intense interest in the small details of his demeanor and behavior, especially in Book 10. Some of the most interesting passages in that book convey Confucius' affective attitude in response to events and occasions:

10.11: Even with a simple meal of coarse grains and vegetable gruel, he invariably made an offering, and did so with solemnity.

10.17: When his stables caught fire, the Master hurried back from court and asked, "Was anyone hurt?" He did not ask about the horses.

10.25: On meeting someone in mourning dress, even those on intimate terms, he would invariably take on a solemn appearance. On meeting someone wearing a ceremonial cap or someone who is blind, even though they were frequent acquaintances, he would invariably pay his respects.

On encountering a person in mourner's attire, he would lean forward on the stanchion of his carriage. He would do the same on encountering an official with state census records on his back.

On being presented with a sumptuous feast, he would invariably take on a solemn appearance and rise to his feet.

Other the passages in Book 10 go to great lengths in describing the style with which Confucius performed certain ceremonial actions:

On grasping the jade tablet as the lord's envoy, he would bow forward from the waist as though it were too heavy to lift. He would hold the top of it as though saluting and the bottom of it as though offering it to someone. His countenance would change visibly as though going off to battle, and his steps were short and measured as though following a line (10.5).

But here again, the preoccupation with the way Confucius did things is of a special kind: it conveys an impression of the attitudes he brought to these ceremonial occasions. Consider 3.12:

The expression "sacrifice as though present" is taken to mean "sacrifice to the spirits as though the spirits are present." But the Master said, "If I myself do not participate in the sacrifice, it is though I have not sacrificed at all."

Confucius is "present" to the sacrifice in the sense that he takes the emotional stance that would be appropriate were the spirits actually to be present.

Confucius as an exemplar of virtue cared immensely about the moral cultivation of his students, and would not spare their feelings in expressing disappointment when he thought it was merited. He took each meal, whether a sumptuous feast or simple food, as an occasion for expressing gratitude. On each occasion of meeting

another person, he would take note of signs that the other was undergoing an event or experience of personal or communal import, and he would signal his respect. This is a man who strove for moral excellence in the smallest details of everyday life, and many of those details concern the ways in which he makes appropriate affective connection with others or takes the affective stance appropriate for the occasion. The way in which Confucius exemplifies virtue contrasts with the moral hero who acts rightly in singular or dramatic moments. Confucius' moral excellence is embedded in everyday life and requires the utmost constancy.

This is not to say he lived a mundane life. The Confucian notion of what it is like to live a fully good life has an aesthetic dimension that might look odd and unfamiliar to a contemporary Western audience. In part, this may result from a certain narrowing of the domain of the moral in contemporary culture to the prohibition of harm and the protection of rights. In part, it may result from a primarily deliberative model of moral action, according to which general principles of right action are applied to the situation and then acted upon. Neither factor would leave much room for less formalized and concrete reflection, much less the expression of ethically appropriate attitudes toward others in a graceful, often automatic and non-conscious manner, proceeding from a "second nature" resulting from assiduous moral cultivation. Such stylized action could be said to possess a moral beauty. The moral beauty lies in the gracefulness and spontaneity of what has become a natural respectfulness and considerateness. The recipients of such action might be "graced" by action that flows so easily from the agent, and to the extent that the recipient can reciprocate in kind, we might have what Herbert Fingarette might call in his seminal work on Confucius a "holy rite" in which the ultimate object of reverence is human community (Fingarette 1972: 7–17).

The *Analects* provides exemplars of crucial features of moral cultivation: of personal qualities that contribute to moral excellence or lack thereof and of the relationships that in part constitute the process of cultivation. The necessary qualities include affective concern for others combined with reliable judgment as to how to express it in action. The concern is so reliably expressed that it becomes second nature for the person who has reached that high stage of moral cultivation, as indicated by Confucius' self-description of being able to "give[his] heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries" (2.4). How that stage is reached is the subject of the next section.

### ***Ren* as Comprehensive Moral Excellence Viewed Under the Aspect of Affective Concern and Respect Towards Others**

*Ren* 仁 appears in the *Analects* as the primary trait of moral excellence. As might be expected under an exemplarist epistemology, it is not explicitly defined but is associated with a wide array of desirable traits and behaviors: deference, tolerance, making good on one's word, diligence, and generosity (17.6), loving others (*ai ren*)

(12.22), ritual propriety (*li*) (12.1, 3.3), reaping successes only after having dealt with difficulties (6.22), establishing others in seeking to establish oneself and promoting others in seeking to get there oneself (6.30), a heavy charge that scholar-apprentices (*shi* 士) take on (8.7), and the identifying trait of the exemplary person (*junzi*) (4.5). *Ren* is sometimes approached by asking whether certain qualities are sufficient for becoming *ren*, and Confucius' typical reply is that he does not know (14.2). *Ren* is featured prominently in Book 4. It is said in 4.1 that in taking up one's residence, it is the presence of authoritative persons that is the greatest attraction. *Ren* draws people into its neighborhood, and is probably related to the charismatic force of virtue, or *de*. In 4.2 the Master says, "Those who are not authoritative are neither able to endure hardship for long, nor to enjoy happy circumstances for any period of time." Those who are authoritative feel at home with themselves. Those who are not have trouble being with themselves, uncomfortable in their own skin. That is why they are not even able to enjoy happy circumstances for any period of time. Here *ren* is characterized by what it feels like to have it or its effects on others.

It is significant that a thread running through many of the remarks about *ren* have to do with love, care, deference, and tolerance of others, that is, with attitudes that demonstrate affective concern and respect for others. The unity of *ren* as a comprehensive virtue that includes all the particular virtues lies in the fact that the component virtues manifest affective concern and respect. The project of cultivating *ren* in oneself, therefore, requires fashioning one's emotional dispositions. Concern and respect, for example, need to be informed by sympathetic understanding of others. Zigong asks Confucius if there is one expression that can be acted upon until the end of one's days. Confucius replies that there is *shu* 恕, "do not impose on others what you yourself do not want" (15.24). This saying is expanded, quite plausibly, as requiring one to imagine what one would want were one in the place or the circumstances of others, since it would hardly be an effective way of being sensitive to what others want without noticing the relevance of their circumstances. One of the functions of study of works such as the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) is to become acquainted with the various ways of the human heart, so that one is better able to recognize them as one encounters them in one's interactions with others.

The centrality of emotion in Confucian ethics is one of the main reasons why contemporary moral philosophers across a wide range of traditions and philosophical approaches are and should be interested in studying the *Analects*. Much recent empirical and theoretical work in psychology emphasizes the power of unconscious emotion over judgment action. In one of Paul Rozin's classic experiments (Rozin et al. 1986), subjects were reluctant to drink a sugary liquid that they knew perfectly well to be harmless, apparently deterred by a "poison" image on the label, even though the image was preceded by a "not" in front of it. In this case, the power of unconscious emotion triggered by an affectively charged image is linked to the phenomenon of "automaticity:" that human beings process much information from the world very quickly and beneath the level of consciousness (Bargh and Chartrand 1999). Emotions very often involve this fast processing, which takes

the form of a unconscious assessment or appraisal of something or someone in terms of what matters to the agent (e.g., fear of an something as posing danger), along with changes in physiological state (e.g., facial expression, quickening of pulse) that serve as signals to others and/or as preparation for appropriate action (e.g., flight or fight). In his pioneering studies of brain lesions, Joseph LeDoux has demonstrated that fear can be elicited in reflex-like fashion through a “low road” in the oldest (in terms of evolution) parts of the brain (a subcortical pathway directly to the amygdala) and bypassing the neo-cortex, the part of the brain associated with higher-level cognitive functions (LeDoux 1993). One plausible construal of the nature of these fast, automatic, and unconscious appraisals is that they are “seeing” things “as” this or that or “under the aspect of” this or that. One perceives features of things as salient and under some category that expresses evaluation in terms of what matters to the agent. Such perception is not the product of judgment formed through activity of the neo-cortex, which explains why it influences behavior independently of conscious belief and reasoning. Furthermore, contemporary moral psychology has come to an increasing recognition of the power of unconscious emotions over moral belief. Disgust over the thought of incest in a specific case can motivate the judgment that it is immoral even when the harms usually cited as the basis for condemning it (e.g., genetic defects, emotional damage, social disapproval) are explicitly removed by the description of the case (Haidt 2001).

However, a slower, deliberate, and conscious mode of processing also can occur in the process of having an emotion. It can co-occur with the initial fast response to something or someone, and can result in a reappraisal of the object of emotion, in the form of specific discriminations of the way or the degree to which the object is something to be feared, for example. It may involve complex forms of reflection involving the self (“Why am I feeling this way?” or “What’s out there that’s causing me to react like this?” “Is it reasonable for me to feel this way?”). This slower track can result in conscious choice of an action or a modification of an action that is tightly connected to the fast response (e.g., an involuntary startle response to a loud bang may lead to scanning of the environment for possible sources of threat and to a decision to take cover).

A critical question for moral psychology is to what degree such conscious and reflective processes can bring under control unconscious and automatic affective processes. But this is just the subject addressed in the Confucian project of the *Analects*: because *ren* is comprehensive moral excellence viewed under the aspect of moral respect and concern, cultivating the self to become *ren* is a matter of deliberately, and at some level consciously, transforming the self and especially its emotions. Consider *Analects* 1.15: being poor but enjoying the way (*dao* 道) or rich but loving ritual propriety is associated with the verse from the *Book of Odes* that says, “Like bone carved and polished./Like jade cut and ground.” The self is carved and polished, cut and ground, and in significant part this is done through the proper observance of ritual. When YAN Hui asks about *ren* in *Analects* 12.1, the Master replies, “Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety one becomes authoritative in one’s conduct [*ren*]. If for the space of one day one were able to accomplish this, the whole empire would defer to this authoritative model.”

## The Relation Between *Ren* and Observing Ritual Propriety

The passage from 12.1 poses the issue of what precisely is the role that observing ritual propriety plays in becoming *ren*. In the *Analects* ritual includes ceremonies of ancestor worship, the burial of parents, and the rules governing respectful and appropriate behavior between parents and children. Later the word came to cover a broad range of customs and practices that spelled out courteous and respectful behavior of many different kinds. One of the most distinctive marks of Confucian ethics is the centrality of ritual performance in the ethical cultivation of character. For example, while Aristotelian habituation generally corresponds to the Confucian cultivation of character, there is no comparable emphasis in Aristotle on the role of ritual performance in this process of character transformation.

The translation of 12.1 by Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr. suggests that the role of observing ritual propriety is at least that of a necessary condition for realizing *ren*. The controversy is whether and what manner it might be more than a necessary condition. The crucial passage, “*keji fuli wei ren* 克己復禮為仁,” is rendered by Edward Slingerland as “Restraining oneself and returning to the rites constitutes goodness [*ren*]” (Slingerland 2003a: 125). Such a translation might be thought to suggest that observing ritual propriety constitutes the *whole* of being *ren*, or that it in fact *defines ren*.<sup>2</sup> However, Chenyang Li points out that the word translated by Slingerland as “constitutes”, *wei* 為, can have several distinct meanings, the most relevant of which is “make.” The ambiguity of the reference of “make” is precisely between a causal relation (in which case it is interpretable as “*shi* 使 or *ling* 令 cause” or “*ze* 則 result in”) and a constitution relation (in which case it is interpretable as “*shi* 是 is” or “*biancheng* 變成 become”) (Li 2007).

Though *Analects* 12.1, especially when “*wei*” is read as “constitutes,” provides some support for the definitionalist interpretation, it is difficult to sustain that interpretation in the end. For one thing, Confucius in *Analects* 9.3 seems to distinguish permissible from impermissible variations on traditional ritual forms by the content of the attitude these forms express. The current custom of using a more frugal silk rather than hemp ceremonial cap is permitted; however the current custom of bowing after ascending the hall expresses hubris in comparison to the traditional form of bowing upon entering the hall. This idea fits with the interpretation of *ren* as comprehensive moral excellence viewed under the aspect of affective concern and respect. And it is difficult to see how observing ritual propriety, no matter how assiduously, could define *ren* in this sense. It seems implausible that affective concern and respect is created *ex nihilo* from observing ritual propriety. Rather, it seems that one must already have at least some “raw substance” of emotion and give it form, or more form, or alter its form, through observing ritual propriety. In 3.3, the Master asks, “What has a person who is not *ren* got to do with observing ritual propriety? What has a person who is not authoritative got to do with playing music?” The attitude or feelings that might animate one’s performance of

<sup>2</sup> See Shun 2002 for his influential characterization of the “definitionalist” interpretation of *ren*.

ritual seem to be given priority in 3.4, where response to a question about the roots of observing ritual propriety the Master says that it is better to be modest than extravagant and in mourning better to express real grief than to worry over formal details. The roots here seem to be the emotions that ideally inform the ritual forms. It is the opposite of what we today might often think of something when we call it a ritual, which is that it has become mechanical and devoid of feeling. In 3.8, the Master comments on a poem by saying that the application of colors comes only after a suitably unadorned background is present. His student Zixia 子夏 says, “so it is observing ritual propriety that comes after.” After what? Perhaps after native emotions such as reverence upon which the rites build. Rites refine, and there must be something prior to them to refine.

Furthermore, observing ritual propriety cannot exhaust the affective or behavioral content of *ren* because much of human intercourse falls outside the scope of ritual propriety; also, the demands of propriety may conflict; and deciding what to do in such cases requires a skill not reducible to rule-following or following established customs (Sarkissian 2010a). *Analects* 12.2 associates *ren* with *shu*: “not imposing on others what you yourself do not want.” An illuminating interpretation of *shu* given by Philip J. Ivanhoe is that a sympathetic understanding of what it feels like to be in the position of others functions to guide the performance of one’s role-related duties to them (Ivanhoe 2008). While general norms and the dictates of ritual propriety may give one a sense of what one should do, one’s application of them can be informed and softened or mitigated by a sense of what it is like for *particular* others to occupy their social roles.

But if this line of reasoning is correct, then the problem lies in explaining why ritual propriety is so important, given that it is not wholly constitutive or definitional of *ren*. One plausible partial answer is based on the recognition that the intentional content and motivational direction of emotions is deeply influenced by upbringing, personal experience and culture. “Intentional content” refers to the content of the appraisal made, for example, when one reacts with fear. One may perceive something *as* dangerous without necessarily appraising it consciously. Whether conscious or not, some appraisals might be hard-wired. Human beings might be hard-wired to perceive a snake-shaped object making sudden movements as posing danger. Other appraisals are obviously learned and culturally derived, e.g., being afraid of a stock market crash. “Motivational direction” refers to action tendencies associated with an emotion. Again, some tendencies might be hard-wired and others are learned: e.g., the physiological changes preparing a person to flee or fight in response to the perception of danger versus moving one’s savings into gold.

One’s perception of what is dangerous, whether hard-wired or learned, might become more discerning through learning, e.g., learning which snakes are harmless to humans and which ones are poisonous. Motivational directions can be changed through learning. One might be taught not to try to kill a venomous snake since a snake is most likely to bite a human when attacked, or that moving one’s savings into gold is not ultimately prudent. The learning of cultural norms can have similar effects. Mauss et al. illustrate the effect of culture through the story of a woman

from Hawai'i driving in southern California, who was suddenly being cut off by another driver who then suddenly slowed down in front of her (Mauss et al. 2008: 39). Instead of becoming enraged, she remained quite calm and did not even have to exercise conscious restraint. Anger never crossed her mind, because in Hawai'i people do not simply display anger with other drivers. After spending more time in southern California, however, she began responding with intense rage at similar incidents. Cultural norms can influence the way people experience and express emotions even without their consciously making efforts at self-control in accordance with these norms.

In one experiment Mauss and her colleagues “primed” their subjects to control their emotions or to express them by having them perform sentence unscrambling tasks (taking word jumbles and making sentences out of them) (Mauss et al. 2007). For one group, embedded in the jumbles were emotion-control words such as “restrains” and “cool”. For the other group, embedded in the jumbles were words like “volatile” and “hot”. Then subjects in both groups participated in an event designed to provoke their anger. Participants primed with emotion-control words reported less anger experience after provocation than those primed with emotion-expression words. Mauss et al. interpreted the results to indicate that people have goals and cultural norms requiring emotional restraint and control that can be activated and then begin operation when the relevant situation comes along.

What might this have to do with Confucian self-cultivation? Slingerland has pointed out that part of the program of Confucian self-cultivation involves study of the classics, memorized and rehearsed until they become fully internalized and unconscious patterns of thought (Slingerland 2009). This is one characteristic pattern of Confucian self-transformation: one consciously, deliberately and assiduously undertakes a program that inculcates certain unconscious and automatic emotional responses and patterns of conduct. Confucian study of the classics, in Mauss et al.'s terms, might involve the inculcation and priming reinforcement of goals and norms having to do with the “self-discipline” mentioned in 12.1. We might indeed talk of a group “culture” formed by Confucius and his students, wherein they reinforce in each other such goals and norms.

Observance of ritual propriety constitutes an enactment of ethically required attitudes such as respect and concern, an “exercising” of emotional dispositions that strengthens them. As *Analects* 9.3 suggests, the exercising cannot be done mindlessly. It involves the effort to achieve a right fit between the form and substance of ritual, where the form is the physical gesture, bodily posture or pattern of conduct and the substance is the affective attitude. The form is deprived of its expressive meaning without the affective attitude it was meant to express. The form can be suited to the attitude or can be misaligned with it in varying degrees, and the implication of 9.3 is that the ill-fit can subvert the desired attitude. Taking a physical posture that is below another has a natural meaning of submission among various species of mammals (e.g., crouching by nonhuman primates and dogs and cats). It is easy to see how humans might have built on a genetically-based behavior and turned it into a signal of deference to authority. Thus in some cases, choosing the right form for the intended attitude involves both a reflective



awareness of what the intended attitude is supposed to be in the given ritual and a sense of which of the possible and available forms is most suitable for expressing the intended attitude. This includes not only the question of when and where to bow in relation to the recipient, but whether. Bowing is appropriate towards a superior, but Confucius would not bow on receiving gifts from friends, even those as lavish as a horse and carriage; the only exception was for a sacrificial gift (10.23). To make such judgments about ritual, one needs to learn their point or purpose. When Confucius entered the Grand Ancestral Hall, he asked questions about everything (10.21). When someone queried why a man who is supposed to know about observing ritual propriety is asking so many questions, Confucius responded that doing so is observing ritual propriety (3.15).

Demeanor on ritual occasions plays a major role in the detailed descriptions of Confucius in Book 10: his demeanor would change at a significant point during the occasion (10.3–10.5); and a number of contexts in which his demeanor becomes solemn are noted (10.25). Confucius also emphasizes the overriding importance of demeanor in serving one's parents (2.8). Interestingly, facial expressions have been shown not only to express emotion but also to induce the emotion they normally express (Strack et al. 1988; Hennenlotter et al. 2008; Salomons et al. 2008; Lewis and Bowler 2009). In other words, there is a “feedback loop” between the physical behavior and the emotion such that the causal arrow goes both ways. The fact that it does go both ways can perhaps explain why there are passages in the *Analects* conveying the idea that ritual and other cultural learning refines an emotional substance that is already given (3.3, 3.8) and other passages conveying that whatever is already there needs considerable restraint and alteration (12.1). Slingerland points out that recurring through the *Analects* are two different metaphors for self-cultivation: adornment and craft. The adornment metaphor occurs mainly in connection with the idea that human beings have the basic emotional substance that should inform the performance of rituals (e.g., 3.3, 3.4, 3.8). The craft metaphor occurs mainly in connection with the idea that observing ritual is necessary for restraining and reshaping the self, implying that the basic emotional substance must be transformed and not just adorned (e.g., 5.21, 12.1, 15.10, 19.7). Mengzi went on to emphasize in his theory of moral development the first idea; Xunzi emphasized the second, though it is arguable that both ideas are present in each of their theories.

In any case the more balanced position conveyed by Confucius in 6.18 is arguably the most reasonable one to adopt: “When one's basic disposition (*zhi* 質) overwhelms refinement (*wen* 文), the person is boorish; when refinement overwhelms one's basic disposition, the person is an officious scribe. It is only when one's basic disposition and refinement are in appropriate balance that you have the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子).” The mixed nature of human emotional substance makes it likely that some emotions will be of the sort that a sincere practitioner can and should bring to and inform his performance of ritual and that others will need to be curbed, restrained or redirected from harmful expression.

Observing ritual propriety, then enables the development of the appropriate affective attitudes that *ren* manifests in all its forms of moral excellence. If that were its only function, then its relationship to *ren* might be purely “instrumental,” to

use Kwong-loi Shun's term to characterize this interpretive possibility (Shun 2002): Observing ritual propriety might merely be a means to developing the appropriate affective attitudes that are manifested in all the forms of moral excellence. However, *Analects* 12.1 confers a kind of centrality on observing ritual propriety that is difficult to reconcile with its being purely instrumental. Yet neither is the relation definitional. Kwong-loi Shun has proposed that the relation is such that the rituals of one community "constitute" *ren* in the sense that mastery of the community's rituals is necessary and sufficient for becoming *ren*, but the concept of *ren* is not defined by that set of rituals because we can recognize that another community can have its own rituals that would, within *that* community, be necessary and sufficient for becoming *ren*. To clarify his proposal, Shun uses the analogy of the concept of marriage: in a particular community, performing one set of rituals is necessary and sufficient for getting married; however, the concept of marriage is not defined by these set of rituals because another community may have another set of rituals that would "constitute" or be necessary and sufficient for being married (Shun 2002: 62–63).

Shun's proposal is ingenious, but to see how it really would work, we would need to see how the concept of *ren* could have enough overlapping content across communities so that it could plausibly be regarded as the *same* concept, and at the same time, the overlapping content must be consistent with different sets of necessary and sufficient conditions for being *ren* across different communities. In the case of the concept of marriage, we might think of the overlapping content as involving a partnership between those who are married that is generally intended to involve activities such as pooling resources to maintain a household and raise children. We could think of different sets of rituals that might, in different communities, be necessary and sufficient for commencing such a partnership. We would need an explanation like this in the case of *ren* and observing ritual propriety, and it is not clear how to give it. There seems something of a disanalogy between being married and being *ren*: while the rituals are necessary and sufficient for having the status of being married, they do not really constitute the activities of being married. But for observing ritual propriety to constitute *ren*, it would seem that mastering the relevant rituals would have to constitute all the activities (at least within the relevant community) that go into being *ren*. Another problem is that there seems little textual basis for attributing to the *Analects* the presumption that different sets of rituals would constitute *ren* differently. Most importantly, the reasons that have come up earlier for not defining *ren* in terms of observing ritual propriety don't really seem to involve the difference in the rituals that communities have. It seems that one must bring some pre-existing emotional substance of the right sort to even begin observing ritual propriety in the way it should be. Furthermore, observing ritual propriety only enables one to become *ren* when we are able to correctly judge which ritual forms to use and when. This latter point involves the concept of *yi*, rightness or appropriateness, and to the ability to judge rightness or appropriateness in the situation at hand.

Chenyang Li has proposed a different interpretation, under which rituals would be a kind of cultural grammar and *ren* would be mastery of a culture (Li 2007: 317–322). Rituals stand to *ren* as grammar stands to language. The problem is that

the analogy to grammar and a language only goes so far in spelling out the exact relation between observing ritual propriety and *ren*, and the most natural way of carrying out the analogy doesn't seem quite right. For example, grammar stands to language in something like the way that form stands to content. Grammar determines what a well-formed expression in the language could be and what it could not be, but does not confer semantic content or specific meaning on well-formed expressions. But observing ritual propriety is not observing rules that leave meaning undetermined. It is not mere outward observance of prescribed patterns of behavior but also involves the expression of the appropriate ethical attitudes. It involves both form and the content of affective attitudes such as respect and concern.

Both Shun and Li seem right to look for a way that observing ritual propriety can be more than instrumental to realizing *ren* and yet not definitional. Is there a way to specify how that could be so? One key is provided by the composition of *ren* 仁 from the character for person 人 and two 二. Being *ren* involves relationship: not just in the sense of expressing affective attitudes toward others, but in the sense of acting together. Rituals of marriage, funerals, greeting, serving at meals, and giving gifts involve not just a single person expressing the appropriate attitudes towards others through the performance of certain customary patterns of actions, but at least two people whose actions toward each other express and enact reciprocal concern and respect. Rituals are especially suited for the partnered and reciprocal expression of these attitudes because they are conventionalized ways of communicating these attitudes. Convention coordinates expectation and exponentially increases the possible content of what can be communicated between people. Even actions having some natural meaning, such as bowing, become through convention much more specific in social meaning and are regulated by widely recognized specifications of when the actions are appropriate. Giving food to another is in some sense a natural action among human beings, but as governed by social conventions, it becomes a respectful serving of food to others (2.17). Fingarette construes ritual performance as an end in itself, as beautiful and dignified, open and shared participation in ceremonies that celebrate human community (Fingarette 1972). Ritual performance, internalized so that it becomes second nature, such that it is wholeheartedly, gracefully and spontaneously performed, is a crucial constituent of a fully realized human life. Observing ritual propriety is valuable for its own sake because it is the enactment of respectful and concerned relationship with others, made possible by human conventions that confer that kind of meaning on those inter-actions. Observing ritual propriety is not simply instrumental for realizing *ren* in oneself, but it is one's participation in a life with others that at least partially realizes *ren*. It is partly though not wholly constitutive of *ren* in that sense.

Such an interpretation of the value of *ren* also sheds light on the value of the aesthetic dimension of the Confucian ideal. From a contemporary Western perspective, the ethical value placed on graceful action may seem odd. But when someone does the right thing in a cold and unemotional fashion, or in an emotionally ambivalent way, it is arguable that much of the ethical value is lost. As noted earlier, when someone does the right thing with the ease that bespeaks wholeheartedness of

motivation, the action comes to possess a kind of moral beauty. For human beings to express concern and respect for one another through their actions is itself of ethical value, apart from whatever particular duties are thereby discharged. If they convey these attitudes to each other with grace, ease, and wholeheartedness, it makes our lives more fully and distinctively human.

Finally, insofar as *ren* is a set of activities with others, it should be noted that the way one performs ritual, the extent to which one expresses genuine and unforced emotions of the appropriate sort, even through minor stylistic details such as demeanor and tone of voice, one can influence the way others will act in subsequent activities (Sarkissian 2010b). One can get one's interactions off to a good start, or one may fail to do so through negligent or clumsy ways of ritualistically initiating those interactions. Insofar as being *ren* means influencing others for the better, both by drawing them into graceful and expressive performance of rituals and by the ramifying effects on them of such participation, then observing ritual propriety is in another way much more than an instrument for shaping oneself, though it is that too.

### Is *Wuwei* 無為 Part of the Confucian Ideal in the *Analects*?

The idea that *ren* consists partly in what one does with other people brings us to the question of how one does it, and more specifically to the question of whether it involves *wuwei* 無為, variously translated as “non-action” or “effortless action.” The actual phrase is used only once in the *Analects*, where Shun is described as effecting proper order by simply assuming an air of deference and facing south (the ritual position of the king) (15.5). The other passage often cited in support of the idea that full moral excellence involves *wuwei* is the aforementioned 2.4, where Confucius describes himself at 70 as being able follow his heart's desires without transgressing the (socio-ethical) boundaries. Edward Slingerland treats *wuwei* as fully a part of the Confucian ideal in the *Analects* as it is in a Daoist texts such as the *Daodejing* 道德經. He also argues that its presence in the Confucian ideal creates unresolvable tensions between the effortless and unselfconsciousness of *wuwei* on the one hand and the effortful arduousness of the Confucian path to that ideal. It therefore becomes quite important to address to what extent *wuwei* really is part of the Confucian ideal, and to the extent that it is, whether it really creates unresolvable tensions within the ideal.

Since there is just a single explicit mention of *wuwei* in the *Analects*, Slingerland makes his case on the grounds that the concept of *wuwei* functions as a metaphor for effortless action with several different but related dimensions that are expressed by “families” of metaphorical expressions (Slingerland 2003b: 59–62). These dimensions include “following” (as in Confucius being able at 70 to follow his heart's desires without overstepping socio-ethical bounds), “being at ease” (here he cites, for example, 5.26, translating one of Confucius' stated aspirations as “bringing ease (*an* 安) to the aged”), and “unselfconsciousness” (7.19 is cited, where Confucius describes himself as the type of person who becomes so absorbed in his studies that he forgets to eat, whose

joy (*le 樂*) renders him free of worries, and who grows old without being aware of the passage of years), and “timeliness and flexibility” (9.3 is cited as indicating Confucius’ flexibility in practicing ritual as long as the crucial feeling is still expressed).

Slingerland is onto something when he points out that *wuwei* may correspond to several related “families” of metaphorical expressions. The thing about the kinds of metaphorical expressions cited, however, is that they blossom various meanings linked merely through association, not through logical implication. Hence they allow a speaker to attach a range of particular meanings to an expression belonging to a *wuwei* family without committing himself to the other meanings that have been or can be attached to that expression. For example, forgetting to eat or how old one is are fairly specific forms of self-forgetfulness. They do not logically imply that one forgets what one is doing in the sense of not being self-conscious about what one is doing. Furthermore, the various dimensions Slingerland attributes to the overall conceptual scheme of *wuwei* are not logically tied to each other. A thinker may evoke one dimension of *wuwei* without necessarily committing himself to evoking the other dimensions. That Confucius is described as being able to give his heart-mind’s desires free rein clearly indicates that wholeheartedness of ethical motivation is the ultimate goal of self-cultivation. And acting from such wholeheartedness, because it eliminates internal struggle between motivational elements, could create a sense of one’s action as being effortless. But wholeheartedness of motivation does not necessarily imply a lack of self-consciousness while acting. And when lack of self-consciousness *is* evoked in the *Analects*, it is far from clear that it is the kind that involves lack of awareness about what one is doing at the moment. To forget to eat while learning or not to notice one’s age as the years go by is not necessarily to lack a sense of what one is doing in relation to others, nor is it necessarily to be able to respond immediately and without deliberation to the demands of a situation that differs in significant details from what one has experienced in the past. In Confucius, it certainly does not indicate a lack of self-assessment and awareness of the kind of person one is, since he was the one who made these observations about himself!

These points are crucial to keep in mind when addressing the issue of whether the presence of *wuwei* in the Confucian ideal creates unresolvable tensions within the *Analects*. Because *wuwei* is not a clearly defined style of action with a unified set of features, it is tricky to sustain the claim that it conflicts with self-conscious deliberate and effortful action. Consider Slingerland’s various descriptions of the source of the conflict. One description refers to the tension between the long and arduous process of achieving *ren* and the effortless of *ren* once it is fully realized. How can something that requires constant watchfulness over one’s faults and being full of questions when at the Ancestral Hall result in the ease and naturalness of being able to act freely from one’s heart’s desires and not overstepping the bounds?

The question loses much of its paradoxical air if wholeheartedness is distinguished from the radical and sweeping form of unselfconsciousness that exempts one from ever having to think about what to do in unusual situations. One can be wholeheartedly for whatever turns out to be, on reflection, the right thing to do. Any puzzlement that needs to be worked through need not be puzzlement over one’s own motivations. One may simply need to reflect on what one’s motivations require

in the situation at hand. Moreover, as Chris Fraser has pointed out, much of the question's paradoxical air arises from taking a synchronic perspective on self-cultivation and its ultimate goal (Fraser 2007). From a diachronic perspective, the *process* might involve self-conscious monitoring and restraining refractory desires, but the *later result* is, say, the transformation of once-refractory desires and the mastery of the details of ritual action such that one need no longer pay conscious attention to that aspect of what one is doing and one is able to focus fully on the feeling toward and with others that is being expressed in ritual action.

Another way Slingerland describes the tension is in terms of the conflict between the adornment and the craft metaphors of self-cultivation. He argues that the idea behind the adornment metaphor—that we have the emotional substance of *ren* that only needs refinement—is supported by the “paradox of Virtue” as discussed by David Nivison (1996). The paradox is that realizing virtue is only possible if one wants to be moral, but wanting to be moral is the essential part of being moral, and so it appears that becoming virtuous requires that one already be virtuous.<sup>3</sup> This thought, claims Slingerland, results in the adornment-related idea that we already have the basic right “stuff.” On the other hand, the craft metaphor corresponds to the appearance that most people are pretty far away from having virtue, and this gives rise to the idea that self-cultivation is a process of reworking oneself and one's emotional stuff.

Now there clearly is textual evidence for a *prima facie* conflict between the adornment and craft metaphors. The text does not settle the question of whether the conflict is irresolvable. It was suggested earlier that the adornment and craft metaphors alternate because self-cultivation is a causal process that goes both ways: One starts with some of the “right stuff,” some impulses for love, concern and respect, and this stuff is expressed and strengthened through observance of the appropriate rituals. Mengzi's doctrine of the inborn sprouts of morality that consists of feelings such as compassion, shame and dislike, deference, and a sense for what is to be done versus what is not to be done, is a crystallization of this direction of development in the *Analects*. This “right stuff” is refined and channeled through better judgment one acquires. At the same time, there is some “wrong stuff” such as desires to get ahead through flattery and toadying up to one's superiors. Such desires are restrained through the appropriate rituals. This is direction of development is crystallized in Xunzi's conception of human nature as containing feelings and desires that lead to moral conflict and destruction unless restrained and transformed. However, both thinkers acknowledge both directions of development even as they tend to emphasize one or the other. Mengzi acknowledges that if one indulges the “petty parts” corresponding to sensual desires, one will become a petty person. The heart-mind needs to reflect and then it will see that it should give priority to the greater parts of the self, the moral beginnings or sprouts (*Mengzi* 6A15; see Bloom 2009). In the chapter on ritual, Xunzi defends the traditional 3-year mourning period as more suitable than a shorter period, arguing that natural

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., 7.30: “How could *ren* be so far away? No sooner do I seek it than it has arrived”.

grief for the loss of parents requires a longer period. This suggests that there is no contradiction in using both the adornment and craft metaphors as long as one is not implying that either metaphor captures the whole of the process of self-cultivation.

The process involves additional complexity. There can be a kind of bootstrapping that takes advantage of the bi-directionality of causation. The “right” stuff that is refined can provide motivational leverage for substantially transforming the “wrong” stuff. If one is able to nurture and strengthen one’s concern and respect for others through ritual, these affective attitudes may increase one’s sense of shame when one lets the more refractory motivational elements govern one’s actions. That is, if participating in ritual with others strengthens one’s connections with and responsibility to these others, one may feel shame when one lets them down. One may have increased motivation to do something about the motivations that prompt one’s failures. This may be part of the psychological mechanism that lends plausibility to the claim in *Analects* 2.3: Leading people with administrative injunctions and keeping them orderly with penal law will motivate them to avoid punishment but they will lack a sense of shame; if one leads them with excellence [or virtue] *de* 德 and keeps them orderly through observing ritual propriety, they will develop a sense of shame and order themselves.

Recognizing that the different dimensions of *wuwei* are significantly independent of each other and that each dimension admits of different degrees and kinds of realization (unselfconsciousness, for example, need not be a total lack of reflectiveness about what one is doing, and reflectiveness need not involve mechanical rule following but thoughtfulness about what the situation requires) allows a more productive exploration of the way that felt qualities of action such as spontaneity and effortlessness might in fact be combined with reflectiveness and good judgment. The latter qualities do not need to be confined to the stages in which a person is becoming but not yet *ren*.

The Cook Ding story in the third chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 is often taken as an example of the way in which supremely skillful activity does not involve thought about what one is doing but instead an intuitive and immediate responsiveness to the material and to the situation. Cook Ding has reached a level of skill in cutting up oxen that he is able to glide his knife through the spaces and joints without encountering resistance. What is often neglected in the story, however, is the Cook’s description of what he does when he comes to a difficult place in the ox: “I see where it will be hard to handle and cautiously prepare myself, my gaze settles on it, action slows down for it, you scarcely see the flick of the chopper—and at one stroke the tangle has been unraveled, as a clod crumbles to the ground” (Graham 2001: 64). This moment in the Cook’s story indicates not just that the flow of unselfconscious activity can be interrupted when the agent gets to a part of the activity that requires self-monitoring, but also that a continuous self-monitoring is operating at another level, perhaps pushed into the background of the subconscious or conscious when things are going smoothly, but present nevertheless in case self-conscious direction is needed in the foreground of consciousness.

Such complex layering is made possible by parallel processing involving different areas and circuits of the brain, with feedback mechanisms to enable coordination

between the two levels of intuitive and self-monitoring processing. To use another analogy, the master musician may achieve such a level of mastery over her instrument that she does not need to concentrate on what she is doing with her fingers, but on one level of consciousness she is monitoring how the performance is going, and ready to activate self-monitored action when the going gets tough. If she is playing with others, for example, she will need to adjust her playing to what she is hearing from others. Where inter-action with other human beings is involved, it is even more plausible that both intuitive and self-monitoring processing should both operate in skillful activity. Dealing with a difficult place in a dead ox is a far simpler task than reading how another person is reacting to one's words and actions and making adjustments in the course of a conversation in order to achieve one's goal. And that in turn is a simpler task when one is in the course of that conversation not trying to accomplish some pre-determined goal of one's own but is striving to reconcile one's interests with the other person's interests.

This is not to deny that intuitive action can play an important role in the Confucian ideal. Hagop Sarkissian has usefully related Antonio Damasio's somatic marker theory to the Confucian ideal of *wuwei*: emotional responses, whether of positive or negative salience, get associated with certain situational features through biological hard-wiring or through personal or cultural learning; these responses are bodily physiological changes that somatically "mark" these situational features and highlight them as highly relevant for choice-making (Sarkissian 2010a). The process is typically automatic and unconscious. Damasio holds that such markers are necessary for helping human beings manage what would otherwise be an unmanageable array of choices (Damasio 1994). Positively marked options are saliently choice-worthy; negatively marked options need no further consideration. On Sarkissian's view, Confucius' program of self-cultivation produces, in effect, countless somatic markers, facilitating a fast response to an increasingly wide range of life situations. But however thoroughly people go through a program of self-cultivation, it seems implausible that they will have "somatically marked" all the situational features they will have to deal with in the future. It is implausible, in other words, that they will never encounter situations novel enough to require some deliberation or reflection. The very fact that *yi* or rightness is rightness in a particular context and can never be fully captured by a general rule (4.10) guarantees significant novelty. That is why a two-level theory involving both an automatic and unconscious level and a conscious, reflective level seems the most consistent with the total configuration of features of Confucian ethics as it appears in the *Analects*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Tiwald 2010 for a discussion of DAI Zhen's 戴震 defense of the role of reflection in the Confucian ideal against Neo-Confucians such as ZHU Xi who emphasized the spontaneous.



## The Influence of Situations and Confucian Ethics

The contemporary renewal of interest in Confucianism in the United Kingdom and North America has in part been fueled by a resurgence of interest in virtue ethics, and this resurgence has in part been fueled by disillusionment with modern, principle-based ethics such as utilitarianism and deontology. At the beginning of the modern era, there was hope that the principle of utility or the categorical imperative would provide precision and clarity as a guide to action or at least a higher-level justification of more familiar looking moral rules. A significant number of philosophers have been disappointed in that hope, and one result has been a renewal of interest in virtue ethics. But that renewal of interest has also prompted a more critical eye on possible failings of virtue ethics, and in particular the belief that a character ideal consisting of virtues could form the core of a viable ethic.

One of the more interesting criticisms is that the very notion of a virtue presupposes the illusion of global character traits. These are traits consisting of behavioral, perceptual, and dispositions that reliably manifest themselves across the wide range of situations in which they are ethically required or desirable. Critics such as Gilbert Harman cite psychological studies showing that people's behavior tends to vary in unexpected ways, affected by factors we do not expect to be so significant (Harman 1998–1999, 1999–2000; Doris 2002). For example, they cite the Milgram experiment in which the majority of subjects were willing to administer severe and dangerous electric shocks to others in an experiment, they were led to believe, that tested the effect of punishment on learning. The situational variable thought to be responsible for the surprising willingness to hurt others is the authority of the experimenter in charge (Milgram 1974). The experiment is disturbing because we might have expected, as Milgram did before he performed the experiment, that most people would have shown more ethical resistance than they actually showed to inflicting pain and very possibly harming others. In another experiment by John Darley and Daniel Batson, the most influential factor in whether seminary students stopped to help a person slumped in an alleyway was whether they were late to an appointment, even if the appointment was a lecture on the Good Samaritan! (Darley and Batson 1973).

Confucian ethics, perhaps more than other virtue ethics, should be in a good position to address this problem. David Hall and Roger Ames, and Henry Rosemont, Jr. have been influential in pointing out that Confucianism has a conception of the person that involves relationship to others (Hall and Ames 1998; Rosemont 1991). For example, Hall and Ames say that

The interlocking pattern of relationships, where focused and individuated, is the particular person, both psychic and somatic. The “field” that both constitutes and is constituted by these foci is the community (Hall and Ames 1998: 26).

There is a great deal of plausibility in what Hall and Ames say here, but it is also in need of clarification. Fields take on definition through individuals and their relationships and in that sense are constituted by them. However, it is more difficult to say how a field constitutes individuals. Hall and Ames sometimes suggest that the self is determined by the esteem with which one is regarded in community.

However, such determination cannot exhaust what the self is, since they speak of the self as having an agency that goes into constituting the field. In any case, it is unclear how the “one” who is regarded in community cannot have an existence independent of being regarded in this or that way. How else could there be a “one” to regard in the first place? If one’s self is a shared consciousness of one’s roles and relationships, there must be some “one” who takes these roles and stands in these relationships (see Wong 2004).

Rosemont writes about the Confucian self:

[T]here can be no me in isolation, to be considered abstractly: I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others . . . . Taken collectively, they weave, for each of us, a unique pattern of personal identity, such that if some of my roles change, the others will of necessity change also, literally making me a different person (Rosemont 1991: 90).

Again, there is a great deal of plausibility in what Rosemont says about the Confucian conception of the person, but it is also in need of clarification. If I am simply the sum of my relationships, then who or what is the entity standing in each of these particular relationships? (Wong 2008).

A way out of these difficulties is to take the one who stands in all the self’s relationships as a biological organism. We begin life embodied as biological organisms and become persons by entering into relationship with others of our kind (Wong 2004). This is true in several senses. It is true in the “developmental sense” that we become who we are in large part through the kinds of relationships we have with others. One reason Confucius grieved with abandon upon the death of YAN Hui is that a major part of himself was lost with YAN Hui. But it is also true in a “constitutive” sense because our identities are partially constituted by our relationship to others. Many of our constituting traits involve dispositions that are triggered by specific persons in specific social contexts. To say what these traits are, then, we must say which people, and in what context, trigger the relevant dispositions. I am the person I am in part because I am certain ways with my wife; certain ways with my daughter, and still other, different ways with my colleagues, and so on. In that sense, at least some of our constituting traits are relational, and to that extent, our identities are relational. Again, to use the example YAN Hui, important parts of Confucius’ practical identity was that of teacher of and father-like figure to YAN Hui, with whom he interacted in quite distinctive fashion; another part of his identity was the way he interacted with Zilu, and so on.

Relationally constituted identities may not just be a feature of the *Analects* or of Confucian philosophically thought generally. Some anthropologists and psychologists believe there is an East–west difference in the tendency to think of persons in terms of context-specific versus global traits. Westerners, and especially people in the U.S., tend to describe character in terms of global traits that manifest themselves across a wide range of contexts, while Asians tend to think of character in terms of context-specific traits. That people may act in certain distinct ways to family and close friends but different ways to those with whom they work is a fact that may be more salient to people in Asian societies such as China, Japan and Korea than it is to people in the U.S. (Choi et al. 1999; Hall 1976; Norenzayan et al. 2002).

Thus Confucian ethics may be grounded in a broad and ancient approach to thinking about the person that is comparatively more relational than in other traditions. Hall, Ames, and Rosemont are right about that. This is not yet to address the problem that Harman and John Doris raise, however, which is that human beings may not, or at least not enough human beings may not, be able to develop sufficiently robust character traits that qualify as virtues. To do that, they must be able to resist the influence of persons and other situational factors *when* such influence would prevent them from displaying the right conduct or attitudes. And to have virtues, they must be able to resist reliably.

However, what Hall, Ames, and Rosemont have pointed out is that being responsive to the situation, including particular others in the situation, need not be regarded in a negative light. In fact, given the conception of *yi* as rightness or appropriateness to the context, an ethically apt responsiveness to the context is morally required, and this requires one to act differently in relevantly different contexts. Several of the detailed descriptions of Confucius' behavior and demeanor in Book 10 convey exactly that impression: that he was different in different contexts, and appropriately so: in his home village, he was deferential, as though at a loss for words; and yet in the ancestral temple and at court, he spoke articulately, though with deliberation; at court, he was congenial with lower officials, and straightforward yet respectful with higher officials; in the presence of his lord he was reverent yet composed (10.1–10.2). As a teacher, he gave different advice to different students because they needed different things (11.22). The unique feature of *yi* as a robust character trait is that it is both relational *and* consistent across the very wide range of situations where its manifestation is required. It is relational in that it responds differently to different people and different situations; it is consistent in always being *appropriate* responsiveness. As *Analects* 4.10 says, the exemplary person is always on the side of what is right.

This capacity for consistency across a wide range of situations, as noted earlier, is based on a capacity for resisting undue influence from others and the situation. The latter is a power of the heart-mind (*xin*). In *Analects* 9.26, Confucius constructs both an analogy and a disanalogy between the heart-mind and the commander of the Combined Armies: both set directions, *zhi* 志, but the Armies can be deprived of its commander while peasants cannot be deprived of the directions they set for themselves. Tradition and particular others with whom one has relationship influence the substance of the self, but the heart-mind has the capacity to reflect on and criticize these influences, to the point where a person can totally reject the social order and seek to live outside it (18.5–18.6; see also Shun 2004: 188–190).

Thus Confucian ethics both recognizes the profound influence that tradition and one's relationship with others have in shaping and constituting the person, but also maintains the possibility of the self's critically reflecting on and controlling the effect of these influences, especially as they bear on developing the ability to reliably judge and act on what is appropriate for the situation at hand. Slingerland observes that Confucians have two ways of addressing the "high bar" challenge of overcoming the undesirable influence of situations (Slingerland 2011). The first is to train long and hard to jump higher, e.g., the forms of emotional training discussed earlier. Training

oneself in ritual both strengthens desired emotional dispositions and in contemporary psychological terminology “primes” unconscious and automatic activation of one’s goals for emotional self-regulation. This “priming” effect of ritual also illustrates Slingerland’s second way of addressing the high bar challenge, which is to “lower the bar” by manipulating features of the situation so as to make it easier for the agent to feel and do the right things. Through rituals, one embeds in one’s life, reminders and re-enforcers of one’s goals for self-transformation.

However, in accordance with the argument of the previous section, one should not neglect the possible effectiveness of conscious and more direct control of emotions. The Confucians believed in the power of the heart-mind to reflect on its own most minute workings and through awareness of these workings to redirect its own activities so as to orient them in an ethical direction (Shun 2004: 188). There is intriguing evidence in recent psychological studies pointing toward such a possibility. In his classic study of what made the difference between children who could control their own impulses and delay gratification for the sake of greater future reward (not immediately eating one marshmallow sitting in front of one in order to get two in 15 min), Walter Mischel found that the children with more self-control employed various mental strategies such as not looking at the marshmallow or singing to themselves (Mischel et al. 1989). By changing the focus of their thoughts, they could delay gratification longer than children who let their eyes and thoughts linger on the immediate reward. Moreover, children who displayed greater self-control on the marshmallow test later showed more social and cognitive competence and were more successful in school. From a theoretical point of view, we might expect such a result if in fact there are two tracks in emotional processes: not only a fast, automatic and unconscious track by which we assess and react to features in the world, but also a slow and reflective track by which we become aware of our immediate impulses, reflect on them, and possibly inhibit or change motivational directions by changing how we think of the intentional objects of our emotions. Confucianism might indeed have been an ancient program for enhancing the power of the more reflective track.

It might be thought that there is a limit on how much human beings can regulate their own emotional lives because the exercise of willpower drains a limited supply of mental and physical energy (see Slingerland 2009, citing Baumeister et al. 1998). However, more recent work has revealed that affirming a value that is important to oneself counteracts the depleting effects of activities that require self-control, perhaps in the service of that value (Schmeichel and Vohs 2009).

Finally, in considering why robust character traits that could qualify as virtues are so rare, we should consider the perspective that very much informs the self-cultivation projects of Confucius and his students. They were very much aware of the lack of virtue as a social and political condition and not merely as an individual condition that just happened to be widespread (Hutton 2006 makes this point). There is a reason why Confucius and Mengzi after him sought to have kings adopt their teachings. If in fact the achievement of robust virtues requires long and hard training, supported and guided by others who have taken similar paths before, and if as *Mengzi* 1A7 holds, people cannot engage in such training until they have the material security that enables them to take their minds off the sheer task of survival,

then it is no mystery at all why there are no such traits in societies structured to achieve very different goals. Ironically, the situationist psychological experiments do not take into account this underlying relational factor that might deeply influence the ability of people to form robust virtues, and neither do the philosophical critics of virtue ethics who rely on the situationist experimental evidence. This is one more thing we might learn from the *Analects*.

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# Chapter 11

## Perspectives on Moral Failure in the *Analects*

Amy Olberding

The *Analects* most directly functions as a moral manual.<sup>1</sup> It ostensibly records instruction Confucius offered his students and, by extension, enjoins its readers to use this instruction for their own moral development.<sup>2</sup> Because its purposes are largely pedagogical, the *Analects* favors that which will move readers toward personal moral cultivation rather than the comprehensive understanding typically privileged in moral theory. Confucius does not exhaustively explain the moral domain but articulates a program for lived virtue. Consequently, the *Analects* is selective in its attention, explaining most fully the affirmative practices and habits of mind a moral learner ought cultivate. So too, explanation of such practices and habits of mind often freely blends the descriptive and hortatory. The moral learner must understand, but so too she must develop both appropriate affective responses and the psychological resources to persist on a path often difficult. In sum, the governing imperative in both Confucius' remarks and their presentation in the text is to aid moral learners in developing moral mastery, and this imperative informs both what Confucius seeks to explain and how he offers explanation. It also inclines

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, passages from the *Analects* quoted in this chapter are from the translation of Ames and Rosemont 1998.

<sup>2</sup> I borrow the distinction between moral philosophy framed as “moral manual” and framed as “moral theory” from Linda Zagzebski (Zagzebski 2010: 42–45). For greater elaboration on its application to the *Analects*, see Olberding 2011: 1–7.

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against close attention to moral failure, particularly to moral failures that are dramatic and rather radically depart from the sensibility it advocates.<sup>3</sup>

The *Analects* does, to be sure, freely acknowledge that many people do in fact morally fail, but it offers comparably little that directly addresses or closely attends to moral failure. My sense is that this is a rather predictable result of its purposes *qua* manual. Just as we would not expect a do-it-yourself manual on furniture building to address the ways in which one could go astray in making a chair or, worse, how one could construct a bad chair, so too we should not expect the *Analects* to attend closely to moral failure. However, while Confucius does not elaborate an account of moral failure, he does nonetheless allude to it and his cursory descriptions of the *xiaoren* 小人, or “petty person,” are particularly evocative. So too, while the narrative elements of the *Analects* largely focus on Confucius, depicting his character and interactions with others, they include accounts of Confucius’ students. Among these, Ranyou 冉有, a student who rather dramatically morally fails, is particularly striking. Confucius’ remarks on the *xiaoren* and the *Analects*’ narrative account of Ranyou will serve as my focus in this chapter.

While Confucius does elsewhere occasionally allude to moral failure (see, e.g., 15.6, 16.5, 16.7, 17.3), the text’s presentations of the *xiaoren* and Ranyou offer a more sustained attention to failure. More specifically, these elements of the text effectively come at the issue of moral failure in suggestively different ways. In Confucius’ discussion of the *xiaoren*, he engages in a way of talking and thinking about moral failure that is notably general and, apparently, rather schematically outlines a negative moral type. In the *Analects*’ representation of Ranyou, we are instead privy to a case of moral failure *in situ*, an account that necessarily entertains particular circumstances and pressures encountered in lived experience. While not exhaustively mapping all the *Analects* offers regarding moral failure, these two elements of the text’s treatment are especially effective at capturing the dynamics of perspective at work in the *Analects*’ program of moral cultivation. In Confucius’ discussion of the *xiaoren*, he suggests a perspective on moral failure the learner must work to achieve; in Ranyou, we find instead just how difficult the cultivated perspective may be to achieve. Let me begin, then, by addressing Confucius’ most explicit remarks about moral failure, his remarks about the *xiaoren*. While Confucius’ comments on the *xiaoren* comprise the most direct and explicit treatment of moral failure available in the text, what they offer is far less straightforward than they may initially seem.

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<sup>3</sup>There are in the *Analects*, as I have argued elsewhere, both abstract remarks and narrative personae that appear to indicate more subtle species of moral failing (Olberding 2011: especially chapters 6 and 7). Given the *Analects*’ close attention to elements such as demeanor and appropriate disposition, it should be acknowledged, the possibilities for moral shortcomings, errors, and “lower-level” failures are many. Here, however, I focus on just those more dramatic claims and cases, where moral failure is pronounced, unobvious, and rather disastrous.

## The *Xiaoren*

Confucius' descriptions of the *xiaoren* are persistently coupled with descriptions of the *junzi* 君子, with the qualities of the *xiaoren* cast in relief against those of the *junzi*. Both the qualities that Confucius' ascribes to each and the frequent conceptual juxtaposition of *junzi* and *xiaoren* suggest that here are two conflicting moral types. Indeed, the terms themselves suggest this. "*Junzi*," variously translated as "gentleman," "exemplary person," or "noble person," is used throughout the *Analects* to describe those who have significantly refined themselves, cultivated persons who are reliably virtuous and thus models for others. In contrast, the *xiaoren* is ignoble or, as the evocative term "*xiao*" denotes, small and petty. Where "*junzi*" operates as a moral success term, "*xiaoren*" is a term of moral disapprobation and indeed is almost always employed by Confucius as straightforwardly indicating a stark contrast with the *junzi*. Moreover, just as "*junzi*" appears to capture a wide-ranging set of qualities readily evident in good people, so too "*xiaoren*" appears pitched to capture the sorts of features we find in bad people.

Confucius' discussions of the *xiaoren* touch on a number of features salient for understanding the moral type indicated by the term. The most emphasized of these is the disposition of the *xiaoren* toward others. Where the *junzi* is not partial in dealings with others, the *xiaoren* is (2.14). Where the *junzi* seeks to achieve harmony rather than mere agreement with others, the *xiaoren* will favor agreement, a tendency the text implies amounts to a preference for superficial sameness over fruitful incorporation of differences (13.23). Where the *junzi* will draw the best from others, the *xiaoren* will draw the worst (12.16). Where the *junzi* will have high expectations of himself, the *xiaoren* will have demandingly high expectations of others (15.21). The *junzi* can lead others with a joint sensitivity to their abilities and an insistence on meeting moral standards, but the *xiaoren* will have difficulty leading, expecting too much of others while also readily accepting that which violates moral standards if it is useful to do so (13.25). Where the *junzi* exhibits appropriate deference for great people and honors the words of sages, the *xiaoren* exhibits impertinent familiarity with great people and disdains the words of sages (16.8).

In addition to describing the *xiaoren*'s orientation toward others, Confucius suggests that, more generally, there are stable and reliable patterns in the *xiaoren*'s character and habits. The *xiaoren*, Confucius avers, does not simply err, but habitually and even willfully inclines toward error. Where the *junzi* reliably seeks the higher, the *xiaoren* reliably seeks the lower (14.23). Where the *junzi* may sometimes fall short of the ideal, the *xiaoren* never reaches it (14.6). Worse still, when the *xiaoren* errs, he will seek to conceal it and hide his faults (19.8). The *junzi* is unsuited to trivial work, but can be entrusted with great responsibilities, while the *xiaoren* can manage the trivial, but cannot be entrusted with the great (15.34).

Perhaps the most psychologically acute judgments Confucius offers about the *xiaoren* are those that appear to capture in summary fashion the *xiaoren*'s self-presentation and apparent habits of mind. He offers one particularly pregnant

observation about the characterological differences between the *junzi* and *xiaoren*: Where the *junzi* is possessed of a certain dignity, the *xiaoren* is simply arrogant (13.26). The force of this remark registers as rather damning where we recognize its invocation of a pervasive theme in the *Analects*, the considerable value of being esteemed where one is worthy of esteem (See, e.g., 1.16, 4.14, 12.20, 14.30, 15.19). Rather than earning the esteem of others, the *xiaoren* asserts superiority, imposing his self-importance on others. This may in part clarify another rather global remark Confucius makes: The *junzi* will enjoy a tranquil presence of mind, but the *xiaoren* will be apprehensive and anxious (7.37). In noting the *xiaoren*'s anxiety, Confucius may indicate that the *xiaoren*'s arrogance is not principally a failure in self-knowledge, a failure to see and know that he falls short.<sup>4</sup> Arrogance may be an assertion of one's worth where worth is *known* to be wanting, a posture that generates significant discomfort and anxiety in the one who assumes it.<sup>5</sup> This psychological portrait gains credence where we additionally consider Confucius' spare comments on the *xiaoren*'s motivational structure.

Confucius observes that unlike the *junzi*, who values virtue (*de* 德) and fairness (*xing* 刑), the *xiaoren* values land and his own gain (4.11).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, where the *junzi* understands "what is appropriate," the *xiaoren* understands "what is of personal advantage" (4.16). In these remarks, Confucius alludes to a motivational hinge around which his other observations about the *xiaoren* appear to pivot. Understood as one whose conduct finds its impetus in self-interest, the *xiaoren*'s character, habits, and orientation toward others assume a governing logic of selfishness. The *xiaoren* expects more of others than himself and abandons moral standards because such serves him; he cannot be trusted with great responsibilities because he will look to serve his own interests first; he is anxious and arrogant because he wishes to win power, deference, and status without incurring the considerable costs of earning them. Such also well fits the evocative sense of the term itself: The *xiaoren* is *small* or *petty* precisely because he favors a narrow, constricted sense of humanity, both his own and others'. He implicitly adopts a view in which each has himself alone to organize the shape of a life and concomitantly denies a more expansive view in which the fate and welfare of one is attached to that of many.

In sum, Confucius' presentation of the *xiaoren* indicates a number of related general conclusions about moral failure. Moral failure, he suggests, results from the adoption of narrow self focus as one's orientation, from a constricted sense of one's own good in which profit and advantage enjoy priority, and from a concomitant lack

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<sup>4</sup>This reading finds some credence when coupled with *Analects* 12.4, where Confucius explains the *junzi*'s lack of anxiety with reference to the *junzi*'s being able to examine himself and find no fault. I.e., seeing one's own faults is here given as a provocation to anxiety.

<sup>5</sup>For a detailed and compelling general treatment of how arrogance may issue from perceived vulnerability and insecurity, see Tiberius and Walker 1998.

<sup>6</sup>I here follow Ames and Rosemont in reading the *junzi*'s interest in *xing* 刑, more typically translated as "punishment," as indicative of an interest in fairness or, more broadly, a fair and just society. See Ames and Rosemont 1998: 237, n.67.

of interest in the good and welfare of others. The *xiaoren* is driven by self-interest, defines his interests narrowly, and excludes the interests of others from his own. Moral failure features most acutely in relations with others, such that others are principally valued for their instrumental use, but it also registers for the *xiaoren* himself in the form of anxiety and unease. As a paradigm of moral failure, the *xiaoren* evokes a sense of stuntedness, an inability or unwillingness to expand the body of one's interests to incorporate those of others and to broaden one's aims to embrace a richer array of goods and rewards.

Understanding Confucius' presentation of the *xiaoren* certainly goes some distance in understanding moral failure. In it, we have at least a sketch of a negative type that hooks rather cleanly, if somewhat predictably, to features of human conduct and character Confucius elsewhere decries. However, where we seek to understand the nature and conditions for moral failure, understanding the *xiaoren* simply does not take us far. This is evident if we consider how the concept of the *xiaoren* fits in the wider moral vocabulary of the *Analects*.

## The *Xiaoren* as a Moral Concept

Where we consider "*xiaoren*" as one term in a more extensive conceptual moral vocabulary, its comparative poverty becomes quickly apparent. One need only consider the wealth of observation and complexity of description Confucius employs in his usage of moral success terms to see a pronounced difference. The other terms employed to capture moral types – "*ren*" 仁 and "*junzi*" – exhibit a conceptual density and intricacy. These success terms, and "*ren*" in particular, may be somewhat elusive in meaning, but this largely seems owing to the finer subtleties of what the terms are meant to express. A similar complexity and nuanced care in expression is evident in Confucius' usage of narrower success terms, those terms referencing particular moral qualities.<sup>7</sup> Confucius' treatment of the *xiaoren* is comparably basic and, I venture, can seem almost ham-fisted.

In my presentation of Confucius' remarks about the *xiaoren* I have sought to draw his various comments together into a plausible portrait of a moral type. However, the type that thus emerges, it must be said, is rather crudely drawn. Where we look to the *xiaoren* to understand moral failure, Confucius' description may suggest that there is not much here to understand. The explanatory content of his various observations can, without sacrificing much, be reduced to base selfishness and its outcomes. More worrisome, Confucius' depiction of the *xiaoren* risks suggesting an implausibly unified character. The *xiaoren* is *reliably* and *characteristically* selfish. Absent is any tension or conflict, any sense that becoming a *xiaoren*

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., even a relatively straightforward quality such as filiality (*xiao* 孝) comes in for a rather sophisticated discussion sensitive to the tensions and competing interests that can complicate familial relationships (See, especially, 2.8, 4.18, 13.18).

results from a failed effort to navigate the complexities of human experience. Instead, the *xiaoren* seems never to try, never to entertain any alternative to his selfish orientation or to have struggled to be otherwise; the *xiaoren* is one in whom the good puts up no contest. He is an *utter* failure, taking the low road as though blind to any other.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to a rich understanding of the *xiaoren* is that Confucius nowhere suggests just what underlying causes or developmental history produce the character of the *xiaoren*. There are multiple possible explanations that could account for the *xiaoren* as Confucius describes him. The strongest interpretation would be to conclude that the *xiaoren* actively privileges selfishness. He is, in other words, simply morally corrupt, fully aware of the difference between good and bad, and committed to the bad. However, Confucius' comments do not clearly rule out other, more moderate explanations. Confucius' descriptions of the *xiaoren* can, for example, be understood to sketch the problem of moral ignorance. The *xiaoren* may, that is, reliably take the low road because he operates on base desires unrefined by moral learning. He simply suffers from the absence of moral structures and thus is not even really immoral, but amoral. A third possibility is that the *xiaoren* represents a kind of moral unsteadiness, his privileging of selfishness neither wholly corruption nor ignorance but instead a frailty of sorts. On such a reading, the *xiaoren* may have some moral awareness but suffers from a habitual inclination to succumb to personal expediency and avoid pain.

While Confucius avers rather emphatically that the *xiaoren* is a person of habitually and rather intractably selfish character, the source of that character is opaque. How one *becomes* a *xiaoren* – what trajectory of choices, ignorance, or weakness yield such a character – is simply not clear. Because of this, if Confucius' aim is to define a moral type, the lacuna is particularly costly. The risk here is that any understanding of moral failure achieved by invoking the *xiaoren* rides on the cheap clarity of caricature rather than any acute understanding of human moral psychology and learning. The faults of the *xiaoren* are clear but absent any appreciation of how he comes to have these faults, he cannot aid much in moral understanding and, worse, may foster an artificially stark and bifurcated understanding of the moral landscape, a landscape populated by good people and villains. This worry is aggravated by the way in which Confucius habitually frames his comments on the *xiaoren*.

The comparable lack of sophistication in Confucius' presentation of the *xiaoren* largely owes to how he uses term. What we learn about the *xiaoren*, we learn by way of a series of oppositions in which the *xiaoren* is said to exhibit some quality or habit that effectively reverses a quality or habit seen in the *junzi*, or that suggests a quality of the *junzi* that the *xiaoren* markedly lacks. The conceptual contours of “*xiaoren*” are thus overwhelmingly realized *via* a binary opposition in which meaning is conveyed through the differences contrast illuminates. While this might suggest that Confucius' real target in invoking the *xiaoren* is to better illuminate the *junzi* by way of the contrast, the *xiaoren* but a heuristic device for articulating the *junzi*'s character, this too seems unsatisfying. Confucius' many descriptions of the *junzi* offered independently of any contrast with the *xiaoren* are

quite fulsome, and it is not apparent that the contrast *does* illuminate the *junzi* in a way that significantly adds to these descriptions. The same sharp dichotomy that renders the depiction of the *xiaoren* somewhat rough and clumsy afflicts the characterization of the *junzi* in these passages. Where the *xiaoren* is basely selfish, the *junzi* is not; each seems simply the obverse of the other.

If the characterization of the *xiaoren* is simultaneously conceptually thin and a bit ham-fisted, its promise for clarifying the nature of moral failure is limited. However, it is important to consider whether Confucius' aim in invoking the *xiaoren* is indeed to *explain* moral failure. Because the conceptual content of passages describing the *xiaoren* is, relative to Confucius' reasoning elsewhere, uncharacteristically stark and unsubtle, their logic may reside in purposes that have little to do with their conceptual content. Moreover, insofar as the *Analects* largely functions as a moral manual, we have reason to query whether this orientation informs Confucius' references to the *xiaoren*. Where we understand the audience of Confucius' remarks to be moral learners who enjoy some interest in and motivation to *apply* Confucius' teachings, there may be pedagogical purposes at work in these passages that can explain or at least ameliorate their lack of conceptual sophistication. To recall my earlier analogy, perhaps an image of a bad chair can inspire better furniture building practices even where the causes of the disastrous chair are unclear. This might be so if we understand the bad chair as functioning to inspire motivating aversion to failure that will increase attention to what success requires. While a bit speculative, let me apply this reasoning to the *Analects'* presentation of the *xiaoren* as it might feature in the wider instructive purposes of the text.

### The *Xiaoren* as Hortatory Device

To read the *xiaoren* as an instructional tool rather than merely conceptually outlining a moral type may suggest that we should locate the logic of passages invoking both *xiaoren* and *junzi* in the pair *qua* pair. Perhaps what is significant is less *what* Confucius says than *how* he says it. Such would be to understand that Confucius' claims are not really about defining the distinctive traits and characteristics of *junzi* and *xiaoren*, but about the contrast itself, the pronounced gap that obtains between them and, most pointedly, how registering that gap may influence the moral learner. Read in this way, the purpose of Confucius' claims is not explanatory but hortatory: He seeks to generate affective and emotive responses the contrasts can cue in the moral learner. Rather than *working out* differences between the *junzi* and *xiaoren*, then, Confucius may be *working on* the psychology of the moral learner, exhorting the moral learner to cultivate the responses of admiration and aversion evoked where he gestures at these types. Such an account can both make sense of the sharply defined binary Confucius asserts and, moreover, is well suited to the purposes of the *Analects qua* moral manual. The moral learner is enjoined, throughout the *Analects*, to refine her motivations, judgment, and

affective responses in accord with the way (*dao* 道). In considering how the *xiaoren* might feature in this process, it is helpful first to sketch in broad strokes the result at which it aims.

To read the *xiaoren* in the way I propose is to see Confucius' appeals to the *xiaoren* as fundamentally in service to the affirmative aims of the *Analects*, aims we can begin to assay using Herbert Fingarette's influential analysis of the text. As Fingarette avers, moral cultivation is presented by Confucius as a process whereby one comes to apprehend the moral way as a singular, uniquely authoritative way that commands one's steps with an undeniable and persuasive authority. For the cultivated person, the way will, "through its nobility and the nobility of those who pursue it," exercise an attractive force so compelling that there can be no real, and certainly no genuinely competing, alternative to following it (Fingarette 1998: 35). The moral way, in Fingarette's felicitous phrase, is apprehended as a "way without crossroads" (Fingarette 1998: chapter 2). Fingarette of course reads Confucius as consequently failing both to recognize "the problem of internal moral conflict" (Fingarette 1998: 24) and to acknowledge choice, *qua* "a selection, by virtue of the agent's powers, of one out of several equally real options" (Fingarette 1998: 21). In this, Fingarette appears to conflate Confucius' descriptions of the moral exemplar's psychology with the psychology of ordinary people.<sup>8</sup> Where we grant, however, that Confucius is not describing ordinary people but moral exemplars, Fingarette's characterization of how the moral way exercises an undeniable attractive force on motivation seems correct.

As Joel Kupperman argues, there is an important sense in which the moral sensibility recommended by Confucius may indeed be identified with an absence of genuine options. As Kupperman observes, one of the aims of moral education is "to render certain kinds of behavior impossible" (Kupperman 1999: 104).<sup>9</sup> Moral education works on the learner's evaluative responses to her possibilities and functions to narrow them such that she will, as she cultivates herself, see fewer and fewer live alternatives to being, and acting as, a good person. In this respect, the

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<sup>8</sup> While a full discussion of Fingarette's position is beyond the scope of this essay, his skepticism regarding Confucius' acknowledgment of choice appears to result from identifying Confucius' comments on the exemplar's psychology with a more general theory of human psychology. As Joel Kupperman suggests, Fingarette can appear to conflate the two in a way that the *Analects* does not (Kupperman 1999: 105–106). Moreover, I expect that Fingarette's skeptical reading results from the overwhelming attention the *Analects* gives to the psychology of exemplars. That is, Confucius awards the lion's share of his attention to describing moral success, to describing the exemplary, and his comparative inattention to any but the exemplar's psychology registers, for Fingarette, as a failure to *see* any but this psychology. Where we understand the *Analects* as principally a moral manual and comparably unconcerned with the more exhaustive explanations expected of moral theory, however, Fingarette's skeptical reading is less plausible.

<sup>9</sup> Throughout this chapter, I use the phrases "live option" and "genuine option" in the Jamesian inspired sense that both Herbert Fingarette and Joel Kupperman do in their studies of the *Analects* (see Fingarette 1998: chapter 2 and Kupperman 1999: 102). I thus understand a live or genuine option to be a possibility that a person conceives as compelling and available. Such options are, as Kupperman observes, not merely possible, but register as plausible in the full context of a life.

moral exemplar features as one who has, in a rather totalized way, completed such an education. In Fingarette's idiom, moral exemplars, such as Confucius himself, come to apprehend the "intrinsic nobility" of the way as a rather irresistible "pull." The "pull" of the good, combined with the "push" of the exemplar's own effort, effectively conspire to eliminate all options but those consonant with the moral way (Fingarette 1998: 27). Doing wrong ceases to be an option that the exemplar registers as a live or genuine option.<sup>10</sup>

What both Fingarette's analysis and Kupperman's appropriately more moderate version of it serve to highlight is that in the *Analects*, descriptions of moral exemplars incline away from representation as cases in which the actor *selects* the appropriate option from among other, compelling but less appropriate or even immoral, options. Indeed, "ease" and "naturalness" are the hallmarks of these descriptions, the "push" of the exemplar's effort and the "pull" of the way *seamlessly* and *effortlessly* moving in a common direction.<sup>11</sup> As Kupperman notes, where we see these descriptions as representing exemplars, it is clear that "there are many people who are not especially sagelike and who are far from this ideal" (Kupperman 1999: 105). What I suggest is that Confucius' allusions to the contrasts between *junzi* and *xiaoren* may represent one strategy to draw the ordinary person closer to this ideal: Confucius invokes these contrasts in order to evoke just the evaluative responses the learner needs to embrace and develop.

The rather stark binary asserted between the *junzi* and the *xiaoren* notably mirrors the psychological movement moral cultivation stimulates, a movement in which attraction to the good and aversion to the bad should find increase. The great distance between the good of the *junzi* and the bad of the *xiaoren*, in this iteration, has less to do with distances between cleanly defined types of people we encounter in experience than it does with a distance moral learning should achieve in the learner's psychology. Moral learning should open a gulf between the learner's affective and emotive responses to what is morally worthy and what is unworthy, strengthening her attraction to the good and deepening aversion to the bad such that where she must choose in her own conduct which route to take, there will be no genuine choice to make. Where developing this psychology is concerned, then, Confucius' descriptions of the *xiaoren* have a hortatory function. In these descriptions, the *xiaoren* is deeply unattractive, inspiring a rather total aversion. Most fundamentally, the *xiaoren* is someone we *cannot want to be like*. Thus the invocation of the *xiaoren*, coupled with invocations of the *junzi*, operate on the

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<sup>10</sup> While it is outside the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that there are, to be sure, multiple "ways" of being good. Moral cultivation effectively narrows the range of conduct a person will find viable, but such should not be equated with there being, literally and in many circumstances, only one way to express moral virtue or a singular moral choice. As David Wong argues elsewhere in this volume, where we look to the exemplars of the *Analects*, the manner in which they express their moral sensibility can be quite different. See David Wong's chapter in this volume. The narrowing of options moral cultivation accomplishes entails that *doing wrong* ceases to be a live option.

<sup>11</sup> For close analyses of the issue of "ease" and "naturalness" in the exemplary, see Kupperman 2002: 39–52 and Slingerland 2003b: 43–75.



learner's capacities for admiration and aversion, stimulating and encouraging value responses that are rather core to moral cultivation. Such is to see Confucius' gestures at a dramatic contrast between the *xiaoren* and the *junzi* as akin to "spiritual exercises" through which the moral learner may rehearse the value responses she seeks to develop.<sup>12</sup> There are, I think, two conceptually distinct ways in which these exercises may work.

First, while the *xiaoren qua* moral type is rather bluntly drawn, the habits of conduct and mind Confucius ascribes to the type are nonetheless ones against which moral learners must surely sometimes struggle. The *xiaoren* is habitually selfish and constitutionally rather insensate to the needs of others. Few may be in peril of becoming *characteristically* selfish and indifferent to the needs and welfare of others, but many will find it, for example, easier, more immediately satisfying, or personally profitable to *sometimes* be so. In describing the *xiaoren* as he does, then, Confucius links perils to which the learner may be prey to a type the learner cannot want to be like. Aversion to the type thus extends and attaches to habits of mind and conduct that belong to it but that, significantly, do not *exclusively* belong to it. Rehearsing the association of the *xiaoren* with habits of mind and conduct the learner may find it sometimes tempting to adopt encourages motivating aversion the learner should cultivate: She wants not to be like the *xiaoren*, so she must want not to exhibit the tendencies and conduct that mark it out. Easy aversion to the *xiaoren* may thus work on building a much more difficult to achieve aversion to succumbing to temptations many sometimes feel. The more powerful the association between the *xiaoren* and these characteristics, the more powerful will be the learner's aversion to failing, even occasionally, in the ways a *xiaoren* fails.

Second, the strikingly stark binary between *junzi* and *xiaoren* Confucius asserts excites responses that are, put simply, *forceful* and *clear*, the gap between *junzi* and *xiaoren* such that there will be no ambiguity about which a learner will desire to be like.<sup>13</sup> Entertaining the contrast Confucius posits may thus function an exercise through which the learner effectively borrows something of the moral exemplar's psychology. Where *junzi* and *xiaoren* are concerned, the appropriate response, a response that arrives rather *naturally* and *easily*, is to prefer the *junzi* and see his conduct as the attractive and decisively compelling "choice." In the contrast, the moral learner apprehends and experiences the moral world the way an exemplar will: Where *junzi* and *xiaoren* are concerned, the way "has no crossroads." Confucius' claims may thus offer a way to experience the psychology of the exemplar before one has it, the contrast serving to summon value responses with a clarity and force that, it is hoped, can serve the learner in her own experience,

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<sup>12</sup> I borrow this phrasing from Pierre Hadot, who applies it to ancient Greek and Roman philosophical works that also, notably, operate largely as moral manuals. See Hadot 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Here again, it is important to emphasize the audience for Confucius' claims. Confucius' remarks regarding the *junzi* and *xiaoren* are directed at his students. This audience, it should be understood, already enjoys some motivation to be moral and some higher facility in moral affective responses. I thus here intend no comment on whether the *junzi* and *xiaoren* contrast would inspire admiration and aversion in someone not already motivated to be moral or absent some basic moral emotions.

experience that is far less likely to present her with such crisply defined possibilities.

In sum, Confucius' treatment of the *xiaoren* may aim at preventing rather than explaining moral failure. If this is correct, it implies that Confucius recognizes that acting *like a xiaoren* is sometimes tempting, that learners must struggle against seeing certain behaviors and habits of mind as live options. While the contrasts Confucius draws between *junzi* and *xiaoren* may aid in training the learner's responses to temptation, so too, they are, as perhaps such exercises must inevitably be, artificial. Their clarity and force derive from the crisp simplicity of abstract representation and the sharp dichotomy this style of representation allows. Their simplicity necessarily elides many of the complexities – complexities involving learning, motivation, and desire – a satisfying explanation of moral failure would incorporate. A perspective on moral failure sensitive to these complexities can, however, be found in the *Analects*' narrative accounts of Confucius and his students. In its presentation of Ranyou in particular, the text appears to acknowledge that in the mix and muddle of experience, the choices facing moral learners do not experientially register with the clarity enjoyed by exemplars and posited in the contrast between *junzi* and *xiaoren*.

Analysis of Ranyou's moral failure creates an important joint that can link Confucius' use of the *xiaoren* to a far richer understanding of and sensitivity to temptation. Where Confucius' use of the *xiaoren* elides, and indeed perhaps deliberately obscures, the ways in which being like a *xiaoren* can be seductive and compelling, in Ranyou's life we come to see instead just how live this option can be even for one who wishes to resist it. So too, where Confucius' presentation of the *xiaoren* suggests a character bluntly univocal in an exclusive privileging of selfish desires, Ranyou models a moral confusion that, because it is ill-handled and mismanaged, yields failures that are nonetheless rather catastrophic. Ranyou features in the *Analects* as one who may be becoming a *xiaoren*, but how he is getting there is far more complicated and circuitous than merely endorsing and acting upon univocally selfish motivations. Let me first simply rehearse what the *Analects* offers about Ranyou.

## Ranyou's Errors

With the exception of passages describing Ranyou's failures, the *Analects*' presentation suggests little that marks Ranyou out as unusual. He is neither unusually gifted nor does he apparently give Confucius the sort of resistance we see in other students.<sup>14</sup> While not exceptional, however, Ranyou did once enjoy some measure

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<sup>14</sup>E.g., Two of Confucius' other students, Zilu and Zaiwo 宰我, are, compared to Ranyou, strikingly more resistant. Zaiwo is characterized as indolent (5.10) and lacking in fundamental moral feeling (17.21). While Zilu is in many ways quite admirable, he is noted also for his incaution and contentiousness. For a study of Zilu, see Olberding 2011: chapter 6.

of Confucius' confidence. Confucius is asked on several occasions to estimate his students' fitness for government service. In this context, Confucius always affirms that Ranyou is fit. As he does in reference to other students, Confucius declines to identify Ranyou as great (11.24) or as *ren* (5.8), but he commends Ranyou's refinement (6.8) and administrative skill in state matters (11.3). These qualities, Confucius suggests, will make Ranyou an able minister. The *Analects* also offers some indications of Ranyou's temperament. When Ranyou asks Confucius whether upon learning something, one should act immediately upon it, Confucius replies affirmatively, a response that notably reverses an answer Confucius gives another student, Zilu 子路, on the same subject (11.22). In explanation, Confucius notes that Zilu's temperamental inclination to haste warrants advising caution, but Ranyou inclines to timidity and hesitation, so Confucius' answer is meant to "urge him on." The qualities of temperament Confucius identifies here feature elsewhere in the *Analects*' depiction of Ranyou, but while this exchange appears relatively benign, others appear to prefigure the nature of Ranyou's failures.

In *Analects* 11.26, we find a conversational exchange between Confucius and his students in which Confucius invites his students to describe what they would do if their skills were recognized and they could use them. Brash Zilu leaps to answer and gives what can only be counted an altogether too ambitious account of how he would in short order save a state suffering a host of ills and utterly transform its character. Confucius rebukes Zilu with a smile and then turns to Ranyou for his answer. Ranyou gives a far more modest reply, saying only that he would see to the people's needs and self-deprecatingly adding that the full refinements of moral culture would have to await a *junzi*. There is nothing objectionable in the answer Ranyou gives, but it nonetheless bespeaks the caution Confucius observes in Ranyou and may, moreover, contain intimations of a weakness to which Ranyou is prey. Ranyou exhibits here a capacity to be watchful and to calibrate his self-presentation in accord with what will be inoffensive and pleasing to his interlocutor. Zilu has given an ambitious answer and received rebuke, so Ranyou offers a more guarded and politic answer. Indeed, his reply is quite pointedly modest, effectively announcing its contrast with Zilu's problematic answer. While Ranyou's response may bespeak mere timidity, it may also indicate a desire to win approval. Ranyou surely has ambitions beyond what he attests but prudentially owns here only what will preclude critique.

Ranyou indubitably encounters trouble in his service to the Ji 季 family. Confucius consistently decries the Ji family as morally corrupt, but sanctions his students' serving the Ji family with some hope that they can operate to rein in the family's excesses and moderate its worst impulses. While we cannot know whether Ranyou accepted service to the Ji family with the aim of following Confucius' injunctions to remonstrate where a superior departs from the way, his service becomes his undoing. If Ranyou began in earnest hope of influencing the Ji family to better conduct, he ends by being largely co-opted by them. Far from restraining or redirecting the Ji family, he serves them as they are, fulfilling their aims regardless of how corrupt or damaging they may be.

In detailing Ranyou's service to the Ji family, the *Analects* attends both to the subtle and the obvious. On one occasion, Confucius simply inquires why Ranyou is late and Ranyou replies that he has been attending to "affairs of state" (13.14). Confucius immediately seizes on Ranyou's phrasing and recognizes its significance. "Affairs of state" are the province of legitimate rulers; the Ji family, usurpers of power they do not legitimately have, can only have "routine business." In another passage, we learn simply that the Ji family has usurped the ritual duties of a ruler by offering a sacrifice at Mount Tai (3.6). Confucius despairs of the ritual violation and asks Ranyou whether he could not have prevented it. Ranyou's reply is terse, avowing simply that he could not. Notably absent, however, is any clear indication that Ranyou has tried to dissuade the Ji family from its plan or any sign that he shares the impassioned distress with which Confucius decries their actions.

Less subtle are Ranyou's activities regarding financial management. Presumably exercising his authority in dispensing stipends of millet to subordinate ministers, Ranyou ignores Confucius' advice to provide a reasonably modest stipend to Zihua's 子華 family and instead supplies them with a portion well in excess of what need requires (6.4). In doing so, he displays "generosity" to a family already rich, a gesture that leads Confucius to remark, "I have heard it said, 'Junzi help out the needy; they do not make the rich richer.'" The same theme is repeated in *Analects* 11.17. Here we see Confucius decrying the high taxation levels Ranyou has implemented for the Ji family and that serve only to accrue yet greater wealth to those already possessed of enormous resources. It is this that compels Confucius to express greater disgust than we see him anywhere confess about a student's conduct, disowning Ranyou and remarking, whether in earnest or in rhetorical flourish, that his other students have his sanction to "sound the drums and attack" Ranyou.

In perhaps the most telling exchange between Confucius and Ranyou, *Analects* 16.1 shows the two in heated argument. The Ji family is laying plans to attack Zhuanyu, a small state within Lu's borders and presently governed by the lord legitimately delegated to do so. Ranyou and Zilu, who is also in service to the Ji family, relate the plan to Confucius. It is a course of action to which Confucius heartily objects. He notes the political legitimacy of the appropriately delegated governing authority of Zhuanyu, the ritual legitimacy of its rulers, and the most basic fact that attacking Zhuanyu will initiate an internal conflict pitting fellow citizens against each other.

Ranyou's first strategy in meeting Confucius' objections is to disavow the plan and assert his opposition to it. Confucius, however, is impatient with this and insists that Ranyou, as the Ji family's steward, must either accept responsibility or resign his post. He likens Ranyou to a tiger keeper who declines to accept fault when the tiger escapes its cage and to a guardian of precious objects who disavows responsibility when what is precious is ruined or destroyed. In both analogies, Confucius' disgust is palpable: Ranyou lets danger be loosed upon the world and allows justly prized political and social order to be shattered, all the while professing helplessness. In response, Ranyou adopts a different strategy and seeks to justify the Ji family's plan, noting that the strength and proximity of Zhuanyu rightly makes the

Ji family anxious about their security. Here again, Confucius will give Ranyou no relief. He observes first how disingenuous it is to disown a plan and then, when pressed, claim it justified. The episode ends with Confucius decrying both Ranyou's and Zilu's failure to shift the Ji family from its disastrous course.

In sum, the *Analects*' presentation of Ranyou effectively conveys a sense of a man of reasonable ability and moral competency gradually succumbing to moral corruption. Confucius judges Ranyou capable of service, but when given the opportunity to serve, Ranyou betrays that confidence rather dramatically. The transition is striking and to appreciate the steep descent Ranyou achieves we need only consider the transformation of his experience it accomplishes. Where once he could companionably sit among peers and friends, imagining what they could do if granted position and power, he becomes one those same friends and peers have sanction to "attack."

The *Analects*' description of Ranyou effectively serves to propose him as a negative exemplar, a cautionary model that, not unlike the *xiaoren*, inspires some aversion. Indeed, in the dialogues between Ranyou and Confucius, we find a contrast not unlike that which obtains between *xiaoren* and *junzi*, their conversations affording a similar sense of juxtaposition. Confucius operates as the moral model, his reactions to events effectively marking out how a good person should respond to the Ji family's various violations of propriety and greedy overreaching. Ranyou's responses, both what he says and what he does, are of course wide of this mark, and the great distance between what his responses should be and what they are is all the more emphatically conveyed by Confucius' palpable dismay.

Confucius' and Ranyou's responses to events are, to be sure, very different, but in their talk a more subtle and nuanced account of moral failure emerges. This is perhaps most immediately evident in an additional and especially suggestive passage:

Ranyou said, "It is not that I do not delight in your way, but that my strength is not enough."

The Master said, "Those who do not have the strength for it collapse somewhere along the way. But you have marked your own line" (6.12, translation mine).

While the context for the conversation recorded here is unknown, Ranyou appears to be offering Confucius an explanation for his shortcomings. Indeed, it seems likely that Ranyou is here engaging in apologetics for his service to the Ji family. The tension between student and teacher evident in this brief exchange captures a more general tension evident in the contrastive presentation of these men in the text. Each is explicitly seeking to explain Ranyou's moral failures. How then might we understand moral failure in light of these apparently competing explanations?

The natural hermeneutical inclination in interpreting *Analects* 6.12 is to treat Confucius' assessment of Ranyou's failings as authoritative, to see his claim as correct. However, while not discounting Confucius' assessment, Ranyou's account of himself warrants attention. In Ranyou's self-assessment, we catch a glimpse of what moral failure looks like from the inside, how Ranyou interprets his own experience and conduct. To the extent that his interpretation is wrong, how it is

wrong and how he gets it wrong is part of what we seek to understand in understanding moral failure.

## Feeling Delight but Lacking Strength

Ranyou claims to delight in the way but to lack the strength to follow it. It is of course possible that Ranyou's claim is disingenuous and he merely seeks to manipulate Confucius toward understanding or even pity in order to deflect attention from his rather deliberate violations of the way.<sup>15</sup> A more plausible reading of Ranyou's explanation of his conduct, however, is that he does, in some fashion, mean just what he says. Such is consonant with the wider portrait of Ranyou the *Analects* offers. Ranyou is, after all, Confucius' student, a status that, put bluntly, indicates some history of wanting to be good.<sup>16</sup> However mixed his efforts and poor their outcome, he willingly participates in a community devoted to moral cultivation. Moreover, his efforts have not been wholly unsuccessful – Confucius did at one time count him capable of moral service. There are, in short, reasons to think Ranyou sincere: He does enjoy *some* delight in the way and he does *feel* weak. Getting at why he might think as he does requires looking away from what Ranyou did and said and considering what he would have seen and heard.

Like all of Confucius' students, Ranyou will have presumably been well acquainted with Confucius' many remarks about the rewards and satisfactions that issue from living morally (see, e.g., 4.2, 6.20). In echo of Confucius' distinction between *junzi* and *xiaoren*, those who cultivate themselves are presented as achieving a refined joy and satisfaction; those who do not suffer anxieties and insecurity. To be a student of Confucius would entail being audience both to the verbal expression of such commitments and to their lived expression in exemplary figures, such as Confucius himself and his remarkably skilled student, YAN Hui 顏回 (see, e.g., 6.11). As a general matter, Ranyou will have both heard and seen much that can foster a desire to live morally. He will have had many opportunities to reflect on moral matters, to cultivate his own moral responses, and to see peers who are companionably engaged in the same and encourage his efforts. Learning from

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<sup>15</sup> While we cannot decisively rule out a cynical reading, Ranyou's behavior and persona seem to belie it. He is, by Confucius' estimation, given to hesitation and timidity, qualities at odds with the rather audacious manipulation of Confucius' own claims the cynical reading of Ranyou would entail: To deploy a claim of "delight in the way" in alibi of poor conduct would constitute a rather brazen affront. As Confucius' response makes clear, it not only fails to win Confucius' understanding, it appears to inflame his disgust, a reaction both predictable and one Ranyou is unlikely to risk if he is but seeking to cynically manipulate Confucius.

<sup>16</sup> While Ranyou's failures receive most of the *Analects'* attention to him, I think we do well to remember that his voluntary decision to study with Confucius indicates some significant commitment to and interest in the mode of life Confucius recommends. Study with Confucius could be a path to securing an official position, but the uncertainty of this outcome and the effort such study entailed would require *commitment*.

Confucius, as Ranyou did, in part entailed learning to discover sources of well-being and even delight that lay beyond the common run. However, Ranyou would also have seen and heard much that communicated just how tenuous more worldly well-being could be.

Confucius habitually emphasizes the superior value of moral cultivation, but pursuit of it could, and indeed often did, entail much sacrifice. Confucius himself never achieved his most ambitious goal to win a stable position and influence in state governance. He did not get the opportunity to *employ* many of the skills he so assiduously cultivated. YAN Hui, whose enjoyment of self-cultivation the *Analects* presents as unparalleled, also failed to win a position and, moreover, died tragically young (11.7). More generally, Confucius' students suffered hardships that included near starvation (15.2), physical peril (9.5, 11.23), and scorn for the way of life they led (see, e.g., 2.21, 9.2, 14.38, 14.39), a life that included few of the comforts and little of the security most desire. It is in this context that Confucius' remarks about the rewards of moral cultivation must be situated. While these rewards are significant, they are extolled in the midst of great uncertainty both about basic life goods, such as security and the meeting of material needs, and about the possibilities for fulfilling life-governing hopes to use hard won skills in securing a better world. Confucius himself appears to have developed considerable psychological resources for withstanding the deprivations and sacrifices entailed in his way of life, but for his students it cannot have been easy.<sup>17</sup>

Confucius' students are, by definition, ambitious, and the skills they so assiduously cultivate are ones they aspire to *use*. The better world they envision is one they want enacted and one they want a role in securing. Their aims are complex and the intrinsic rewards of moral cultivation are but a part of a wider dream that includes the winning of influence and position, the power to exercise skill and acumen, and the non-trivial material rewards and security that would accompany success. Most fundamentally, their desire to secure a better world includes the desire for a world in which good and skillful people, *people such as themselves*, can thrive and where the sacrifice of prosaic goods is not required for living virtuously. Indeed, the question Confucius asks his students in *Analects* 11.26 – What would you do if your worth were acknowledged? – can be seen as poignantly capturing both dream and reality. These are men with aspirations and plans they can articulate but not enact, their conversation exercising their imaginations where power to realize their hopes is sadly wanting. With this in mind, we can begin to appreciate better what would confront Ranyou, a student of modest ability, some ambition, and unsteady confidence in learning.

Ranyou will have heard the rewards of self-cultivation commended, admired exemplars such as Confucius and YAN Hui, but he will have seen and heard much more besides. And what he saw and heard would have been much more mixed, much less compelling as testament to the joy and satisfaction moral cultivation can

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<sup>17</sup> For a study of Confucius' own occasional complaints about the sacrifices entailed in following the way, see Olberding [forthcoming](#).

bring. In this context, his perception that strength is needed gains force. Likewise, his suggestion that his delight is insufficient absent adequate strength achieves some sense, for no ordinary appreciation of the moral could long withstand the sorts of challenges Confucius and his students sometimes faced. With this in mind, a more sympathetic account of both his failure and his explanation of it is possible.

Most basically, Ranyou features as a learner for whom there are multiple “live options.” Where moral cultivation aims to narrow the learner’s perceptions such that doing wrong will not seem a viable route to take, Ranyou has not yet attained this perceptual clarity and his circumstances present him with choices he must navigate. He does not yet enjoy the compelling “pull” toward the moral enjoyed by exemplars and instead registers his conditions as generating internal conflict about what to do. In rudimentary summary, his failure can be characterized as his simply having chosen the wrong path, having gone the way a *xiaoren* would. However, while he acts as a *xiaoren* might, his motivations and psychology are almost certainly more complex, more prey to a kind of confusion that is comprehensible given the conditions of his life.

Ranyou has achieved a remarkable success in winning a position as steward to the Ji family. He is positioned to influence governmental affairs, both to exercise skills and to enjoy the fruits of such labor. His reluctance to lose this position – either by remonstrating and thus displeasing those he serves or by resigning based on moral considerations – operates in just the uncertainty I describe above. Given the deprivations and dangers Confucius and his students sometimes faced, the desire for some security in meeting one’s material needs and preserving one’s safety was neither trivial nor unreasonable. Even if we conclude, however, that Ranyou should forego such concerns in directing his life, there is arguably much more at stake for him in the choices he faces. Unlike many of Confucius’ students, for Ranyou, the dream has become real: He is positioned to do that for which all his training has ostensibly prepared him, what he and his peers have long aspired to do. While abandoning his post would constitute a moral success, such would also plausibly be to admit failure, to concede that he is unequal to the work and to own the limitations of his own powers. It would be to acknowledge the dream become nightmare, to accept that what one has long wanted cannot be kept and must be abandoned. The stakes here, in sum, are not just material but existential.

For Ranyou, motivating moral conduct has become a matter of navigating significant and life-altering loss. Opposing the Ji family stands to lose him not only the popularly recognized stuffs of success – position, influence, and material goods – it stands to lose him something of his hopes and aspirations. Thus his claim to lack strength for the choice before him registers the felt, experiential reality of his circumstances. Most immediately, he needs the strength to voice moral judgment of the Ji family, to overcome any hesitation simply to say what must be said and endure what follows. More globally, he needs the strength not only to accept that “the dream” has soured, but to be the agent of ending it. To do as Confucius suggests, that is, is to assert a moral judgment of the Ji family’s conduct that will sever him from them and thus sever him from the fulfillment of some of his life-governing ambitions. Ranyou’s account of himself suggests that he perceives



Confucius' advice as requiring not simply that he be moral but that he be *heroically so*, his claim to enjoying delight but wanting strength acknowledging that what he must give up is a sacrifice too far for one who, in his own modest self-estimation, does not lay claim to being a *junzi*. He is, he implies, a man who is good in a rather ordinary way, unequal to circumstances that require superlative moral goodness and significant sacrifice.

While Ranyou's circumstances are in many ways more dramatic than most, the structure of his struggle, as he frames it, is one with considerable purchase in much of moral experience. Moral struggle against temptation often does operate against reluctance to court loss. The greater the stakes, the more difficult moral conduct becomes and the more important the strength to withstand and endure loss becomes. However resonant Ranyou's diagnosis of his trouble may be with rather common moral experience though, it is not the whole of the story as far as the *Analects* is concerned. I have so far treated Ranyou's perspective rather charitably and sympathetically, but it is a perspective that Confucius rather hotly contests. Let me now turn to Confucius' assessment, an assessment the *Analects* treats as authoritative.

## Marking the Line

To recall, Confucius replies to Ranyou's explanation of himself by saying, "Those who do not have the strength for it collapse somewhere along the way. But you have marked your own line." Confucius' alternative explanation of Ranyou is somewhat puzzling. On the face of it, his response to Ranyou appears to endorse Ranyou's sense that following the way requires strength (*li* 力). While Ranyou does not lack strength, Confucius allows that some do and "collapse" (*fei* 廢). However, this reading may be undermined by Confucius' comments elsewhere in the text, most notably in *Analects* 4.6. There Confucius remarks, "Are there people who, for the space of a single day, have given their full strength to *ren*? I have yet to meet them. As for lacking the strength to do so, I doubt there are such people – at least I have yet to meet them." Here Confucius unambiguously denies that anyone lacks the requisite strength to follow the way. In this passage and elsewhere (7.30, 9.31), Confucius suggests that what matters most is developing an appropriate affective orientation to the way: "loving what is *ren*" (*hao ren* 好仁) and "hating what is not *ren*" (*wu bu ren* 惡不仁). Achieving this orientation largely dissipates temptation, enabling one to see the way as "without crossroads."

In this light, Confucius' diagnosis of Ranyou charges him with lacking not strength but an appropriate affective orientation. As Edward Slingerland explains this line of interpretation, "Despite his protests to the contrary, [Ranyou] actually lacks a true passion for the Way" (Slingerland 2003a: 57). For Ranyou to do other than he does, he would need to develop deepened "passion" for the moral and aversion to doing wrong. While this is likely the most parsimonious interpretation of Confucius' assessment of Ranyou, it is also dissatisfying in several ways.

As Slingerland notes, while it may be true that a genuine love of the way can render moral conduct effortless, this simply raises the significant challenge regarding how to inculcate that love where it does not (or not yet) exist (Slingerland 2003a: 37). Of course, as I have argued, Confucius' rehearsal of the contrasts between *junzi* and *xiaoren* can be understood to aim at this work. However, as is implicit in my treatment of Ranyou, the crisp simplicity of such exercises may have limited potency where the conditions of life are far from simple and choices register amidst complex experience and desires. Perhaps most basically, though, this interpretation offers little for understanding the shortcomings of moral learners, those who are neither *junzi* nor *xiaoren*. Ranyou is, as Kupperman observes, a "man in the middle," neither hero nor miscreant (Kupperman 1999: 107). Put another way, *qua* learner, he presumably has *some* of what he needs to live morally, *but not all*. If Confucius' response to this state of affairs is to note that Ranyou would not have such trouble if he "had it all" – that is, if he sufficiently loved the way – it may well be true, but it is trivially and unhelpfully so. It is but to suggest that were Ranyou an exemplar, he would not err as he does.

While Confucius' comments regarding the potency of loving the way are not to be discounted and do reflect his idea of maximal moral success, there is, I think, more to be gained by reading his reply to Ranyou as pitched at a different target. If we read Confucius' claim as taking as a given both that exemplars do not struggle as learners do and that Ranyou is but a learner, he may be offering a way that Ranyou can come nearer the exemplar's perspective. Such is to see his remarks to Ranyou as another instance of Confucius offering comments therapeutically adapted to the abilities and understanding of his interlocutor. What he wants, then, is Ranyou to *see and register* his struggles and failings differently than he does. He suggests that of all the ways of thinking about Ranyou's situation, there is a better way *available to learners* than Ranyou has yet achieved. Read in this fashion, Confucius' remarks achieve a sense and logic that permits a far more sophisticated understanding of how learners may fail.

Confucius clearly believes that the account of himself Ranyou has given is wrong. However, assessing *how* it is wrong requires considering whether Ranyou has offered an account of failure that is rooted in a *general* misunderstanding of why people err or whether he has *misapplied* a potentially viable explanation of failure to himself, an explanation that does not suit what Confucius observes in Ranyou. That is, there are two levels at which Confucius addresses Ranyou's remarks: He speaks both to the implicit general claim that one must be strong to follow the way and he addresses whether this general claim is rightly applied in explaining Ranyou's particular failures. With this distinction in mind, let me outline what might be entailed in taking Confucius' remarks to Ranyou as pitched at therapeutically addressing Ranyou and, more generally, moral learners.

As my sympathetic presentation of Ranyou's context and likely concerns seeks to highlight, his claim to be wanting strength for moral conduct invokes more general and commonplace anxieties about losing what we value. Even where losing something of what we value may operate to preserve other, more important goods, quailing at loss is an obstacle to acting virtuously, an obstacle Confucius regularly

notes and seeks in part to address by emphasizing the superiority of virtue to what we might lose in the pursuit of it (see, e.g., 6.11, 7.16). It is thus quite striking that Confucius' reply to Ranyou treats strength as it does: Confucius does not here insist that everyone is strong enough; some are *not* and they *collapse*. The oddity of this claim is not simply that it ostensibly contradicts views Confucius elsewhere attests but that it seems designed to *evoke* and *amplify* just the anxieties learners are likely to have. It suggests that one may do one's best, exercise what strength one possesses, and yet it will not be enough. One will not end delighting in the way, discovering redemptive and surpassing joys out of loss, but "collapse."

In raising the possibility of collapsing despite one's best efforts, Confucius appears rather emphatically to endorse Ranyou's implicit general claim that strength is required for following the way. He accedes, that is, to the view that, *from a learner's perspective*, following the way will register as a significant risk. Reconciling oneself to losses incurred through the practice of virtue is not merely a matter of developing delight in the way, but of inhabiting the host of anxieties one will encounter on the way to such delight, as well as the global doubt that one may never reach delight at all. It will *feel* as if one needs strength, and uncertainty about being equal to the task are part of the process. Confucius' claim that some "collapse along the way" thus acknowledges the felt, experiential struggle of moral learners. This acknowledgment, however, is but a preface to Confucius' more pointed assessment of Ranyou. Whatever general truth about the psychology of learners may reside in Ranyou's claim that one needs strength, it is not a truth that explains, much less excuses, his particular case. Something else, something *worse*, is at issue for Ranyou: he has "marked his own line." What Confucius means by this is evident if we look to how Ranyou's failures transpire.

Ranyou's behavior and comments suggest that he has not been overmastered by fear, nor has he exhausted what strength he possesses. He has not "collapsed along the way." Instead, while he stands at a moral crossroads, he largely flies from seeing it as such. Despite his accession to the Ji family's aims, it is significant that he does not remove himself from Confucius' sphere and influence, and indeed actively invites Confucius' counsel. He solicits Confucius' opinions and attempts to defend himself against Confucius' criticisms. He appears, that is, to want to serve two masters: to preserve his position with the Ji family and to keep Confucius' good opinion, to collude in corrupt governance and continue as Confucius' student. The manner in which he "serves," moreover, suggests a deeper determination to conceive the "two masters" as one. For example, Ranyou's quarrel with Confucius regarding the proposed conflict with Zhuanyu bespeaks a desire not simply to justify his conduct but to enjoin Confucius' agreement: Confucius should acknowledge the limitations of Ranyou's powers to influence the Ji family or, failing that, assent that the Ji family's plan is a reasonable response to a threat. He wants Confucius to concede that the road he takes is the *only* road available given the circumstances. Indeed, Ranyou often disavows his own agency: He denies the presence of options in his discussion of Zhuanyu, he cannot stop the sacrifice at Mount Tai, and, more globally, ascribes his failings to a want of strength. On Ranyou's account, he has in each case done what can be done and any poor

results owe to forces outside his control. There is here little acknowledgement that he *could* do otherwise. In short, Ranyou habitually evades the existential position in which his circumstances place him. He stands at forking paths, but seeks not to see them as such, operating as if circumstances alone drive events. Because he will not acknowledge the forking paths, he careers between them, trying to maintain a life in which serving the Ji family and pursuing moral cultivation can both be preserved. It is in this – in Ranyou’s refusal to entertain his choices *as choices* – that Ranyou draws a line. While his conduct functionally constitutes a rejection of Confucius’ counsel and his own training, he declines to own it as such, his professions of powerlessness amounting to strategies for denying the nature of his situation.

Ranyou’s failure, on this account, issues from existential dishonesty. He declines to navigate the losses to which circumstances oblige him in a self-conscious and deliberate manner, choosing where he must even when to do so is to suffer profound disappointment, despair, and the sacrifice of life-governing hopes or dreams. Confucius sees in Ranyou a resistance to embarking on a process rather core to moral development, the process of ordering one’s desires. What Ranyou wants – to have moral purpose and companionship, to enjoy the good opinion of worthy others, to exercise his talents and training, to enjoy influence and its material and psychological rewards – is not the source of his problem. Such are the same stuffs Confucius and all of his students want. Ranyou’s problem issues from an unwillingness to decide which of his wants will matter most, which he will seek where circumstances bar seeking them all. In defiance of what his life in fact can afford he *wants to have all he wants*. Because he cannot surrender this global desire and hope, he marks a line. He never consciously and deliberately embarks on the life he has, a life that obliges him not only to make choices, but to suffer losses. What strength he has to endure these losses is unknown because he has not yet really acknowledged the need to exercise it.

Read in this way, Confucius’ response to Ranyou captures and makes sense of the vacillation and irresolute that characterize the presentation of Ranyou in the passages detailing his failures. Moreover, in Confucius’ evocation of the anxieties that can accompany moral effort – the fear that one will “collapse” – he makes more explicit an element implicit in his other conversations with Ranyou. While Confucius’ various critiques of Ranyou clearly enjoin him to act differently, they also suggest that he should *feel* differently. In comparing Ranyou to a negligent tiger keeper, for example, Confucius enjoins Ranyou to an alarm and self-disapprobation he does not apparently feel. In declining to see his choices as choices, Ranyou has failed to feel the pain of them, “marking a line” that insulates him from their full emotive effect. In invoking the fears of learners, then, Confucius again seeks to enjoin affective responses. Here, however, it is not the clarified perspective of an exemplar he invites but a perspective on the way to this. Ranyou would do better to inhabit the fear of collapse, to own the pain of what he stands to lose and the uncertainty that it will be redeemed, than to retreat as he does from his own agency into insulating, impossible hope.

In this analysis of Confucius’ remarks, Ranyou again notably features as a kind of everyman, the struggle Confucius discerns in him betraying elements rather common to much of moral experience. Just as people may feel weak and unequal to

the losses circumstances demand of them, they may fly from recognizing that they cannot win all they want and must thus decide what will matter most. Prior to the temptation to choose badly is the temptation to deny that choice is required and thereby preserve the hope that one can “have it all.” However, as Ranyou’s life stands as testament, denying the possibility of loss does not prevent it. He does lose some of what he wants: Confucius’ good opinion, his place among peers and friends, and, to the extent he internalizes Confucius’ condemnation, the “dream” itself, the sense that his is the morally noble work for which he assiduously trained.

In sum, Confucius’ response to Ranyou engages two perspectives moral learners may have: the perspective Ranyou claims to have and the existentially dishonest perspective Confucius discerns in him based on how he in fact behaves. While both are perspectives learners may have and indeed are common in moral experience, Confucius implies that the one Ranyou claims but does not inhabit – that strength is necessary to follow the way – is preferable. Better to feel self-doubt about one’s capacity for courage and enduring losses in one’s choices than to deny the existential reality of them and one’s own agency. Better to feel fear and anxiety than to retreat into self-deceptive hope.

## Moral Failure

Where we combine Confucius’ explicit abstract remarks about moral failure in his treatment of the *xiaoren* with the *Analects*’ narrative presentation of Ranyou and Confucius’ response to him, what emerges is not of course an exhaustive examination of moral failure. What we find instead is a range of perspectives. The struggle against moral failure is in part a struggle to *see* moral experience as clearly as possible. In the contrast between *junzi* and *xiaoren*, the learner may catch a sight of what an exemplar sees, a way in which choices are narrowed and one is drawn onward as if there is no other way to go. In the conversations between Confucius and Ranyou, we find two perspectives that lack this clarity, but that confess something of what the moral world can look like for learners. The perspective Confucius urges Ranyou to adopt is one that sees not simply the way but the crossroads and byways. Ranyou, that is, should own that, *for him*, there are multiple routes, that circumstances do not direct him but instead open multiple paths from which he must select a route. So too, Confucius forcefully acknowledges that in this openness there is anxiety and fear. Trepidation about where the paths may lead and what it may cost to follow them is part of seeing them as they are. It is, in this way, a stage on the way to the exemplar’s clarity. The perspective Ranyou has instead is, Confucius suggests, befogged by existential dishonesty, by a desire to treat divergent roads as one in order to escape the necessity of choosing. Where Ranyou can alibi his poor conduct by ascribing it to circumstances he does not control, thus disavowing his agency, he draws a line that bars his own progress. Where the *xiaoren* rather boldly strides down the path of badness, Ranyou represents the possibility that one may stumble into it.

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**Part III**  
**Mapping the Landscape: Issues in**  
**Interpretation**

## Chapter 12

# The *Analects* and Moral Theory

Stephen C. Angle

Over the last century, scholars both within China and without have considered how the *Analects* relates to modern, Western philosophy. Should we think of the *Analects*—or the early Confucian tradition more broadly—as “philosophy,” and if so, should we seek to analyze its contents in terms of Western philosophical categories? With regard to the ethical teachings in the text, a more specific concern has also been raised: Does it make sense to think of the *Analects* as engaging in “moral” theory, or is its framework adequately different from modern Western moral philosophy that a different set of categories is necessary?<sup>1</sup> A central contention of the present chapter is that thinking about the *Analects* in terms of modern moral theory can indeed be constructive (from both interpretive and dialogical standpoints, as I will explain below), but there are also good reasons to take seriously concerns about an unhealthy hegemony of Western philosophical categories. The first section of this chapter will therefore address a variety of methodological issues raised by the prospect of thinking about the *Analects* in terms of moral theory. Subsequent sections will then explore the pros and cons of viewing the *Analects* through the lenses of Kantian deontology, which Sinophone scholarship on the text has tended to stress; virtue ethics, which is more prominent in Anglophone secondary literature; and role ethics, which has emerged as a potential alternative to both deontology and virtue ethics. We will also consider the results of viewing these theories through the lens of the *Analects*. The chapter’s overall conclusion is that we are entering an exciting time for open, cross-cultural and trans-linguistic textual interpretation and moral theorizing, much of which is on view in the recent approaches to the *Analects* canvassed here.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of this large question in terms that complement those of the present chapter, see Olberding 2011, especially Ch. 1.

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## Methodology

Of all the chapters in this volume, the present one engages in the most explicit and sustained use of Western philosophical categories to analyze the *Analects*, and so it seems important to consider some of the methodological issues that such an approach raises. The first question we will consider is whether it makes sense to think of the *Analects* as engaged in “philosophy” at all. Second, assuming it is legitimate to treat the *Analects* as (among other things) a work of philosophy, does the way philosophers—both East and West—have sought to use Western categories to interpret the text result in a troubling privileging of Western categories? Third, even assuming that we can deal with this general question, a more specific version of the challenge may recur: Namely, is the ethical thought in the *Analects* concerned with “morality,” as that category has been understood in contemporary Western philosophy? The final topic in this section presumes satisfactory answers to all these questions, and looks at various ways in which one might taxonomize “moral theory,” as a preparation for the chapter’s subsequent sections.

## Philosophy

The most basic challenge faced by those who wish to discuss the *Analects* and (philosophical) moral theory is whether the text is properly understood as “philosophical.” From two very different perspectives it might appear that the answer is “no.” On one hand, there are scholars—primarily but not exclusively Chinese—who believe that to view the *Analects* as philosophy is to diminish it, to reduce it to the parameters of a Western academic discourse and thereby miss out on the broader, holistic significance of the text’s teachings.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, there are scholars—primarily but not exclusively Western—who believe that to view the *Analects* as philosophy is to misunderstand the social, political, and cultural contexts in which classical Chinese “masters literature” was produced. According to this kind of view, the goals, functions, and style of a text like the *Analects* were so different from those of classical Greek “philosophical” texts that is a mistake to read “philosophical” concerns or reasoning into the *Analects*.<sup>3</sup> The issues raised by both these groups of scholars are many and complex, and their insights offer us a great deal when it comes to understanding the contexts and objectives that informed the production of the *Analects*. I believe, though, that there are still sufficiently good reasons to engage with the *Analects* as philosophy, if it is done with sensitivity and with a consciousness of the limitations of a philosophical approach.

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<sup>2</sup> See Defoort and Ge 2005 and the essays collected in that journal issue (as well as the two following issues).

<sup>3</sup> One example of such an effort to peel away layers of “philosophical” readings—although doing so in part to contribute to a more pluralistic future philosophy—is Denecke 2010.

Consider, for example, the scarcity of eristic rhetoric in the *Analects*. It has plausibly been argued that a range of cultural and institutional differences between Greece and China help to explain the different degrees of, and attitudes toward, explicit argumentation and reason-giving in the two contexts.<sup>4</sup> With respect to the *Analects* in particular, it is certainly the case that insofar as there is reasoning supporting the text's various claims, it is mostly implicit. One possible response is to conclude that the text is "evocative" rather than "systematic" (Van Norden 2007: 137), even while it helps to initiate more explicit articulation of positions and reasons that are seen in later texts. Others might emphasize the possibility that more explicit reasoning was not written down into the text, but could have been part of the practice of the community around the *Analects*. In either case, lack of explicit reasoning does not necessarily mean a lack of reasons; we are not forced to conclude that the text grounds its claims in arbitrary assertions, mysterious sagely insight, or because-we've-always-done-it-this-way traditionalism. One of the values of engaging with the *Analects* philosophically can precisely be to see ways in which its claims may be backed up with reasoning.

It sometimes seems that scholars who worry about thinking of the *Analects* as philosophy mistake contemporary philosophical practice for all of what "philosophy" can and should mean. The story of Greek *philosophia*'s evolution (or devolution) through Roman, Christian, Islamic, and eventually modern European and American contexts is fascinating, but there is no reason to assume that the current professionalized, university-based conception of philosophy is the best or final possibility. It is true, in other words, that the practices of those responsible for texts like the *Analects* were very different from those of contemporary philosophers, but they had more in common with the Greek and Roman philosophers for whom philosophy was a "way of life" (Hadot 1995). Furthermore, even though the practice out of which the *Analects* emerged was not identical to that of any period of Western philosophical practice, it makes sense to think that the human concerns in each case are similar enough to make it constructive to view them in light of one another. At least, this is a plausible enough claim that we should be open to seeing what happens when we consider the ideas in the *Analects* and the ideas found in another philosophical tradition in light of one another. This is of course not to say that there are never any problems with viewing the *Analects* as philosophy: We will need to keep our eyes open for issues throughout the following discussions.

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<sup>4</sup>I have found Stephen Walker's conference presentations and blog posts on this subject (for example, see <http://warpwefandway.wordpress.com/2011/09/12/zhuangzi-and-the-possibility-of-philosophical-culture/>) to be very stimulating. I accept that there is an overall difference of tone and method between early Chinese and Greek discourses, though of course there is wide variation within each, including many non-eristic Greek texts and many Warring States and later Chinese texts that engage in explicit argument and even pay explicit attention to the methods of argument. See also Van Norden 2007: 10–15, 59–64 and Denecke 2010.

## *Asymmetry*

A second major concern that has been raised in recent years is that studies in comparative ethics, no matter whether Anglophone or Sinophone, have tended to exhibit a troubling asymmetry. Kwong-loi Shun has put the point this way:

[T]here is a trend in comparative studies to approach Chinese thought from a Western philosophical perspective, by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Western philosophical discussions. . . . Conversely, in the contemporary literature, we rarely find attempts to approach Western philosophical thought by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Chinese philosophical discussions (Shun 2009: 470).

I agree with Shun that there has been such an asymmetry, and furthermore that asymmetry of this kind may well be a problem. If local, idiosyncratic experiences from moments in Greek, Roman, or European history are taken as normative expectations for all of humanity, this should trouble us; if categories that Greeks (and so on) used to understand their experiences are taken as the only categories to be used in understanding all human experiences, this sounds equally troubling. Of course, the mere fact that a category is first articulated in one particular context does not mean that it cannot be legitimately applied in others. Genuine problems occur only in two kinds of cases. First, differences in global power may lead us to only consider some putatively universal categories—say, those derived from European experience which happen to mesh particularly well with contemporary capitalism—and to ignore others that also make universal claims. Second, it may be that there are categories without universal aspiration whose applicability is limited to cultural contexts in which they are rooted. If so, then the imposition of these categories on other parts of the world might be an even more egregious form of cultural imperialism.

I mention this second kind of case primarily because there are some Chinese scholars today who think of Confucianism (and the *Analects*) principally as a crucial cultural inheritance of the Chinese people, even arguing that without Confucianism, there can be no Chinese.<sup>5</sup> If the *Analects* is only this kind of local knowledge, then an effort to insert it into a global conversation about philosophy or moral theory would indeed be quixotic. In my view, however, efforts to confine Confucianism to local knowledge are seriously mistaken. There are strong indications in the *Analects* and other early Confucian texts that the classical masters took their views to apply to everyone, not just to some narrower group of people (any talk of “Chinese” at this point would be anachronistic).<sup>6</sup> I also reject the idea

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see Kang 2005 and Kang 2011.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in *Analects* 9:14, Confucius says that he wants to dwell among the Yi people outside the Chinese heartland, which leads someone to ask him: “But they are uncouth; how will you manage?” Confucius responds, “If a gentleman were to dwell among them, what uncouthness would there be?” The implication seems to be that Confucian virtue is not limited by borders or culture, but applies and can spread wherever the virtuous gentleman should go. For further discussion, see Angle 2013.

that Confucianism is somehow intrinsically tied to Chinese culture, although pursuing that argument here would take me too far afield.<sup>7</sup> If there is a kind of asymmetry for us to worry about, in other words, it is of the first kind mentioned above, according to which we too readily assume the applicability of one set of universalist categories without giving others their due.

Once things have been put this way, we see that asymmetry itself is not the problem, but only the sign of a possible problem. Depending on the goals of a particular researcher, it may well be possible to rest primary weight on one set of categories without being closed-minded toward other relevant categories; we will see examples of this in the sections to come. In addition, the situation Shun has diagnosed may be changing, or at least it is not the case that the asymmetry is complete. As we will see, some scholars, both East and West, have taken categories from texts like the *Analects* as primary, and analyzed or criticized Western moral philosophy in these Confucian-derived terms. Still, we will also see below some reasons to think that moral thinking in the *Analects* may be too readily assimilated to the categories of Aristotle or Kant. In order to assess when and where things go wrong, it will be helpful to distinguish between two modes in which scholars may ask questions about the *Analects* and moral theory: the interpretive and the dialogical. Categories not derived from the *Analects* itself are relevant to the philosophical *interpretation* of the text only insofar as a case can be made that they contribute to a better understanding of the text than is available without them (or *via* alternative categories). Philosophical dialogue, on the other hand, may have primary aims that are different from the best understanding of a given source text. One might argue that a reading of the *Analects* in terms of deontological ethical theory suggests issues for modern deontology that had not previously been noticed, or that stressing the virtue-ethical elements in the *Analects* can stimulate the contemporary growth of Confucian moral theory in constructive ways. Even if they are never wholly distinct from one another, we would do well to keep the differences between dialogical and interpretive approaches to the *Analects* in mind as we proceed.

### ***The Terrain of the Moral***

We have two, linked tasks remaining before we can turn to the main body of the chapter: first, to consider whether the *Analects* is in fact concerned with morality at all, and second, to examine the various ways in which competing moral theories carve up the domain of morality. Insofar as the theories disagree about the scope of the moral, of course, this must also be taken into account.

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<sup>7</sup> See Zhao 2008 on whether Confucianism can successfully be “universal” instead of “local” knowledge (Zhao 2008: 175); and also Bai 2010, arguing that we can read early Confucianism as accepting the universal openness of political philosophy, as versus the particularist focus encouraged by JIANG Qing’s viewing Confucianism (that is, *rujiao*) through the lens of religion.

In two well-known papers, Henry Rosemont, Jr. argues that the concept-cluster corresponding to “morality,” as that term is understood in modern Western moral philosophy, has no match within early Confucianism (Rosemont 1988, 1991). There are no terms, he says, for a host of ideas key to morality—freedom, liberty, autonomy, individual, utility, principles, rationality, and so on—and so we should conclude that Chinese thinkers were not concerned with morality, but with something else. He suggests that we adopt a broad definition of “ethics,” as the study of “the basic terms employed in the description, analysis, and evaluation of human conduct,” and see that while both Confucians and modern Westerners have varieties of ethics, only the latter have morality (Rosemont 1988: 173). Rather than morality, the Confucians’ way of evaluating human conduct was based in an understanding of persons as constituted by their roles. In a variety of contexts, Rosemont goes on to argue that the Confucians’ approach is in many ways preferable to “morality,” and that we today should seriously consider adopting the Confucian approach to ethics. In the last few years, Rosemont and Roger Ames have explicitly formulated this Confucian alternative to moral theory as “Confucian role ethics.”

Before any assessment of Rosemont’s claims, it will be helpful to sketch some of the arguments within modern Western moral theory that overlap, both chronologically and conceptually, with Rosemont’s ideas. In the mid-twentieth century, moral theory (like the era’s psychology) was dominated by questions related to behavior and “right action.” The key question was “what should one do?”; the key notions were individual duty, liberty, and so on. In 1958, Elizabeth Anscombe’s scathing essay “Modern Moral Philosophy” questioned the foundations of this enterprise, arguing that it was based on an abandoned conception of divine moral law and on an inadequate approach to psychology (Anscombe 1958: 1). These general lines of critique were reemphasized by Iris Murdoch a decade later when she argued that matters of inner agency—such as motivation and perceptiveness—were at least as important to morality as were our actions (Murdoch 1970). A good example of mainstream moral philosophy’s reaction to these challenges is John Rawls’ 1972 *A Theory of Justice*. On the one hand, Rawls gives considerable attention in the later sections of his opus to motivation, moral education, and psychology. On the other hand, such issues only penetrate to a limited degree into his conception of morality. His influential taxonomy of morality is still based on the idea of right action, and is divided into “teleology” (i.e., those theories that determine the moral action through the maximization of some “end”) and “deontology” (i.e., those theories for which moral rightness is defined independently from the goodness of our ends). This closely matches the slightly earlier dualism proposed by John Silber, according to whom teleological moral theories were “homogeneous” because they derived the moral good from the non-moral good, and deontological moral theories were “heterogeneous” since they viewed moral and non-moral goodness as fundamentally distinct.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Silber develops this idea in a variety of articles; see, for example, Silber 1967. LEE Ming-huei 李明輝 notes that a similar distinction is made in German moral discourse between “*Gesinnungsethik*” and “*Erfolgsethik*” (Lee 2013).

Through the 1970s and into the 1980s, the centrality of right action and the exhaustive dichotomy between teleological and deontological theories continued to characterize moral philosophy. The volume of critics' voices was rising, however. Alasdair MacIntyre's influential 1981 book *After Virtue* argued that the biggest difference among moral theories was actually between those, like Aristotle's, that were committed to a substantive end (such as nobility or virtue), and those that were not. On this account, utilitarianism had more in common with deontology than either did with Aristotle, despite the fact that on Rawls' account, both Aristotelianism and utilitarianism had been versions of teleology.<sup>9</sup> As more and more attention started to be paid to virtuous character as an end, Gary Watson offered another critique of Rawls, arguing in considerable detail for a threefold typology of "teleological/maximizing" or "ethics of outcome"; "teleological/non-consequentialist" or "ethics of virtue"; and "deontological" or "ethics of requirement" (Watson 1990). Over the last two decades, MacIntyre's and Watson's efforts to define the territory of virtue ethics have been complemented by those working to articulate more clearly what "virtue" or "character" is, as well as some attempts to spell out full-fledged systems of virtue ethics.<sup>10</sup> Two of the key developments have been a rapid expansion of the sources on which virtue ethicists are drawing, together with a related expansion of the subtypes of virtue-ethical theories.

The recent expansion of the scope of virtue ethics has by no means led to an end to the controversy over the category of "virtue ethics," though; a number of theorists have emphasized the degree to which Kantianism and some forms of consequentialism can accommodate a significant role for virtue and inner psychology, and some have argued on this basis that the category of "virtue ethics" is in the end unnecessary or even incoherent. In response, it has become common to distinguish between "virtue theory," which is the portion of a moral theory dealing with issues like virtue (no matter how peripheral it might be to the overall theory), and "virtue ethics," which is (at least purportedly) a distinctive category of moral theory itself.<sup>11</sup> For our purposes, one of the more interesting kinds of resistance to the category of virtue ethics comes from Martha Nussbaum, herself often identified as a virtue ethicist. To the contrary, she argues that virtue ethics is a "misleading category" because the ideas really shared by all so-called virtue ethicists are too few to support an independent category, and are in fact also shared by some non-virtue-ethical theories. She argues that it is more perspicuous to divide the purported virtue ethicists into two clusters, those who are pro-reason and anti-utilitarian, and those who are pro-sentiment and anti-Kantian; she places herself in the former group (Nussbaum 1999: 181). The problem with such a taxonomy

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<sup>9</sup> Both on this specific point, and more generally concerning the topic of this section, I have found Wang 2005 to be very helpful.

<sup>10</sup> I mention some of the philosophers involved in these debates in the "[Virtue ethics](#)" section, below.

<sup>11</sup> See Driver 1996. Various other terms are used to mark roughly the same distinction. Van Norden prefers to speak of a spectrum from moderate to "radical" virtue ethics (Van Norden 2007: 34); Adams refers to "the ethics of character as an important department of ethical theory" (Adams 2006: 4).

is that while it might be true to the genealogy of current views, it defines its categories around existing approaches in Western philosophy, and is thus necessarily Eurocentric. It does not even make sense to ask whether Confucius is an anti-Kantian, while the question of whether virtue lies at the theoretical center of moral theory in the *Analects* at least seems well-formed.

Putting the point this way brings us back to Rosemont's argument that there is no "morality" in early Confucianism. Recalling that Rosemont understands "ethics" as the study of "the basic terms employed in the description, analysis, and evaluation of human conduct," an initial point to make here is that his definition is, from the perspective of the virtue ethics movement, still too concerned with conduct, and thus is not a definition of "ethics" that they are likely to accept. Bernard Williams' earlier distinction between morality and ethics might be preferable: His understanding of "morality," centered on "obligation," is close enough to Rosemont, but he offers a broader (and vaguer) sense of the "ethical" as comprising answers to the question of "How should one live?" (Williams 1985). Williams is explicit that issues of virtue, disposition, and inner psychology all fall within the scope of how we live. A second issue is that according to some of the theorists we will shortly examine, the lack in the *Analects* of explicit terms corresponding to ideas like "freedom" or "autonomy" cannot be taken to show conclusively that theories centered around such notions are not implied by the text. Methodologically, I believe this is correct, though it must be true that if a whole cluster of concepts appears absent, the burden of proof is considerable on those who believe that these concepts and the inferential relations among them are nonetheless implicitly present. In the end, the wisest course seems to be to adopt a broad notion of ethics or morality—I use the two interchangeably here, unless indicated otherwise—and let evidence in the texts and arguments for stimulating dialogical insights speak for themselves.

## Kant and Deontology

As mentioned at the outset of the chapter, Chinese-language discussions of the *Analects* and moral theory have tended to stress resonances between the *Analects* and Kant, while Kantian deontology has been only a minor strand in the English-language literature. We will look at the reasons behind the dominant Anglophone approach in the next section. Here, it makes sense to open with some historical background on Kant and Confucianism, before turning to current arguments that from both interpretive and dialogical stances, deontological readings of the *Analects* inspired by Kant are to be preferred.<sup>12</sup> The story begins in the early

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<sup>12</sup> David Elstein has reminded me that key Chinese developers of the deontological reading believe that Confucianism in fact surpasses Kant in key ways, and so it is somewhat misleading to label their views as "Kantian." This is an excellent point that I have taken to heart. As Elstein emphasized, since we see virtue ethics as broader than Aristotle (see below), shouldn't we see deontology as broader than Kant?

twentieth century, with LIANG Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) and his 1903–1904 essay introducing Kant to Chinese intellectuals.<sup>13</sup> Liang is very appreciative of Kant’s philosophy. He emphasizes some of the similarities between Kantian epistemology and metaphysics and Buddhist ideas, especially concerning the free, time-and-space-transcending “true self” (Liang 1989: 194). Liang finds Kant’s distinction between heteronomous (*you suo wei zhe* 有所為者) and autonomous (*wu suo wei zhe* 無所為者) laws to be of the first importance, and agrees with Kant that any laws that are concerned with goals (especially profit or interest, *liyi* 利益) are heteronomous and thus “correctly speaking, have no relationship with morality” (Liang 1989: 197). Liang explains that according to Kant, moral responsibility is born from the “freedom of the conscience (*liangxin zhi ziyou* 良心之自由).” Liang then equates this with the famous idea of “innate good knowing (*liang zhi* 良知)” of Neo-Confucian WANG Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) (Liang 1989: 198). This last connection is of course extremely important for our purposes. The idea that some versions of Confucianism, at least, endorsed an “autonomous” morality proved to be attractive to a number of subsequent thinkers. Many Chinese intellectuals in the teens and twenties criticized Confucianism for imposing a rigid set of ritualized rules upon the Chinese; in Kant’s terms, such rules were clearly heteronomous. Kant seemed to suggest a way for Confucianism to shed its restrictive mantle, though. As the important thinker XIONG Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968) said, “Kant conceives of ultimate reality (*benti* 本體) as something that is beyond the reach of [theoretical] reason and can be responded to only through moral practice. His main idea can be reconciled with the spirit of our classical learning.”<sup>14</sup> Finally, Xiong’s student Mou Zongsan 牟宗三 (1909–1995), probably the most important Confucian philosopher of the twentieth century, developed a deep and sophisticated engagement with Kant over his long career. The details go well beyond our scope; rather than looking at Mou’s specific articulation of a Confucian-cum-deontological moral theory, we will soon turn to the contemporary development of related ideas in the work of Mou’s student LEE Ming-huei 李明輝 and others. For now, it suffices to say that the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy continues to be central to Mou, as does the idea—hints of which we can already see in Liang and Xiong—that the Confucian’s “moral heartmind (*xin* 心)” bears an important resemblance to Kant’s noumenal self and free will.<sup>15</sup>

The best example of a philosopher arguing for a deontological reading of the *Analects* in contemporary Sinophone discourse is LEE Ming-huei. To be sure, some of his key arguments focus on issues raised in *Mengzi* 孟子 or by later Neo-Confucians. Lee acknowledges that Confucius didn’t clearly settle all the

<sup>13</sup> The essay was published serially over several months. For some fascinating background to Liang’s essay, including the degree to which he both drew on but also deviated from prior Japanese interpretation and translation of Kant, see K. Huang 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Chan 2011: 36–37, slightly modified.

<sup>15</sup> The best source on Mou’s approach to the idea of autonomy is Billioud 2011. It is worth noting that it is controversial how Kantian Mou really is; see, for example, Zheng 2000.



issues that subsequent Confucians would debate, the resolutions of which are relevant to whether Confucianism in fact endorses an autonomy-based ethics. Still, Lee argues that the *Analects* itself leans in the direction of an autonomous ethics. He begins by citing the following two passages:

The Master said, “Is *ren* 仁 really far away? If I want *ren*, then *ren* is already there” (7.30).<sup>16</sup>

YAN Yuan 顏淵 [YAN Hui 顏回] asked about *ren*. The Master said, “To overcome the self and turn to propriety is *ren*. If one day he overcomes himself and turns to *ren*, the world will turn to *ren* along with him. To be *ren* comes from the self; does it then come from others?” (12.1).

Lee says that these two passages imply the idea of moral autonomy, because only if morality is autonomous can it be achievable independently of any external conditions, as these passages seem to suggest. On such an account, morality is based on the “free exercise of one’s will” (Lee 1990: 36). Lee also connects this idea to a famous passage in *Mengzi*, part of which reads: “‘Seek and you will get it. Abandon it and you will lose it.’ In this case, seeking helps in getting, because the seeking is in oneself” (*Mengzi* 7A3; Van Norden 2008: 172). From the context, it appears that what is being sought in oneself is one’s moral nature; as in the *Analects* passages we just looked at, moral achievement does not seem to depend on external circumstances (or “the decree [*ming* 命]”). Let us call all of this Lee’s *autonomy argument* for a deontological reading of early Confucian moral theory (and of the *Analects* in particular). I should add that Lee’s goal is not just to show that early Confucianism assumes the idea of moral autonomy, but also to show that autonomy-based morality is a superior conception of morality to a teleological conception based around happiness or *eudaimonia*. Again drawing on Kant, he says that only the former kind of theory, based on free causality (*ziyou di yinguoxing* 自由的因果性) rather than natural causality, has room for a genuine concept of moral agency (Lee 1990: 36).

One important challenge that Lee’s autonomy argument must face is the evidence that *Analects* recognizes the phenomenon of moral luck. If there are, after all, factors outside of one’s control that influence one’s moral development, then can morality be fully autonomous? Relatedly, does moral luck actually vitiate genuine moral agency, as Lee claims? These are of course large issues, but we can sketch some of the relevant arguments briefly.<sup>17</sup> On the one hand, we could supplement Lee’s evidence with further passages that look to deny moral luck a role. Consider Confucius’s well-known words in *Analects* 6.11 concerning his favorite student, YAN Hui 顏回:

The Master said, “Worthy indeed is this YAN Hui! One dish of food, a dipper of drink, living in a narrow alley: Others could not have borne their sorrow, yet for Hui it has no effect on his joy.

Confucius says much the same about himself in *Analects* 7.16: “Eating coarse food, drinking water, crooking one’s arm and pillowing upon it—joy may be found also

<sup>16</sup>Translations from the *Analects* in this chapter are ultimately my responsibility, but I have based my renderings closely on those in Brooks and Brooks 1998.

<sup>17</sup>The balance of this paragraph draws on material in Angle 2012: Ch. 7.

in these circumstances.” A natural way to read these passages is as claiming that wretched circumstances do not matter to proper, even joyous, moral functioning. However, Sean Walsh has pointed out that even if YAN Hui’s means are modest, he still has access to food, drink, and shelter. Walsh further argues that there are many ways in which we can see recognition in the *Analects* of luck playing a role: It is important to be fortunate enough to live in a state with a good ruler, to find a good teacher, and to be surrounded by a community that observes the rituals, among other things, even if no one of these things is absolutely necessary. With respect to *Analects* 7.30’s suggestion that one only has to want to be *ren*, Walsh maintains that attaining the right state of one’s heart-mind such that one genuinely wants to the *ren* requires a long and difficult process, according to *Analects* 2.4 (Walsh 2013: 122–124). If Lee were to reply that we must avoid reading moral luck into the text, because to do so would be to deny genuine moral agency to Confucian agents, a possible rejoinder can be found in the work of Joel Kupperman. He contends that our actions are often the involuntary (i.e., not consciously chosen) results of an interaction between our character and our situation, and that our characters themselves are largely involuntary. By this latter point he means that we cannot change our characters at will, and indeed sometimes even great efforts over extended periods of time will fail. Nonetheless, he holds that often enough, we do have control over circumstances that will gradually reshape our characters, and as a result it is possible for one’s character to change dramatically. Kupperman’s conclusion is that we have enough control, that is, that “it makes sense to hold people responsible both for their characters and for actions that flow from their characters” (Kupperman 1991: 63). In short, genuine moral agency is still possible.

With the shape of the argument surrounding autonomy clear—though certainly not settled—let us examine a second argument, which I will refer to as Lee’s *heterogeneity argument*. This argument has three premises. First, deontological moral theories distinguish between moral good—for Kant, moral goodness comes from good motives or will—and natural or non-moral goodness, like happiness or pleasure. Goodness, in other words, is heterogeneous. The second premise is that teleological moral theories take goodness to be homogeneous: Ultimately, all goodness reduces to one type, as when utilitarians argue that moral rightness ultimately rests on the production of the most (non-moral) goodness, namely pleasure. Such teleological theories cannot, therefore, make the distinction—central to deontology—between an act “done ‘out of duty’ (*aus Pflicht*), rather than merely ‘conforming to duty’ (*pflichtmäßig*)” (Lee 2013: 47–55). Finally, the third premise is that in both the *Analects* and the *Mengzi* we find evidence for a heterogeneous conception of the good, which leads Lee to conclude that early Confucianism is deontological.<sup>18</sup> Consider *Analects* 4.16, for example:

The Master said, “The superior person concentrates on right (*yi* 義); the petty person concentrates on advantage (*li* 利).”

<sup>18</sup> Above, in “The terrain of the moral”, I noted that MacIntyre and Gary Watson have both argued that while virtue ethics is a form of teleological ethics, it is not a maximizing teleology in which moral nobility is reducible to some other form of goodness. They would thus resist Lee’s move from “heterogeneous” to “deontological.”

Much hinges on the exact interpretation of the key terms *yi* and *li* here; is the latter, in particular, a broad category of non-moral value, or does it indicate a kind of selfish concern for one's own advantages or profit? Lee reads it in the former way, though it is controversial whether the evidence requires such a reading.<sup>19</sup>

Lee finds more support for his heterogeneity argument in *Analects* 17.21. The passage concerns the 3-year mourning period. Confucius's student Zaiwo 宰我 feels that 3 years is too long, and offers two reasons: first, that a 3-year hiatus from doing all the rituals will lead to the rituals being lost; second, that things in nature cycle back within a year, and so a year-long period should suffice. Confucius, however, simply asks Zaiwo if he would "feel comfortable (*an* 安)" wearing his finery and eating well prior to the end of 3 years. Although Zaiwo says that he would indeed feel comfortable, Confucius makes it clear that a superior person would not—"if he ate dainties, he would not find them sweet," for example—and bemoans Zaiwo's lack of *ren*. As Lee reads this passage, Zaiwo's reasons are ultimately teleological in nature, while "Confucius establishes the meaning of a three-year mourning period on the basis of the agent's motivation. This... implies a deontological viewpoint" (Lee 2013). Strikingly, this very passage is taken up by supporters of a virtue-ethical reading of the text to argue for the implausibility of a deontological interpretation, as I will explain below, in the "Virtue ethics" section.

Thanks in part to the influence of Mou Zongsan—as well as to Lee's arguments themselves—deontological readings of the *Analects* are widespread in Chinese-language discussions. Such interpretations are rarer in English-language secondary literature. One example is Heiner Roetz's 1993 book *Confucian Ethics of the Axial Age*, based on his German-language book of a year earlier. Roetz's perspective is not explicitly Kantian, but it does share quite a bit with ideas we have already seen. His central thesis is that early Confucianism offers an example of an "axial age" breakthrough from convention-based ethics to universal, "post-conventional," principled morality. He draws extensively on Laurence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which itself is based on a deontological understanding of morality. According to Kohlberg's model, moral thinking can advance through increasingly sophisticated stages, the highest of which is Stage 6, "the universal ethical principle orientation." At this stage, "the right is what is in accordance with abstract, consistent, and universally valid principle. It is based on the autonomous desire of conscience" (Roetz 1993: 27). Roetz argues that the values of family and state provide the "conventional level" grounding for Confucian ethics, but the key contribution of the *Analects* and subsequent texts is to move beyond these conventions to higher principles. He surveys several candidate principles like the

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<sup>19</sup> See Lee 2013. *Analects* 4.12, which also invokes *li* in a negative light, is subject to the same ambiguity. The last line of 4.2, "*zhizhe li ren* 知者利仁," has been interpreted in many different ways; I note that Ames and Rosemont's reading, "wise persons flourish in [*ren*]," offers support for Lee's approach, since it connects *li* to a general notion of flourishing (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 89). Perhaps the best support in Book 4 of the *Analects* for the idea of heterogeneous values comes from 4.5, which recognizes that "wealth and honor" have value, but says that if a superior person cannot gain them whilst following the Way, he will not abide them.

“way,” friendship, and the “mean,” each of which helps to “compensate for the insufficiencies of mere role morality” (Roetz 1993: 118). Each of these fall short, though; ultimately, the concept on which he settles as providing the basis for a universal, unifying principle is *ren* (which Roetz translates as “humaneness”). Roetz summarizes various reasons for thinking that *ren* is the central value of the *Analects*, and then emphasizes the (indirect) explication of *ren* in the *Analects* via the Golden Rule, as when *shu* 恕, or reciprocity, is said to consist in “What he himself does not want, let him not do to others” (15.21). Roetz recognizes various potential problems with the Golden Rule, but concludes that:

...of all the ethical conceptions China has developed, the Golden Rule is the most promising if we search for potentials for further moral evolution. It roots morality for the first time in the formal procedures of role taking, not in traditional virtues, allowing [one] to transcend the horizon of one’s own cultural heritage (Roetz 1993: 148).

Roetz is concerned to deny Rosemont’s thesis (discussed above in “[The terrain of the moral](#)”) that Chinese thinking contains only ethics (or, in Roetz’s terms, *Sittlichkeit*); Roetz believes that abstract principles such as the Golden Rule show that Moralität—with its emphasis on autonomy, decision, and duty—is present as well (Roetz 1993: 47). As far as I can tell, Roetz’s motivation to view morality in the terms that he does, and thus to search for such a conception within the *Analects*, come from his own philosophical background and not as a result of the Sinophone discourse discussed above, though he does note that contemporary New Confucian LIU Shuxian 劉述先 “assents to Kohlberg’s universalism as well as to the idea of a development toward an autonomous morality” (Roetz 1993: 29).<sup>20</sup>

The approaches that I have considered so far in this section take deontological ethics to be either the core or the culmination of the moral theory we find in the *Analects*. To conclude the section, let me note that a variety of analysts argue for a deontological aspect to the *Analects* without claiming that the text as a whole must be understood through the lens of deontology. For example, YU Kam Por has suggested that the *Analects*, like other early Confucian texts, adopts a “two-level morality” that combines negative, deontological constraints with positive, teleological injunctions. He calls the former “minimal morality” and the latter “maximal morality”: putting the latter into practice is regarded as a higher achievement, but cannot be fulfilled at the expense of the first (Yu 2010: 46). He cites two well-known passages as examples of the principle behind each of these aspects of morality, respectively:

Do not do to others what you do not want to be done to you (12.2).

Help others to take a stand insofar as you wish to take your stand, and get others there insofar as you yourself wish to get there (6.30).

Yu says that our goal should be to do the right thing (maximal morality), but only insofar as we avoid doing the wrong thing (minimal morality). Kantians will say

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<sup>20</sup> For a rebuttal of Roetz’s position from someone in the virtue ethics camp, see P. J. Ivanhoe’s argument in note 31, below.

that Yu's framework can be completely understood within a Kantian framework: Yu's two levels correspond to perfect and imperfect duties, respectively. It remains to be seen whether Yu is content with such an interpretation of his ideas, or whether he would push for a more distinctive synthesis of deontology and teleology. It is also possible to wonder whether any putative rules—whether ritual injunctions or more abstract principles such as *Analects* 12.2—have the status of unbendable constraints that Yu here ascribes to them.<sup>21</sup> The mere presence of rules, after all, does not indicate that one must be dealing with deontology, so long as the status of those rules is not fundamental.<sup>22</sup>

## Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics, as discussed above in “[The terrain of the moral](#)”, takes virtues, character, and more generally the goodness of a moral agent to rest at the center of moral theorizing. I have already mentioned some of the controversies that attend the distinguishing of virtue ethics from other forms of moral theory; but in the present section I will set these matters aside. My goals here are threefold: to sketch the history of virtue-ethical interpretations of the *Analects*; to illustrate the diversity of such readings; and to highlight some of the most important arguments in favor of a virtue-ethical interpretation. It will be helpful to remember that the modern articulation of virtue ethics—whose initial stages include both a critique of mainstream modern moral philosophy and a call to look again at what we can learn from ancient Western ethics—is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Most analysts use Elizabeth Anscombe's 1958 essay “Modern Moral Philosophy” to mark the beginning of the revival of virtue ethics; other early contributors include Iris Murdoch, Philippa Foot, John McDowell, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Martha Nussbaum.<sup>23</sup> Rosalind Hursthouse's *On Virtue Ethics* then marked a new level of confidence on the part of virtue ethicists (Hursthouse 1999); in the 2000s, we can say that virtue ethics was increasingly firmly ensconced in the now-enlarged field of Anglophone moral philosophy.<sup>24</sup> In addition, one of the critical developments in virtue ethics from the 2000s to the present has been its pluralization. Aristotle had been the touchstone for almost all prior writers in the field (Murdoch being a significant exception), but now it is widely accepted that many philosophers in the Western canon can be read as virtue ethicists, including not just Stoics and medievals, but

<sup>21</sup> See my discussion of whether there are “absolute prohibitions” in *Mengzi* (Angle 2010).

<sup>22</sup> See Hursthouse 1999: 35–39. For a different view, see Liu 2004.

<sup>23</sup> See Anscombe 1958, Murdoch 1970, Foot 1978, McDowell 1979, MacIntyre 1981, and Nussbaum 1990. This list is by no means exhaustive; other important early contributions include Wallace 1978 and Pincoffs 1986. It is worth noting that, as discussed in “[The terrain of the moral](#)” above, Nussbaum explicitly rejects the label “virtue ethics” (Nussbaum 1999).

<sup>24</sup> Representative works include Slote 2001, Swanton 2003, and Tessman 2005.

also moderns such as Hume and Nietzsche. As we will see below, differing conceptions of the breadth of virtue ethics have important impacts on the plausibility of viewing the *Analects*—or Confucianism more generally—as expressing a version of virtue ethics.

Given the history I have just outlined, it is no surprise that virtue-ethical interpretations of the *Analects* are also a fairly recent phenomenon. The main lesson of the early essay “Aristotle and Confucius” is that a comparison of the two figures would make sense, even though it had not featured in previous readings of the *Analects*; Hamburger does not engage in any detailed interpretation of one thinker in the other’s terms (Hamburger 1956). In the early 1970s, George Mahood published some sophisticated studies of the moral philosophy in the *Analects* that take the idea of virtue, and the early writings of MacIntyre, quite seriously, but one detects little immediate uptake either among Western philosophers or among Anglophone sinologists.<sup>25</sup> The idea of virtue in the *Analects* and, especially, the *Mengzi* loomed large in a series of important lectures given by David Nivison at Stanford in the early 1980s, though the lectures were not published until 1996.<sup>26</sup> Another important step was the publication in 1990 of *Mencius and Aquinas* by Nivison’s colleague at Stanford, Lee Yearley. While it was not directly related to the *Analects* and not engaged in dialogue with contemporary theorists of virtue ethics, Yearley’s book shows the fruits that can come from a detailed, sophisticated reflection on the idea of virtue in an early Confucian work (Yearley 1990).<sup>27</sup> With the nurturance of Nivison and Yearley, Stanford proved fertile ground for virtue-ethical readings of Confucianism. The writings of Philip J. Ivanhoe, Stephen Wilson, Edward Slingerland, Bryan Van Norden, and Eric Hutton—all with Ph. D.s from Stanford—over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s increasingly come to make explicit arguments that the *Analects* should be interpreted through the lens of virtue ethics.<sup>28</sup> The year 2007 is a watershed year for Anglophone virtue-ethical readings of the *Analects*, with three books published that defend such a thesis.<sup>29</sup> In the last few years, finally, scholars of Confucianism have begun explicitly

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<sup>25</sup> See Mahood 1971, 1974.

<sup>26</sup> See Nivison 1996a, b.

<sup>27</sup> As can be seen from his glowing back-cover endorsement, MacIntyre was also clearly aware of the book. This is perhaps an apt moment to mention MacIntyre’s fairly extensive engagement with Confucian ethics—as seen in MacIntyre 1991, 2004a, b—although some claims that he makes in his systematic treatments of virtue ethics such as MacIntyre 1999, in which Confucianism makes no appearance, show that the influence of Confucianism has not gone as deep as one might have hoped.

<sup>28</sup> This is more implicit than explicit in Ivanhoe’s dissertation (published as Ivanhoe 1990), though it is explicit in that work’s revised second edition (Ivanhoe 2002: ix, 2n5, 9). The theme of virtue is also central to Ivanhoe 2000 (the first edition of which was published in 1993). See also Wilson 2002 and Slingerland 2001, both of which will be discussed further below. The most mature statement of Van Norden’s position is Van Norden 2007, on which see below.

<sup>29</sup> In addition to Van Norden 2007, two important comparative studies of Aristotle and Confucius were published: Sim 2007 and Yu 2007.

engaging with contemporary developments in virtue ethics, though little of this work has focused directly on the *Analects*.<sup>30</sup>

Within the essays and books I have just mentioned one can find three distinct types of argument in favor of the thesis that the *Analects* evinces a form of virtue ethics: best explanation, explicit contradiction, and fruitfulness. First, both Wilson and Slingerland argue that a virtue-based interpretation better explains the full range of positions taken within the text than do alternative interpretive theories (Wilson 2002; Slingerland 2001). Wilson considers Herbert Fingarette's influential 1972 book *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (Fingarette 1972), and argues that it disregards the individual component of human flourishing. Wilson then turns to David Hall's and Ames' important work *Thinking Through Confucius* (Hall and Ames 1987), which Wilson says treats the *Analects* one-sidedly in the other direction, over-emphasizing individuality and creativity. In contrast, an understanding of the text that is based around the socially-sanctioned cultivation of virtues, which then come to be valued and developed for their own sake, offers a more balanced understanding of the whole (Wilson 2002: 95, 104).

Edward Slingerland also pursues a “best explanation” strategy, supplementing Wilson's account with attention to further areas of the *Analects* that alternative theories have trouble explaining (Slingerland 2001: 97).<sup>31</sup> In addition, two other aspects of Slingerland's essay are worth noting. In order to make his notion of “virtue ethics” more concrete, he explicitly draws on MacIntyre's understanding of virtue, which helps to draw his essay into dialogue with Western virtue ethics—making it of interest not just to those with an antecedent concern for understanding the *Analects*. Slingerland also engages in the second type of argument I alluded to above when he charges that the tie between inner, felt state (the virtue of *ren*) and outer behavior that we see lauded in the *Analects* is the opposite of the Kantian demand that one act from duty rather than inclination. In other words, he sees the *Analects* as explicitly contradicting a central tenet of Kantian theory (Slingerland 2001: 100–1). Recall here LEE Ming-huei's discussion of *Analects* 17.21, in which the nature of Zaiwo's motivation is discussed. Lee suggests that when Confucius says that to “feel comfortable (*an* [安])” is to have the proper kind of motivation, this manifests a deontological-style heteronomy of the good. Following Slingerland's lead, though, one might reply that by emphasizing the aptness of feeling as key to moral motivation, Confucius is stressing something like inclination rather than duty, and thus is more at home with those virtue ethicists who emphasize the importance of emotions to the development of virtuous

<sup>30</sup> Eric Hutton's Stanford Ph.D. thesis is an early instance of this trend (Hutton 2001). In addition, see many of the recent essays by HUANG Yong, of which Y. Huang 2010 is a good example; Van Norden 2009; Angle 2009; Ivanhoe 2011; and Slingerland 2011.

<sup>31</sup> Another version of the best explanation argument can be seen in Ivanhoe's argument that Roetz's Kantian interpretation fails because (1) his insistence that the *Analects* contains universal ethical claims can be accounted for in other ways, and (2) there is no evidence of a relationship between reason and morality in the *Analects* like that insisted on by Kant: “We look in vain for an analysis of moral maxims, autonomy, or freedom” (Ivanhoe 2002: 9).

dispositions. Not that this need be the end of the argument: Recent Kantian theory has revived the attention that was already present in some of Kant's own writing on the role of virtue in the moral life. The picture of a stark opposition between duty and inclination that one gets from Kant's *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* is more nuanced in some of his other work.<sup>32</sup> Still, it seems at least clear that *Analects* 17.21 cannot stand as evidence in favor of a deontological reading, as Lee argued.

The third style of argument, concerning fruitfulness, is emphasized by Bryan Van Norden. He believes that Confucianism "counts as a form of virtue ethics," but in his major interpretive work, argues for this claim only indirectly, by seeking to demonstrate that reading the *Analects* as a form of virtue ethics is fruitful: it both has the potential to contribute to on-going philosophical debates, and "illuminates many interesting aspects of [Confucianism] that might otherwise go unnoticed" (Van Norden 2007: 2). Van Norden's approach to "virtue ethics" itself is loose and pluralistic, including both what we have called above "virtue theory" as well as virtue ethics more strictly.<sup>33</sup> Particularly with respect to the *Analects*, which he considers more "evocative" than "systematic" (Van Norden 2007: 137), his goal is to see what can be learned about the views in the text by asking questions of it phrased in virtue-related terminology, rather than seeking to elucidate a specific, virtue-ethical moral theory.

So far I have been focusing on discussions of the *Analects* and virtue ethics within Anglophone secondary scholarship. We would do well to also take note of a significant debate on the subject that has taken place in Chinese. Starting in the early 1990s, influenced by their Catholic/Aristotelian training and stimulated by MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, some Taiwanese scholars began arguing against the prevailing deontological reading of early Confucianism. We can take Vincent Shen (SHEN Qingsong 沈清松) as a representative of this movement. He focuses primarily on the *Mengzi*, but occasionally cites the *Analects* as well and clearly takes his argument to apply quite broadly. Rejecting what in "[Kant and Deontology](#)" I called LEE Ming-huei's heterogeneity argument, Shen argues that *yi* and *li* are not dualistically opposed to one another, but arranged hierarchically. That is, *yi* and *li* are distinct members of the same family of values, rather than being fundamentally heterogeneous. He acknowledges that there are passages (some of which I have cited above, when discussing Lee) that appear to make a stark dichotomy, but Shen argues that other passages are clearly inclusive. In *Mengzi* 7A13 and 7B10, for example, a ruler's being concerned with the *li* 利 (benefit) of his people is seen as part-and-parcel with his caring for them (Shen 1992: 184). More generally, Shen says that we should understand *yi* primarily as a virtue, and thus of a piece with the virtue of *ren*, which is the source of concern for the people's *li*.

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<sup>32</sup> By now a large literature on this subject has developed; one important source of the discussion is Sherman 1997.

<sup>33</sup> He puts this in terms of a continuum from "moderate" to "radical" virtue ethics (Van Norden 2007: 29–36).



Citing MacIntyre, Shen argues that both in the ancient West and in Confucianism, duties are distinctly secondary and emerge from the framework of cultivating virtue (Shen 1992: 187). In both his 1992 essay and more explicitly in later work, Shen maintains that a virtue-ethical framework both fits better with the Confucian texts than does deontology or utilitarianism, and is the most promising approach to revitalize Confucianism in the present day (Shen 2004). One key to his argument, that is, is a concern that a bare focus on duties and laws will lead to a fundamentally impoverished society. A very similar idea—that Confucian moral theory, as a form of virtue ethics, is fundamentally not “modern” and so might be of use in the critique of modern society—can also be seen in an essay by political philosopher SHI Yuankang 石元康 from the same decade (Shi 1998: 123).<sup>34</sup>

Aristotle has loomed large in many of the virtue-ethical approaches to the *Analects* that I have reviewed so far, both directly and *via* MacIntyre’s version of contemporary Aristotelianism. As I have just been emphasizing, it is important not to conflate virtue ethics with Aristotle, and in this section’s final paragraph, I will look at ways in which current thinkers have examined the *Analects* in light of certain non-Aristotelian approaches to virtue ethics. First, though, it makes sense to look at the most explicitly Aristotelian approaches of all. Two books came out in 2007 arguing for significant similarities between Aristotle and Confucius; according to both authors—Jiyuan Yu and May Sim—we should interpret the *Analects* as a work of virtue ethics.<sup>35</sup> Both books are complex and have occasioned considerable debate; in the context of the present chapter, it is only possible to touch on certain key themes.<sup>36</sup> In both books, the conclusion that the *Analects* offers a virtue ethics is more the outcome of the larger comparison than a specific theme: They do not argue against alternative (Kantian or other) interpretations, but rather present considerable evidence that key Aristotelian ideas have correlates in Confucius, and vice versa. Both Sim and Yu hold that while Confucius<sup>37</sup> and Aristotle share a great deal, each one also has some insights from which the other can learn, and the juxtaposition reveals certain lacunae in the thought of each. One difference between the two interpretations that will have relevance to subsequent argument in this chapter concerns individualism. For Sim, there is a striking difference between the role of the individual, metaphysical soul in Aristotle’s account, and the pure, role-based relationality she finds in Confucius. She suggests

<sup>34</sup> LEE Ming-huei argues rather convincingly that Shen’s critique of the contemporary implications of deontological moral theories is based on a mere caricature of Kantianism (Lee 2005: 107).

<sup>35</sup> For example, Sim says, “ethics for both [Confucius and Aristotle] centers on character” (Sim 2007: 134); for his part, Yu begins his first chapter by saying, “For both ethics of Confucius and Aristotle, the central question is about what the good life is or what kind of person one should be. More strikingly, both ethics answer this central question by focusing on virtue. . .” (Yu 2007: 24).

<sup>36</sup> For some of the debate, see the book symposia printed in *Dao* 8:3 (2009, on Sim’s book) and *Dao* 10:3 (2011, on Yu’s book).

<sup>37</sup> The *Analects* is critical to both Sim’s and Yu’s comparative projects, but both also draw on other early texts to fill out certain issues that are treated sparingly, if at all, in the *Analects* itself.

that both approaches leave something to be desired: Aristotle lacks the capacity to handle the thick relationality that his ethics in fact requires, while Confucius needs some independent substrate to anchor moral norms that would allow criticism of existing role relationships (Sim 2007: 135). For his part, Yu sees less difference on this score. He argues that Aristotelian *eudaimonia* and Confucian *dao* 道 are quite analogous to one another, and that Aristotle's understanding of humans as "political animals" is tantamount to Confucius's emphasis on the relational nature of the self (Yu 2007: 108). I will return to his issue below, because the question of relationality turns out to be crucial to Ames' and Rosemont's argument that Confucianism presents a role ethics rather than a virtue ethics.

The large majority of the analyses and arguments that I have canvassed so far in this section take Aristotle, or at least contemporary developments of Aristotelianism, as their point of departure for understanding virtue ethics. It is vital to recognize that virtue ethics need not be tied so tightly to Aristotle's distinctive approach. Some of the most creative developments within Western virtue ethics over the last decade have been distinctly non-Aristotelian. In order to create the most room for a juxtaposition of the *Analects* and virtue ethics to spark insightful interpretation and fruitful dialogue, we would be wise to think broadly about what virtue ethics can encompass. Indeed, there are already signs that the *Analects*—and Confucianism more broadly—may fit better into an expanded understanding of virtue ethics. Among Chinese scholars, CHEN Lai 陳來 and WONG Wai-ying 黃惠英 are notable for arguing that Confucian ethics can be constructively viewed as virtue ethics only so long as we recognize the important differences between Confucian ethics and the theories of Aristotle: Confucian ethics has its own distinctive concepts and emphases, from which Western virtue ethics may well want to learn (Chen 2002, 2010; Wong 2001, 2013: 74–79). For their part, American philosophers have also been looking for broader models. Ivanhoe has suggested that in Western traditions we see both "virtue ethics of flourishing" and "virtue ethics of sentiments," and then gone on to argue that representative Confucian thinkers actually cross-cut these two categories, implying that virtue ethics cannot be satisfactorily understood simply in terms of extant Western models (Ivanhoe 2013).<sup>38</sup> In recent work, Amy Olberding has drawn on yet another emerging strand of Western virtue ethics, the exemplarism of Linda Zagzebski, to help us understand the *Analects* in particular (Olberding 2011). It is evident that no one model is dominant, but this is probably as it should be; in the words of Christine Swanton, virtue ethics is a "genus" that contains many particular species (Swanton 2003: 1). It makes sense that texts such as the *Analects* and traditions such as Confucianism should provoke further growth within virtue ethics, even as the frameworks of virtue ethics may be useful in understanding the texts.

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<sup>38</sup> See also Slote 2009 and Van Norden 2009.

## Role Ethics

The notion of “role ethics,” understood as the question of how one’s particular roles inflect one’s moral responsibilities, has been present in Western philosophy for quite some time. The focus has tended to be on professional roles such as doctor, lawyer, or business manager, and two main questions have been raised: What are the distinctive norms of the professional role, and how do these norms relate to broader moral norms. In particular, what has been called the “role problem” arises because “the purpose of many institutions such as business, it may be thought, seems not to contain an ethical dimension, and indeed may appear amoral or contra-moral. Yet individuals occupying roles supposedly serving that purpose are expected to behave ethically” (Swanton 2007: 210). Exactly how role ethics should be developed, and the role problem resolved, depends on the broader moral theory on which one draws: consequentialist, Kantian, and virtue-ethical approaches are all possible. It is relevant to some of my subsequent discussion, in fact, to note that both Aristotelian and non-Aristotelian version of virtue-ethical role ethics are possible; according to the former, the goodness of any role is determined by its place in a comprehensive understanding of the life of a good human being, whereas according to the latter, there is no set hierarchy of ends and so role virtues are not necessarily subordinated to more abstract goods (Swanton 2007: 208). In one sense, this discussion of Western role ethics is beside the point, because the role ethics with which we are primarily concerned—“Confucian role ethics,” a term coined by Ames and Rosemont—is presented as *sui generis*, bearing no genealogical or conceptual connection to discussions of role ethics in Western philosophy. It is nonetheless useful to begin with the Western discourse for two reasons. First, noting the existence of this alternative, Western discussion of “role ethics” simply enhances clarity by allowing us to distinguish between the two. Second, we will see that for several intriguing reasons, Ames and Rosemont prefer to emphasize differences with Western moral theories, rather than similarities. Acknowledging the existence of Western discussions of role ethics allows us to understand—and perhaps challenge—this stance more thoroughly.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>In the preface to his 2011 book on Confucian role ethics, Ames notes that Rosemont began developing the idea of Confucian role ethics as early as a 1991 essay that drew a contrast between the “rights-bearing individuals” of Western moral theories and the “role-bearing persons” on Confucian ethics (Ames 2011: xv). As far as I know, though, Ames and Rosemont only began using the term “role ethics” in print in Rosemont and Ames 2009. Another parallel approach to using the category of “role ethics” to understand Confucianism emerges in the work of A. T. Nuyen, whose “Confucian Ethics as Role-Based Ethics” was published in 2007. He draws in part on earlier work of Ames and Hall on the Confucian self (Nuyen 2007: 317), but develops his role-ethical structure quite independently. (Ames also seems unaware of Nuyen’s work on role ethics; it is not cited in Ames 2011.) I will comment in a moment on one or two differences between Nuyen and Ames and Rosemont, but reserve discussion of the biggest difference—namely, that Nuyen sees considerable similarity between the structure of Confucian role ethics and certain Western ethical theories that he labels “social ethics”—for the essay’s concluding section.

For Ames and Rosemont, “Confucian role ethics” is simply a name meant to refer to the moral and religious vision that they find in early Confucianism. At the heart of Confucian role ethics is “a specific vision of human beings as relational persons constituted by the roles they live rather than as individual selves” (Ames and Rosemont 2011: 17). The roles that Ames and Rosemont have in mind are, in the first instance, family-based: son, daughter, mother, older sibling, grandfather, and so on. Traditional Confucian roles of ruler, subject, husband, wife, minister, and friend fill out the picture. Their point is not that these roles themselves are distinctively Confucian, but rather that the idea of human as fundamentally constituted by our on-going living in roles ramifies throughout Confucian thinking in a way that renders it dramatically different from Greek or contemporary Western alternatives. Their argument in favor of a role-ethical interpretation of the *Analects* thus depends on two important premises. The first is a wide-ranging interpretation of early Confucian thinking that emphasizes its anti-foundational, anti-essentialist, and processual character; part of the argument for this reading can be found in their individual and collective writings on Confucian role ethics, but much of the background has been laid in earlier scholarship, going back to Ames’ seminal work on the *Analects* with David Hall, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Hall and Ames 1987). Insofar as this general interpretation of the *Analects* is questioned—and indeed we have seen some challenges mentioned already, in the work of Wilson and Slingerland—then the argument for Confucian role ethics correspondingly comes into question as well. The second premise is that even though Confucian role ethics comes closer to virtue ethics than to Kantianism or consequentialism, relying on virtue-ethical vocabulary to understand the *Analects* “forces the Master and his followers more into the mold of Western philosophical discourse than they ought to be placed. . .and hence makes it difficult to see the Confucian vision as a genuine *alternative* to those with which we are most familiar” (Ames and Rosemont 2011). Therefore the best interpretation of Confucian ethics is as role ethics.

I will elaborate on some key aspects of the first premise in a moment, but will focus now on the second premise. This second premise is important because Ames and Rosemont are not claiming that Confucian role ethics is incommensurable with Western moral theories: It is both similar and different, and they are choosing to emphasize the differences. This is a strategic choice, reflecting not just the degree of difference but also our contemporary situation in which differences with dominant Western frameworks tend to be downplayed. They are concerned with the phenomenon of “asymmetry” between Western and Chinese discourses that I discussed above. Ames and Rosemont note several instances in which, in the course of their comparisons of Aristotle and Confucius, Sim and Yu stress what seems to be lacking, missing, absent, or ignored in Confucian ethics, when seen in the light of Aristotle (Ames and Rosemont 2011: 18). To be fair, both Sim and Yu announce that their projects are to see what each of their subjects can learn from the other, and both Sim and Yu note problems for Aristotle, including that his “insistent individualism. . .fails to account for the thick relations his own theory requires” (Sim 2007: 164), and his overly strong distinction between virtue and activity

“inappropriately reduces the value of having virtue” (Yu 2007: 194).<sup>40</sup> I will not try to settle here whether Sim or Yu in fact give us asymmetrical comparisons, but the fact surely remains that comparative philosophy overall has been characterized by an asymmetry, and it is with this in mind that Ames and Rosemont “want to resist tailoring what we take to be a distinctively Confucian role ethics into a familiar category of Western ethical theory” (Ames and Rosemont 2011: 18).

This concern about asymmetry explains why Ames and Rosemont want to resist conflating Confucian role ethics with virtue ethics. But what is it that makes Confucian ethics so distinct in the first place? Here we return to what I called Ames and Rosemont’s first premise. The most basic difference they see between role ethics and all the standard Western ethical theories is that the latter rely on the idea of an independent principle or cause, while Confucianism does not. According to the Confucian project, Ames writes, “without appeal to some independent principle, meaning arises *pari passu* from a network of meaningful relationships” (Ames 2011: 91). It is easy enough to see how Kantian and utilitarian ethics rely on an independent principle; Ames argues that Aristotelian virtue ethics, too, depends on an independent, essentialist, reified notion of human nature, as compared to corresponding Confucian notions which are “collateral, transactional, and reflexive” (Ames 2011: 90). A related contrast is that between abstraction and universalism in the Western theories, and concreteness and particularity in Confucianism. As Ames says, “the personal model of Confucius that is remembered in the *Analects* does not purport to lay out some generic formula by which everyone should live their lives” (Ames 2011: 95). While one might be tempted to reply that particularism and a lack of “codifiability” are generally taken to be features of Aristotelian virtue ethics, Ames would respond that Aristotle still sees virtues as reified, individual capacities, as versus the relational and transactional idea of “virtuosity” that he finds in Confucianism (Ames 2011: 159, 180). Finally, Ames suggests that the very idea of a moral “theory” matches poorly with the ethical-religious “vision” of Confucianism. Theory-construction, with its emphasis on reason, analysis, definitions, and so on, is at least a somewhat different enterprise from the Confucian project of offering historical models and exhortations to fire one’s moral imagination and inspire one’s relational moral growth (Ames 2011: 121–122, 163).

Explicating and evaluating the evidence on which Ames and Rosemont rely to back up these claims would take me too far afield. Instead, I suggest that we consider a potentially damaging objection to role ethics, and see whether Confucian role ethics has the resources to respond. The *Analects* clearly sees the need for critical evaluation of the ways that roles are inhabited by particular people. Does “Confucian role ethics” provide adequate critical purchase for such assessment? Suppose for a moment that all there is to role ethics is that with respect to any role one occupies, one should be like others in that role. Let us call this “simple role

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<sup>40</sup> It also bears noting that in a fascinating series of blog posts, William Haines has argued that “in most respects, Aristotle accepted Confucian role ethics as Ames and Rosemont describe [it]” (Haines 2012).

ethics.” As a parent, one should model on other parents; as a child, one should be like other children. An obvious problem with this is that in a society in which most parents are bad, one will tend to model on bad parents, and become worse oneself. A defender of simple role ethics might say that a society with bad parents will not flourish, so that in the long run only comparatively good societies, and parents, will be encouraged. This response fails to convince, though, both because our moral practice manifestly seems to make distinctions between good and bad parents (indeed, the coherence of the objection and response require this), and because the long-term existence of patriarchal practices, to choose one example, undermines the idea that good role-occupiers will ultimately be favored through some process of social evolution. If we need to be able to talk about good parents and bad, though, the question then becomes in what terms we judge or articulate such goodness.

Certainly Ames and Rosemont cannot call on widely applicable principles (“good parents are those who respect their children’s autonomy,” perhaps) or general, role-independent virtues (like “anyone with a well-rounded character will be a good parent”). However, it is also clear that they do not promote simple role ethics. Their writings are replete with references to normative categories that seem aimed at evaluating specific role performance. For example, Ames writes: “Each person stands as a unique perspective on family, community, polity, and cosmos, and through a dedication to deliberate growth and articulation, everyone has the possibility of bringing the resolution of the relationships that locate and constitute them within the family and community into clearer and more meaningful focus” (Ames 2011: 93). In addition to “focus,” “growth,” and “meaningful,” other terms play similar roles in Ames’s discourse of Confucian role ethics, including “harmony” (Ames 2011: 96, 112), “coherence” (Ames 2011: 103), “productive” (Ames 2011: 161, 181), “efficacious” (Ames 2011: 166), “vibrant” (Ames 2011: 181), and so on. Two things about this list are striking. First, most of these evaluative terms explicitly depend on the relations among multiple entities. Second, none of them are readily capturable as single, general-purpose principles. Take “efficacious,” for example. As Ames explains this, it is clear that he has something quite different from an economist’s “efficiency” in mind: he envisions an imaginative response to a morally challenging situation that manages to simultaneously make positive differences for each of the multiple values at stake, achieving something like harmony. Since harmony does not mean arriving at a precise arithmetic balance, “Be efficacious!” is a largely empty principle, unlike (for example) the utilitarian’s “Maximize pleasure!”<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that “Be efficacious!” does us no good; it bids us to attend to the variety of values that

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<sup>41</sup> Elsewhere I have noted an important difference between virtuous perceptions of Coherence in Neo-Confucian virtue ethics and virtuous reactions within Francis Hutcheson’s sentimental virtue ethics. Since Hutcheson believed that virtue leads one to judge “that action is best, which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers”, subsequent thinkers were able to set aside the perceptual aspect of his theory and attempt directly to calculate the greatest happiness (Hutcheson 2006: 74). “Be efficacious” is like “Follow Coherence” in not being amenable to such re-casting as an independent principle. See Angle 2009: 58–59.

we see (and feel) are relevant to a given case, and to strive to keep them all in focus. That is, it calls attention to aspects of our situation that we already find valuable, and seeks to further articulate or inflect the ways in which we enhance these values. To return to our original question, it seems that Confucian role ethics does indeed have some critical purchase, vis-à-vis existing role behaviors, but only so long as we are normatively committed to a general vision of interdependence and relationality. It is this web of relations—and not just a single dyadic relationship—that makes it possible for one to improve one’s parenting by striving for greater overall “focus” or “harmony.”<sup>42</sup>

It is an open question, I believe, whether Ames and Rosemont offer an adequate way of understanding the needed normative commitment to interdependence—something that goes beyond any seemingly factual observations about relationality. I will return to this issue in my concluding section, where we will also consider whether the strategic choice that Ames and Rosemont have made to emphasize difference rather than similarity is ultimately the most fruitful approach. As we have seen in earlier sections, the choice of which moral theory to juxtapose with the *Analects*, through which both text and theory can mutually interpret one another, is rarely a simple matter.

## Conclusion

We have considered the relations between the *Analects* and three kinds of moral theory. Comparisons with other theories might be possible, but the fact that they have not yet been significantly developed in the scholarly literature suggests that there are significant obstacles to such interpretations of the *Analects*, so I will set these options aside.<sup>43</sup> Reviewing what we have seen, scholars have deployed four distinct kinds of argument to buttress their favored approach to the *Analects*. Most common are *best explanation* arguments: these aim to show that a given theoretical lens provides the best explanation of the moral theory that is implicit in

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<sup>42</sup> In A. T. Nuyen’s version of role ethics (see note 39, above), the distinction between a good and bad occupier of a role is determined by how well a given individual fulfills the obligations associated with the given role. He writes, “to be in a role is to be under a set of obligations” (Nuyen 2007: 317). These obligations are determined by social expectations, which for key roles are “encoded in the rites, *li*.” As Nuyen recognizes, this approach raises serious concerns about relativism, but he seeks to deflate these by endorsing a “soft relativism” according to which both societal morality (in this case, the Confucian combination of virtues and “strict moral rules”) and the social context on which it is based (primarily, the *li* or rituals) are able to “evolve together in a kind of Rawlsian ‘reflective equilibrium’” (Nuyen 2007: 328).

<sup>43</sup> Two interpretive options that have been explored with respect to Mengzi are consequentialism (see Im 1999, 2011, and the argument against a consequentialist reading in Wang 2005) and moral sense theory (see J. Huang 1994 and the rebuttals in Lee 1990: 37–38 and Lee 2013, as well as Liu 2003). Another important approach that has received some attention is care ethics; see Li 1994 and Tao 2000.

the text, often because it allows one to account for a specific feature (or a specific range of features) of the text that other theories cannot explain as well. A second kind of argument seeks to show an *explicit contradiction* between the text and a rival theoretical approach. Producing a clear counterexample to one or another approach would indeed help to simplify the conceptual landscape, but as we have seen, these arguments tend to overreach. Once the evidence is viewed in a balanced fashion, we tend to fall back into competing claims of best explanation. The third approach is *interpretive fruitfulness*: viewing the text through a given theoretical lens helps us to see things about the *Analects* that we would not otherwise. It is worth noting that while these arguments can indeed bolster the appeal of a particular interpretive approach, it does not follow that the theoretical approach in question must be our exclusive lens onto the *Analects*. More than one modern theory may prove fruitful in this sense. Finally, there are arguments that depend on *dialogical fruitfulness*. These arguments can be assessed in multiple ways, since they often depend on the production of constructive stimuli to both contemporary Confucianism and contemporary Western moral theory.

It is this last category of arguments that most directly addresses concerns about a potential asymmetry between the treatment of Chinese and Western philosophy. Let us take first the case of deontology: Most of what we have seen here have been interpretive arguments about the value of reading the *Analects* as deontology, but is deontology also challenged or enhanced when viewed through the lens of the *Analects*? Yu Kam-por's two-level approach to morality, mentioned at the end of "[Kant and Deontology](#)", might offer an example. More generally, the deontological reading of Confucianism as a whole that was developed by Mou Zongsan (and is continued by Lee) certainly does offer significant challenges to Kant's views on key subjects, most famously on whether humans can engage in "intellectual intuition."<sup>44</sup> Mou's and Lee's readings do not rely very heavily on the *Analects*, but they are intended to include that text among others, and so can count as at least indirect cases of two-way dialogical engagement. Turn next to virtue ethics: does it give us evidence of a symmetrical engagement in both directions? As with deontology, some of the clearest cases of such engagement take other Confucian texts as their primary points of departure.<sup>45</sup> As mentioned above, in their comparisons with Aristotle, both Sim and Yu endeavor to show ways that Aristotle, and by implication contemporary neo-Aristotelians, need to learn from Confucius, even if their efforts still strike some (such as Ames and Rosemont) as biased in Aristotle's favor. In addition, insofar as it is plausible to understand the *Analects* as putting forward a form of virtue ethics that is distinct from Aristotle's—as might be concluded from a synthetic reading of the evidence canvassed above—then we can see the *Analects* as helping to press contemporary virtue ethicists to further enlarge

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<sup>44</sup> See Billioud 2011 and Bunnin 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Van Norden's reflections on Mengzian virtue ethics are an excellent example (Van Norden 2007: 337–359), and see generally Angle 2009, which engages in sustained dialogue between Neo-Confucians and various contemporary virtue ethicists.



their tent: not only should it encompass Humean and Nietzschean varieties, but one or more Confucian versions as well. This both complicates and yet makes more interesting the task of those seeking to generate a synthetic, inclusive theory of virtue ethics.

Given that one of the explicit motivations of Confucian role ethics is to resist asymmetry, it is no surprise that it offers dialogic challenges to contemporary moral theories. In fact, there are two ways that it can do so. Ames' and Rosemont's intended approach is to challenge modern Western moral theories *en bloc*: All of them, according to Ames and Rosemont, suffer from individualism, essentialism, over-abstraction, and so on. As a result, Ames and Rosemont charge that modern moral theories are actually non-starters: They write that so long as it is further developed, Confucian role ethics can be a "viable candidate as a vision of a global and yet culturally specific moral life appropriate to the twenty-first century. . . in a way that the ethics of Aristotle, Kant, or Bentham and Mill cannot" (Ames and Rosemont 2011: 35). This means that Confucian role ethics is not envisioned as entering into productive, mutually-edifying dialogue with deontology, consequentialism, or virtue ethics: Rather, it is being proposed as a full-scale replacement.<sup>46</sup> One possible response to this might be to accept that the gulf between Confucian role ethics and the three theory-types just mentioned is indeed as vast as Ames and Rosemont believe, but to suggest that there is still room for dialogue with other types of Western moral theory: feminist care ethics, perhaps, or Deweyan moral theory, or "social ethics."<sup>47</sup> Still, even with this caveat, there are non-negligible costs to Ames' and Rosemont's approach. Practically speaking, if successful they would cut Confucianism (or at least the *Analects*) off both from the dominant contemporary ways of construing its moral thinking in Sinophone and Anglophone discourse, respectively, and from the vast majority of non-Confucian moral philosophers today (no matter what their language). They thereby would seem to minimize any chance that contemporary Confucianism can learn from the insights, whatever they might be, to be found in these other bodies of theory.

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<sup>46</sup> In general, Ames and Rosemont do not write about ways that they have learned from, much less hope to contribute to, Aristotelian theory. The following sentence is a partial exception: "In fact, it is Aristotle's sustained and often unsuccessful struggle to balance and coordinate the conflicting demands of partiality and impartiality, of first philosophy and particular context, that serves as an object lesson and *shows a way forward* for us" (Ames and Rosemont 2011: 34, emphasis added). The primary idea here seems to be that Aristotle is a negative example, showing why his approach is to be avoided.

<sup>47</sup> For some initial suggestions about how care ethics and Confucian ethics might be able to learn from one another, see the references cited in note 43. In Tan 2004, Sor-hoon Tan masterfully shows ways in which Confucian and Deweyan political theories can inform and enhance one another; with this as a point of departure, it is plausible to think that similar results might emerge from a dialogue in the area of morality. Nuyen argues that his version of role ethics (see notes 39 and 42 above) bears considerable similarity to a trend in Western ethical thinking that he labels "social ethics," including such figures as Charles Taylor, Dorothy Emmet, P. F. Strawson, Marion Smiley, and Larry May. I agree that there are various overlaps between Nuyen's theory and those of these Western figures, although his discussion is too brief to be more than suggestive. For references, see Nuyen 2007: 322–325.

An alternative approach is to recast the ideas and values driving Confucian role ethics as a version of virtue ethics. (I believe that a *rapprochement* between deontology and Confucian role ethics is unlikely.) The idea would not be to conflate Aristotelian ethics and Confucian ethics, but to ask whether there is a way of construing virtue ethics that is broad enough to include an ethic with the relational, transactional grounding on which Ames and Rosemont put so much emphasis. One possible source of insight is discussion of the relation between virtue ethics and care ethics; some have claimed that the latter is distinct from virtue ethics because it takes the *relation* of caring as primary, while others have sought to combine the two. More generally, it is significant that the modern revival of virtue ethics over the last half-century has been spurred by a reaction against many of the same features of deontology and consequentialism that Ames and Rosemont also critique, and also that virtue ethics has been quite dynamic in stretching beyond its initial source of inspiration in Aristotle. Ames and Rosemont say that contemporary version of virtue ethics maintain “the foundational role of the *individual* and of *rationality*,” but it is not clear to me that this is so, or at least problematically so.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, it is striking that when Ames comes to discuss *de* 德 (which is often translated as “virtue”; he renders it “excelling morally”), he says:

Each of these [terms that make up the vocabulary of Confucian role ethics] is a perspective on the same event, and functions to highlight a particular phase or dimension in achieving the consummate life. There is a sense in which *de* is used as the more general term for expressing the cumulative outcome of coordinating the shared experience effectively—both the achieved quality of the conduct of the particular person and the achieved *ethos* of the collective culture. Hence, the other terms we have explored above are all implicated in excelling morally (*de* 德) (Ames 2011: 207).

Ames makes it clear elsewhere that his concern with the term “virtue” is with its implication that virtues are reified, metaphysically independent things, rather than as aspects of our complex, socially articulated experience. Instead, he insists that “whatever we call virtue. . . is nothing more or less than a vibrant, situated, practical, and productive virtuosity” (Ames 2011: 181). Seen in this light—and also in the light of my argument from the end of the “[Role ethics](#)” section concerning the need, within Ames’ and Rosemont’s theory, for a normative commitment to interdependence—I wonder whether their ideas are really, at bottom, about roles. When we foreground virtuosity and interdependent flourishing instead, it starts to sound like such a “virtuosity ethics” has things to teach to, and things to learn from, virtue ethics—and indeed, that they may ultimately be two species of the same genus.

This chapter has been composed at any exciting moment in the developing conversations about the *Analects* and moral theory. Sinophone and Anglophone philosophers are starting to engage one another, which is helping to spur the related (though not identical) process of dialogue between Western and Chinese philosophical

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<sup>48</sup> On the role of emotion for many of the philosophers sympathetic to virtue ethics, see Nussbaum 1999. Rosemont and Ames note in passing that Lawrence Blum has argued for a stronger role for communities and relations in the production and practice of moral virtues (Ames and Rosemont 2011: 37n24).

traditions. Concerns about asymmetry are by no means a thing of the past, but we are beginning to see glimpses of a future that is pluralistic, open, and global. There is good reason to hope that future discussions of the interpretive and dialogical relations between the *Analects* and moral theory will be even more productive than those reviewed in this chapter have been. Lest my optimism get the better of me, though, allow me to end on a cautionary note. There are many hazards on the way to meaningful comparisons between ancient texts and modern theories. The one I would like to highlight lies in moving too quickly from the fact that a given passage in the text appears to be consistent with a particular, well-worked-out contemporary view, to the conclusion that the text must therefore share all the features of the modern theory. That would be to forget that the text has a complex social, conceptual, and historical context of its own, as well as to privilege modern theory as offering the only theoretical options. A more humble attitude is needed. Such humility does not rule out the possibility that the Chinese masters were mistaken or misguided; indeed, it seems likely that all moral theory, ancient or modern, can stand to be improved. Humility does suggest, though, that an open and piecemeal approach to comparative encounters is more likely to lead to constructive results.

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## Chapter 13

# Religious Thought and Practice in the *Analects*

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While most contemporary interpreters of the *Analects* agree that the text presents a religious perspective or, at the very least, that the text has religious aspects, scholars have taken diverse positions on what *kind* of religious perspective that is.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, few debates about the *Analects* have involved such widely divergent positions. Some have maintained that Confucius embraces a form of religious skepticism, while others have defended “a-theistic” interpretations of Confucius’ views. Other interpreters have argued against both of these views that Confucius’ view is defined in part by a belief in spirits or deities of various kinds. Some have even maintained that the view seen in the *Analects* is monotheistic, in ways that resonate with Jewish and Christian views of God. Most of the debates about religion in the *Analects* center around the question of whether Confucius believed in spirits (*gui* 鬼, *shen* 神) or deities, and how to understand his view of *Tian* 天 (most often translated as “Heaven”).<sup>2</sup> Of course, it is important to remember that religious views consist of much more than beliefs about deities, spirits, or other supernatural entities, and not all religious

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from the *Analects* in this chapter follow Watson 2007 unless otherwise noted, with the following adaptations: references to “Heaven” (Watson’s translation for *Tian*) have been changed to “*Tian*,” and I have rendered *gui* “ghosts” and *shen* “spirits” (instead of “gods,” which Watson sometimes uses for both terms). Where Watson’s passage numbers differ from Lau’s, I have indicated the Watson number in brackets. References to the original text are to Lau and Chen 2006.

<sup>2</sup> In speaking about Confucius in this essay, I refer not to a historical person but to a composite figure constructed from the *Analects* whose views represent a certain strand of early Chinese thought. This view is shared by most of the scholars whose work I discuss in this essay.

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practices relate to those entities.<sup>3</sup> All of the interpreters I discuss agree that some things we normally regard as secular are sacred in the *Analects*.<sup>4</sup> Among the most prominent examples of this are the understandings of ritual and filial piety that are seen in the text, and this is one reason why even those interpreters who see Confucius as advocating a form of religious skepticism or a-theism tend to maintain that Confucius still presents a distinctive way of being religious.

In this essay, I examine the most controversial religious themes in the *Analects*, namely Confucius' views on the existence and nature of *Tian* and spirits.<sup>5</sup> Through a close reading of the text, I examine why these ideas have presented interpretive challenges to contemporary scholars of Confucianism and explore how the views of traditional and contemporary interpreters relate to the text, especially in light of the cultural and religious context of ancient China. I begin with a discussion of some general terminological and interpretive issues, followed by an overview of the range of positions on religion in the *Analects*. Then I discuss the textual evidence concerning spirits and *Tian* in the *Analects* in relation to the spectrum of views in the field.

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<sup>3</sup> My focus here is on religious views and practices and not on religions; I will not attempt to address the question of whether Confucianism is a religion here, for such a question concerns more than just the text of the *Analects*. My main concern, and the concern of the secondary work I focus on here, is the religious view that is presented in the *Analects*. Of course, what makes a view “religious” is related to the question of what constitutes a religion. A broadening of attempts to define religion occurred when scholars of religion came to appreciate forms of religion that did not have a concept of deity. The concept of religion was transformed in the process, and one of the results has been to leave some doubt as to what a fully adequate definition of religion might be. Accordingly, I will not offer a definition of religion (or the necessary and sufficient conditions for views and practices being “religious”) in this essay, though I think it is worth noting that religions fulfill a similar range of functions for humans. By examining these functions as we see them in the *Analects*, I will treat religion as a family resemblance concept here. (See, for example Ninian Smart's discussion of six dimensions of religion. He maintains that not all of these are found in all religions, but that every religion shares in some or all of them to greater or lesser degrees. See Smart 1983. For further discussion of the attempt to define religion, see Yandell 1999: 16–17.)

<sup>4</sup> For an early formulation of this type of view, see Fingarette 1972.

<sup>5</sup> One might object to the very attempt to find a coherent view of these topics in the *Analects*, arguing that the text simply does not present a consistent view of the spirits and *Tian*. Although the *Analects* represents a synthesis of different views—namely those of Confucius' students and followers and the authors and editors of the text—they were nevertheless unified in the compilation of the text and subsequently came to be seen as representing “a certain strand of late Chunqiu-early Warring States opposition to the dominant forms of religious practice” (Puett 2002: 97 n. 38). In this essay I focus on how interpreters have understood that strand of thought. I think it is accurate that we do not have enough textual evidence from the *Analects* to articulate a systematic, detailed view, but it remains the case that we can offer a description of Confucius' view based on the *Analects*, particularly when we are informed by an understanding of the cultural and historical background.

## Terminological and Interpretive Questions

Many of the disagreements over religious thought in the *Analects* concern how *Tian* and the spirits fit into categories such as theistic/atheistic, transcendent/immanent, and personal/impersonal. Yet different interpreters sometimes use these terms differently, and often without specifying what they mean. As a result, it will be helpful to specify what is meant by these terms. Although “theism” is often equated with traditional forms of monotheism, the term itself merely denotes belief in a god or gods. William Rowe maintains that it is helpful to distinguish between narrow and broad senses of theism. Theism in the narrow sense, he argues, is belief in the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, supremely good being who created the world. Theism in the broad sense is belief in the existence of some sort of divine being or divine reality. As Rowe points out, to be a theist in the narrow sense is to be a theist in the broad sense, but the reverse is not true: One may be a theist in the broad sense without believing there is a supremely good, omnipotent, omniscient, eternal being who created the world (Rowe 2005: 301). For our purposes, Rowe’s distinction is important because it can help us to recognize that there are different kinds of theism, one of which tends to be privileged in discussions of theism. To deny that Confucius was a theist simply because he did not believe in an omni-predicate God risks underestimating the diversity of theistic beliefs in the world or privileging one kind of theism (and particular religious traditions) over others. Similarly, to claim that Confucius was a theist without specifying what kind of theist he was and how the form of theism he embraced differs from other forms of theism risks suggesting that theists share much more than they do.

A related terminological issue concerns the use of the term “gods” or “God.” It is common practice for scholars of religion to refer to many different kinds of deities, spirits, divine beings, or spiritual agents as “gods.” As Meir Shahar and Robert Weller point out, when used in relation to Chinese religions (including Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism and popular religion), “Such use should be taken to imply not the omniscience and omnipotence of the Abrahamic god, but something more akin to Catholic saints: spirits of dead worthies who can respond to requests from the living” (Shahar and Weller 1996: 2). Some contemporary interpreters object to the use of the term “gods” on the basis that it brings to mind God (with a capital “G”). Yet to deny that spirits, deities or spiritual agents other than a mono-theistic, omni-predicate God should be referred to as “gods” will privilege certain theistic views over other views by denying that any other deities should be referred to as “gods.” It also minimizes—either intentionally or unintentionally—the continuity between different kinds of religious views that involve belief in and interaction with spiritual beings.

Even if one accepts the argument that there is evidence of theism in the broad sense and beliefs and practices concerning gods (as defined above) in the *Analects*, one might still question whether this terminology is helpful, or whether the religious view presented in the *Analects* is *best described* as a form of theism in the broad sense, and whether the entities in play are *best described* as gods. I think there are good reasons both for and against using these terms. On the one hand, using

“gods” and “theism” may be confusing to those unaccustomed to hearing these terms outside of traditional monotheistic contexts. Even many philosophers of religion only use the term “theism” in the narrow sense. This language might mislead some into seeing too much similarity between narrow and broad theistic views, or to mistake other kinds of theistic views for forms of monotheism. On the other hand, refraining from using “theism” and “gods” can have just the opposite effect; it might lead us to over-emphasize the differences between traditional forms of monotheism and other forms of theism, or to overlook some genuine similarities between different religious views, such as a belief in spiritual beings. In relation to the *Analects*, some scholars worry more about over-emphasizing the similarities because of the tendency of early missionaries to “Christianize” early Chinese texts.<sup>6</sup> The tendency to read one’s own perspective into the *Analects* is a more widespread problem, of course. Traditional and contemporary interpreters have offered not only readings that highlight similarities with Christianity but also readings of the *Analects* that appropriate Buddhist and Daoist thought, that highlight similarities with non-religious or a-theistic perspectives, or that argue for continuity with thinkers who define being religious in non-traditional terms.

There are some good reasons to use terms like “theistic” and “gods” with reference to traditions such as Confucianism. There is a pronounced tendency among many philosophers of religion to privilege narrow theism over broad theism by continuously using the term “theism” when they are only discussing a certain kind of Christian theism. Highlighting traditions that are theistic in the broad sense can encourage those who study theism to more fully acknowledge and acquaint themselves with other forms of theism. The failure to do so represents a form of ethnocentrism that is vicious both in a moral sense, because it privileges Christian theism over other forms of theism, and also in an intellectual sense, because of the limited range of views one is able to consider. Those who study theism might have something to learn from broadly theistic traditions and the different sorts of religious views they present; we should expect such views to contribute to our understanding of a wide range of issues not only in the philosophy of religion but in philosophy and theology more broadly.

Another argument in favor of using terms such as “theism” and “gods” stems from the fact that within the study of religion and philosophy, certain terminology has been developed to describe certain kinds of views, including not only terms such as “theism” but terms such as “ethics” and “epistemology.” To fail to use those terms when they are appropriate simply out of a fear that the language will mislead us into thinking that different theistic, ethical, or epistemological views are all the same risks portraying certain views—in this case views from a tradition that has already been marginalized and neglected within the discipline of philosophy—as

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<sup>6</sup>This tendency can be observed in the writings of Matteo Ricci and James Legge (discussed later in this essay), who both read their own Christian beliefs into early Chinese writings. For a detailed study of Jesuit encounters with Chinese texts, including Ricci, see Mungello 1989. For a detailed study of Legge, see Girardot 2002.

radically “other.” As I make clear below, like the vast majority of my colleagues in the field of early Chinese philosophy, I believe there is a rich range of deep and important differences between the views found in texts such as the *Analects* and other views throughout the history of philosophy and religion, around the world. I also believe that in order to fully appreciate many of those differences, it is helpful to acknowledge and work to understand some of the similarities. Once we begin to examine such similarities, we come to appreciate more fully the unique features of the different views before us, and we also come to appreciate the way in which the study of different views can not only teach us about the unfamiliar, but also inform our understanding of more familiar views.

As important as these terminological matters are, it is important to distinguish between terminological debates—concerning the terms we should or should not use for the spiritual entities discussed in the *Analects* (e.g., “gods,” “spirits,” “Heaven”) or to describe Confucius’ religious view (e.g., “theistic,” “a-theistic”), and substantive disagreements about Confucius’ view. The two are often connected, such as when one’s desire to use terms such as “theistic” and “gods” reflects a belief in the fundamental continuity between Christianity and Confucianism, or when one’s desire to use terms such as “a-theistic” reflects a belief in the fundamental discontinuity between Western religions and Confucianism and which in turn highlights their incompatibility and the appeal—or inferiority—of Confucianism. In such cases, one’s terminology both reflects and helps to support a larger interpretive agenda. Regardless of the relationship that often exists between one’s terminology and one’s interpretation, it remains important to distinguish between terminological disagreements and interpretive disagreements. In this essay, my primary interest is not what terms should be used to describe Confucius’ view or what English terms should be used to translate Chinese words such as *Tian*; my primary interest is the nature and content of Confucius’ religious views in the *Analects*.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, my primary questions will be: Does the *Analects* suggest that Confucius did or did not believe in spirits? What does the *Analects* tell us about his attitude toward traditional beliefs and practices concerning spirits? What does Confucius believe about *Tian*, based on his remarks in the *Analects*?

## Views from the Field

In contemporary scholarship on the *Analects* we find a spectrum of opinions ranging from those who regard Confucius’ religious view as very close to Western monotheism to those who regard Confucius’ religious view as having almost nothing in common with Western theism. A wide range of positions fall somewhere

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<sup>7</sup>In order to help readers to remain focused on this question, I use what I think are the least controversial terms possible for the primary ideas in question: “ghosts” and “spirits” rather than “gods” for *gui* and *shen*; *Tian* is left untranslated.

in the middle. Those who see continuity between Confucius' view and traditional forms of Western monotheism—and especially between *Tian* and God—include early missionaries and translators such as James Legge, who maintained that early Confucianism is monotheistic and that the concepts of Shangdi 上帝 (The Lord on High) and *Tian* serve as evidence for this claim (Legge 1880: 11). Julia Ching, too, defended the view that “the Confucian classics clearly enunciate a belief in God as the source and principle of all things, the giver of life and the protector of the human race” (Ching 1977: 118).<sup>8</sup> These general positions concerning early Confucianism include the view presented in the *Analects*. Legge writes, “Confucius felt, I believe, that in all phenomena there was the presence and doing of God;” *Tian* “was to him the name of a personal being” (Legge 1880: 43, 140).<sup>9</sup> One of the obvious difficulties with a monotheistic interpretation of early Confucianism is how one explains beliefs in the spirits. Legge explicitly denied that the early Chinese were polytheists or henotheists because he thought that they regarded other spirits as intercessors, mediators and ministers to Shangdi or *Tian*, and thus denied that they were gods (Legge 1880: 16, 29, 70, 254). Indeed, he writes that “the most ancient and strong conviction of one God” prevented the rise of polytheism in China: “We may deplore, as we do deplore, the superstitious worship of a multitude of spirits, terrestrial and celestial. . .but this abuse does not obscure the monotheism. Those spirits are not Gods, and are not called by the divine name.” He adds that ancient Chinese beliefs in spirits should not lead us to doubt Chinese monotheism any more than Catholic beliefs in angels and saints leads us to doubt Catholic monotheism (Legge 1880: 20, 51–53).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, scholars such as Roger Ames, David Hall, and Henry Rosemont, Jr. contend that Confucius was not a theist but that his view *is* religious. This interpretation offers a challenge to “both the familiar ‘Heaven (*Tian*)’-centered ‘christianized’ interpretation of classical Confucianism and the default claim that Confucianism is merely a secular humanism” (Ames 2003: 165–166). On this view, classical Confucianism “is at once a-theistic and profoundly religious. It is a religion without a God, a religion that affirms the cumulative human experience itself”

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<sup>8</sup> One of the earliest examples of this type of view is seen in the writings of Matteo Ricci, a seventeenth-century Jesuit missionary to China who claimed that God and Shangdi are “different only in name” (Ricci 1985: 125). Legge’s work as a translator of early texts is unparalleled, and his views concerning religion in early Confucianism should be considered in light of the early period in which he wrote—when the academic study of religion was still in its infancy and also prior to the advances in sinology that inform work in the field today. (For a discussion of how Legge’s views on early Chinese monotheism evolve in various works, see Girardot 2002: 220–234, 299–327, 465–471.) However, one can still find some who defend the same kind of position today. A recent defender of this type of view is Kelly Clark, who describes his position as “a highly nuanced version of Legge” (Clark 2005: 130 n. 32). Clark argues that “both the Hebrew and ancient Chinese worldviews came to countenance a single, supreme, and personal deity who providentially orders human affairs” (Clark 2005: 109). Clark relies heavily on Legge’s interpretations and translations, as well as the work of Fung Yu-lan 馮友蘭, whose work is discussed later in this essay (Clark 2005, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> For the view that *Tian* is a personal God, see also Ching 1977: 122 and Clark 2009.

(Ames 2003: 165). In multiple works, Ames, Hall, and Rosemont outline the differences between “this Confucian kind of religiousness and that of the Abrahamic traditions that have largely defined the meaning of religion in the Anglo-European cultural narratives,” including, first, that “unlike the ‘worship’ model that defers to the ultimate meaning of some temporally prior, independent, external agency,” Confucianism offers “a human-centered rather than a God-centered religiousness that emerges through conscientious attention to ritual propriety” (Ames 2009: 268). In addition, “Confucian religiousness is neither salvific nor eschatological” though it does entail “a transformation of the quality of human life in the ordinary business of the day that not only elevates and inspires our daily transactions, but further extends radially to enchant the world” (Ames 2009: 268). Ames writes, “It is this transformation—the ordinary and everyday made elegant—that seems at least in part to provide the mystery other religious expressions find in some transcendent, supernatural appeal” (Ames 2009: 269). Indeed, Ames and Hall reject the view that transcendence is a part of early Confucianism, maintaining that “*Tian* is wholly immanent, having no existence independent of the calculus of phenomena that constitute it” (Hall and Ames 1987: 207). As all of these comments make clear, this position emphasizes the differences between Confucian and Western religious views.

There are a variety of views in the middle of the spectrum. For example, 杜維明 *Tu Weiming* argues that the concept of God in the Abrahamic traditions is “totally absent” from the Confucian tradition but that the Confucian way of being religious still involves a faithful response to the transcendent (Tu 1989: 116, 94). Following the earlier work of 熊十力 *Xiong Shili* and 牟宗三 *Mou Zongsan*, Tu argues that a belief in “immanent transcendence” characterizes Confucius’ religious view, because Confucius understands *Tian* not as “an objective and external God” but as a “transcendent substance” that is immanent in humans and the natural world (Tu 2002: 343). One of the distinctive features of this account is that it works to reconcile the “this-worldly” focus of Confucianism with passages in texts such as the *Analects* that present *Tian* as something that at least in some ways transcends this world.<sup>10</sup>

A view that falls quite squarely in the middle of the spectrum is that of Philip J. Ivanhoe, who argues that early Confucians “did not believe in a creator deity who exists independently of the Natural order, who created the universe *ex nihilo*, and, through revelation, makes its will known in the world. Nevertheless, some important early Confucians ground their ethical claims by appealing to the authority of *tian* ‘Heaven,’ insisting that Heaven endows human beings with a distinctively ethical nature and at times acts in the world” (Ivanhoe 2007: 211).<sup>11</sup> This position presents an obvious contrast with those such as Legge who argue for the continuity

<sup>10</sup> Tu’s view has inspired several attempts to construct new Confucian religious perspectives that combine transcendence and immanence, and which draw upon Neo-Confucian views as well. See for example Feng 2003 and Huang 2007.

<sup>11</sup> On the difference between Western monotheistic views and early Confucian views, see also Ivanhoe 2002: 59.

between Christian views of God and Confucian views of *Tian*, but it also contrasts with those who argue for radical discontinuity between these views. While Ivanhoe rejects the view that Confucius believes in a personal God, he argues neither that Confucius is a secular humanist nor that he is an atheist, maintaining instead that in the *Analecets* *Tian* is presented as “an impersonal yet concerned agent and a force for human good” (Ivanhoe 2007: 213). One of the distinctive features of Ivanhoe’s account is his emphasis on the history of philosophy in the early Chinese tradition. Although he occasionally remarks on important similarities and differences with Western religious views, Ivanhoe operates primarily as a historian of philosophy and not as a comparativist, and as a result his main focus is not the continuity or discontinuity between Confucius’ religious view and Western religious views, but how Confucius’ religious view is described in the text and how it relates to some of the earliest conceptions of a supreme deity in China, the different though related account of the spiritual world in the Zhou 周 Dynasty, and the diverse views of *Tian* seen in classical Chinese philosophy during the latter part of the Zhou Dynasty.

Another scholar who emphasizes the historical context of the religious view in the *Analecets* is Michael Puett, who offers one of the most incisive and comprehensive studies of early Chinese beliefs in deities. Like Ivanhoe, Puett’s view falls in the middle of the spectrum of views described above. Attending to the historical development of ancient Chinese views and practices concerning various spirits and *Tian*, Puett locates Confucius’ religious views in relation to his own culture. One of the most distinctive features of Puett’s account is his emphasis on religious *activities* in addition to and as a way of informing our understanding of Confucius’ religious *views*. He maintains that “a highly theistic vision of the world” was clearly a part of early Chinese religious activities and beliefs, but his argument highlights the way in which early Chinese theism represents a different form of theism than traditional forms of monotheism, most notably because it entails a belief in many deities who were not only powerful but often troublesome and difficult to manage. Puett writes that “since natural phenomena were directly controlled by spirits—and potentially fickle spirits at that—a great deal of religious activity during the Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國, 453–221 B.C.E.) accordingly was devoted to charting which spirits controlled which domain of power, understanding their intentions through divination, and influencing them with sacrifices” (Puett 2002: 96). The *Analecets*, he argues, is one of several texts that present critical responses to the ritual specialists who dealt with these spirits, but we do not have good reasons to think Confucius wholly rejected traditional beliefs about the spirits and *Tian* (Puett 2002: 97). Accordingly, Puett’s view differs in deep and important ways both from those who argue that Confucius was a monotheist, and those who argue that Confucius’ view is a-theistic.

In addition to offering interpretations of the religious views presented in specific texts such as the *Analecets*, Puett offers a larger argument concerning “correlative thinking,” a view seen in much of the secondary scholarship on early Chinese thought, including scholarship on the *Analecets*. According to this view, Chinese religious thought has been defined from a very early time by a belief in continuity and harmony between the divine and the human, where humans and spirits are



understood to be correlated or linked in a harmonious continuum instead of occupying different realms that are in tension with one another, as they are in Western religions. Puett traces the genealogy of this view and presents a definitive and detailed refutation of it, which has important implications for this essay because a number of influential interpreters of the *Analects* embrace the view he discusses.

Puett shows that the belief in correlative thinking originated with Max Weber, who claimed that Chinese culture—and Confucianism in particular—is dominated by “an immanentist cosmology, a this-worldly orientation, and a lack of a tension between the human and divine realms” and that this accounts for its failure to develop certain forms of rationality that developed in the West (Puett 2002: 13; see Weber 1951: 196, 235–236). In response to Weber’s interpretation, Marcel Granet and FUNG Yu-lan 馮友蘭 each argued that while Weber is correct to point out the contrasting cosmologies of China and the West, this actually represents the *merits* as opposed to the downfalls of Confucian thought when compared with Western theistic views. Yet as Puett shows, Granet and Fung held different views concerning the development of correlative cosmology in China. According to Granet, correlative thinking was *always* the guiding principle of Chinese thought: “the Chinese had no sense of a transcendent Law or God” and “Man and nature did not form two separate realms, but one unique society” (Puett 2002: 8; Granet 1934: 476, 25). But while Granet argued that Chinese thought *never* expressed a belief in a “world of transcendent realities outside of the human world,” Fung believed that these features of early Chinese philosophy developed over time and represented “a shift from religion to philosophy, from theistic views to rationality. . . .” (Puett 2002: 8–9; Granet 1934: 279; Fung 1952: 1–3). Fung attributed beliefs in a theistic cosmology to the “primitive” period in Chinese thought, defined by the belief “that natural phenomena and human affairs are all under a divine and supernatural control” (Puett 2002: 9; Fung 1952: 22) and argued that “The Chinese of that time were superstitious and ignorant; they had religious ideas but no philosophy. . . .” (Fung 1952: 24; Puett 2002: 9–10). He claimed that this superstitious, religious, and theistic worldview was replaced by a humanistic, philosophical, and correlative one in the *Chunqiu* 春秋 (“Spring and Autumn”) period (771–481 B.C.E.) (Fung 1952: 33–34; Puett 2002: 10). Yet as Puett points out, despite these differences, Granet and Fung both endorsed Weber’s view that early Chinese philosophy is “this-worldly.”

Puett goes on to show that the accounts of Granet and Fung gave rise to two schools of interpretations, into which most of the subsequent secondary scholarship on early Chinese religious thought can be divided. For our purposes, what is especially important here is that the claims made by Granet and Fung are the very claims that contemporary interpreters often make in defense of both non-theistic and theistic readings of the *Analects*. For example, those who reflect the Fung school of interpretation—which Puett terms the “evolutionary model”—reject the view that Confucius believed in spirits or that *Tian* should be understood theistically on the basis that such beliefs reflect earlier, more primitive religious views as opposed to the more sophisticated philosophical views one finds in the *Analects*. Defenders of this view maintain that theism dominated the early period but not Confucius’ time (Puett 2002: 19). Those who exemplify this view include

Karl Jaspers, who influenced the most well-know proponent of this view in the China field, Benjamin Schwartz (Puett 2002: 11–13, 18–21).<sup>12</sup>

Those who reflect the Granet school of interpretation—which Puett terms the “cultural essentialist model” and which represents the most dominant paradigm over the past two decades—resist the view that Confucius had any theistic beliefs on the basis that such a view is inconsistent with the correlative cosmology that essentially characterizes Chinese thought, and especially the view that there was a lack of transcendence in Chinese thought. On this view, theism is a distinctively Western mode of thinking (Puett 2002: 18). Early figures in this school of interpretation in the China field include Joseph Needham, Frederick Mote, and K.C. Chang. A.C. Graham, too, presents this type of view, though as Puett notes, Graham’s view differs from Granet’s in that he sees correlative thinking as a universal mode of reasoning that was embraced in China, while the West divorced correlative thinking from analytical thinking and valued the latter more highly. Graham’s arguments, in turn, were developed in the work of Hall and Ames, which as Puett notes “represents the most extensive attempt in recent decades to contrast the cultures of early China and the West” (Puett 2002: 16–17).

Against these views, Puett presents extensive and detailed evidence concerning the Shang 商 and Zhou 周 sacrificial systems showing that claims regarding the continuity and harmony between the divine and human realms that originated with Weber are simply mistaken:

Far from revealing an assumption of harmony, a belief in the benevolent intentions of the divine powers, and a desire to adjust to the world as given, sacrificial practice in the Shang was aimed at a radical transformation of the divine world, a transformation undertaken precisely so that humanity could appropriate and domesticate nature for its purposes. Such an attempt to transform both the divine and the natural worlds does indeed involve an enormous investment in sacrificial action, but that investment emerged not from an assumption of harmonious collaboration between man and god but from a sense of radical discontinuity and lack of harmony (Puett 2002: 78).

Given that similar ideas feature throughout the Western Zhou materials, he argues, we need to develop a different reading of Warring States developments, including texts such as the *Analects*.

It is important to appreciate just how devastating Puett’s argument is for the dominant interpretation of early Confucian religious views as “this-worldly.” Indeed, based on the evidence Puett provides, we might even describe the recent interpretive history of early Chinese thought as a series of footnotes to Weber. In addition to presenting extensive evidence for rejecting Weber’s interpretation and

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<sup>12</sup> See Jaspers 1953 and Schwartz 1985. For a recent example of the evolutionary model, see Roetz 1993. Schwartz argued that there was a “transcendental” breakthrough during the “Axial Period,” but that this notion of transcendence is “close to the etymological meaning of the word—a kind of standing back and looking beyond—a kind of critical, reflective questioning” (Schwartz 1975: 3, quoted in Puett 2002: 12). This is why Schwartz characterizes transcendence in China as being of a “this-worldly sort” and maintained that there was a lack of tension between the human and divine realms (Puett 2002: 11–13).

the subsequent interpretations discussed above, Puett shows that one of the dangers of these interpretations is that they encourage us to reject certain readings—such as those which affirm Confucius’ belief in deities—not on the basis of textual evidence but because of the belief that Confucius *could not* have held certain views because they were not emblematic of Chinese views during his time (according to the Fung school of interpretation) or ever (according to the Granet interpretation). As Puett puts it, “Building such a contrastive framework requires taking particular texts out of context and reading them as assumptions of the entire cultures being compared” (Puett 2002: 23).

There are a couple of ways in which the claims made by interpreters who embrace this contrastive framework might be refined and clarified. First, theism tends to be understood in the narrow sense by some, if not most, interpreters. For example, Ames claims that classical Confucianism is “at once a-theistic and profoundly religious. It is a religion without a God, a religion that affirms the cumulative human experience itself” (Ames 2003: 165). He goes on to describe this view as “non-theistic humanism” (Ames 2003: 166). Ames appears to mean that the classical Confucians were not theists in the narrow sense. It is important to notice that one can maintain—as Ames, Hall, and Rosemont do—that the understandings of *shen* in classical Confucianism “preclude any severe distinction between humanity and divinity,” (Ames 2003: 180 n. 17)—if by this one means that there is a distinction but it is not dramatic or “severe” to use Ames’s word here—and yet still maintain that their view is theistic in the broad sense. Even if one rejects the view that *Tian* is a theistic concept, if one acknowledges that classical Confucians believed in ancestral spirits, then one accepts the view that classical Confucian thought is theistic in the broad sense.

A second, and related, difficulty is that although interpreters often follow in the Weberian tradition of claiming that there is an absence of “transcendence” generally, there are many different kinds of transcendence. Following Rowe’s approach to theism, we can distinguish between narrow and broad forms of transcendence as it applies to beings. Narrow transcendence involves a conception of a *wholly* transcendent being; it is transcendent in that it goes beyond our ordinary limits as humans in every conceivable way. Those who believe in narrow transcendence can understand this in different ways; a strong form of transcendence in the narrow sense is seen in the work of Karl Barth, who defended the view that God is “wholly Other” and cannot be understood or grasped by humans (Barth 1961: I/1–2.). In contrast, transcendence in the broad sense involves a conception of beings that transcend us, surpass us, or go beyond our ordinary limits in *some* way. There is a broader spectrum of views that involve a belief in beings that are transcendent in the broad sense, just as there is a broader spectrum of views that are broadly theistic than are narrowly theistic. This distinction can help us to see that the *Analects* contains passages concerning beings that are transcendent in the broad sense—for it contains numerous references to spirits. At the very least, these spirits go beyond our ordinary limits in that they are not confined to physical bodies yet they still exist. This alone is enough to make them transcendent in the broad sense, though there may be other ways in which they surpass us, as well as some ways in which

they are more limited than us. However, as we shall see, the *Analects* does not clearly articulate a belief in beings that are transcendent in the narrow sense or that surpass us in every possible way.

## Spirits

There are good historical reasons combined with strong textual evidence in the *Analects* to support the claim the Confucius not only believed in spirits but also believed that we ought to respond to them in certain ways. It will be helpful to review some of the beliefs and practices that were a part of Zhou religious culture in order to understand why this is the case, for the *Analects* emerges from within yet also responds critically to perspectives and practices within a particular culture, and in order to make sense of at least a significant portion of the text, we will need to know something about that culture.

Puett describes early China as “a haunted world. Ghosts were pervasive and dangerous, and the living regularly performed sacrifices in an attempt to control or mollify the dead” (Puett 2011: 225). Zhou culture, like the Shang, devoted a great deal of time and energy communicating with various kinds of spirits, and although this communication took many forms and changed over time, Zhou texts describe both the spirit world and the human response to it in greater detail than Shang oracle bone inscriptions. As Deborah Sommer points out, for the Zhou people, “belief in a spirit world was a given assumption;” maintaining relationships with spiritual beings was more the norm than the exception, and it was viewed as something one ought to do, not something that was extraordinary if one did it (Sommer 2003: 201). This world included a visible (*ming* 明) realm—that of perceived objects and inhabited by human beings—and an invisible (*you* 黜) realm—that of spirits. Many different kinds of spirits were believed to be a part of this dimension, including the spirits of natural phenomena that provided humans with useful material resources, such as rain, forests, and rivers, as well as the spirits of human beings who had died. But although spirits were most often described as *descending* when they manifested themselves, which suggests that they resided above, the spirit world was more like another *dimension* that existed within this world than another place (Sommer 2003: 201–202). As Ivanhoe points out, “While these various entities were thought to be of a ‘higher’ order, they were never conceived of as supernatural in the sense of existing in a realm distinct from and independent of the world in which we live. Rather, they were viewed as more powerful and ethereal members of the ordinary world” (Ivanhoe 2007: 212).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This type of view has an analogue in some polytheistic cultures. For example, the ancient Celts believed that their gods (and other spirits, too) resided in a hidden or unseen dimension of this world, and had regular interactions with humans.

Of the various spirits humans dealt with, the spirits of dead humans had a special place. The bodies of living humans were believed to contain different elements, including different souls and energies that, upon death, would return to their origin on earth or float up to their heavenly origin in the skies. In many Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國) and Han 漢 texts, those elements that returned to their origin in the skies included the spirits (*shen* 神)—a term that was originally used in the Bronze Age to refer exclusively to divinities but came to refer to substances within humans by the Warring States period—and *hun* 魂 (ethereal) souls. Those elements that returned to their earthly origin included bones, flesh, and *po* 魄 (corporeal) souls (Puett 2011: 225, 2002: 22). Early Chinese beliefs held that these souls and energies left the body when one died, and that this could be dangerous for the living: “Some of the demonic forces—which would then simply be called ghosts (*gui* 鬼)—would tend to haunt the living. Harboring jealousies and resentments, they would be drawn to where they once lived and would send down disasters and misfortunes on their living family members” (Puett 2011: 226). Puett writes that the desire to prevent these dangers gave rise to rituals and sacrifices designed to remove the souls and energies to places where they could be “controlled, contained, and transformed into forces that would at least cause less harm to the living and potentially even be beneficial to them.” Some rituals were performed for the souls that would have floated away after the death of the body, including offerings placed with the body in a tomb, in order to keep the souls in the tomb and prevent them from becoming ghosts who would harm people. Other rituals were performed for the spirits (*shen*), in order to transform them into ancestors who might work on behalf of their living descendants (Puett 2011: 226). These rituals were also designed to domesticate other kinds of spirits, since ancestors were made more pliable by sacrifices and could thus be called upon for assistance with other spirits. Yet as Puett points out, the rituals did not always work: “Ghosts would still haunt the living, and spirits would still send down harm and misfortune upon the living as well. Thus, the rituals were a never-ending attempt to keep the ghosts and spirits at bay. And for brief periods of time, such rituals might even be successful—but usually not for very long” (Puett 2011: 227).

Rituals included sacrificial offerings of food and drink in precious ritual vessels and prayers for assistance and thanksgiving. But while humans appealed to the spirits for help, the spirits came to be seen as dependent upon humans for sustenance. The relationship between sacrificer and spirit thus became one characterized by reciprocity.<sup>14</sup> Food offerings were always accompanied by music and often by dance, which was intended to invoke the presence of the spirits. In order to receive a favorable response from the spirits, offerings needed not only to be appropriate in size and quantity, but also had to be presented with the proper attitudes of piety, devotion, and gratitude (Sommer 2003: 207–208). In turn, a favorable response from the spirits required sacrificers to further engage in moral cultivation. Everyday life was never disconnected from interactions with spirits—a point I shall return to below.

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<sup>14</sup> In its basic details and some of the finer details, too, this is still true of popular religious belief and practice in China today.

The *Analects* refers to a number of the beliefs and practices associated with these spirits. In 2.24 Confucius says, “To sacrifice to those who are not one’s ancestors is flattery. To see what is right and not do it is cowardly.” In this passage, Confucius articulates the common belief that only those of appropriately high rank should communicate with spirits who are not kin; presenting offerings to spirits with whom one does not have an appropriate relationship is flattery and a breach of ritual propriety, and spirits will reject the sacrifice. *Analects* 3.6 describes this sort of scenario: “The head of the Ji 季 family was planning to make a sacrifice to Mount Tai. The Master said to Ranyou 冉有, Can’t you save him from this? Ranyou replied, No, I can’t. The Master said, Are we to suppose that Mount Tai knows less about ritual than LIN Fang 林放?”<sup>15</sup> In this case, the proposed sacrifice to a sacred mountain is only appropriate when performed by a feudal lord who rules the region. The head of the Ji family was only a minister, and Ranyou served as an official under him. Confucius’ rhetorical question seems designed to remind Ranyou that the failure to do everything in one’s power to prevent this breach of ritual propriety is to act as though Mount Tai will not know that it is a breach of ritual propriety (both due to who is performing the sacrifice and his motives) and that there will be no serious consequences. Confucius sees this as a foolish and reckless way to behave, and his response suggests not only that he believes in the spirit associated with Mount Tai, but also that Mount Tai will not overlook this breach of ritual propriety. It seems safe to assume that he thinks it will reject the sacrifice.

According to *Analects* 10.11 [10.8], Confucius followed the practice of offering sacrifices to his ancestors at each meal: “. . . Although it was no more than coarse grain, a soup of greens or melon, before eating he always set aside a portion as an offering and did so with a reverential air”. As ZHU Xi 朱熹 explains, the traditional practice at meals was to take a small portion of each dish and place it as an offering to one’s ancestors (Zhu 1985: 150). This passage suggests that Confucius always made an offering and did so with reverence—even when a meal was of little value. The *Analects* also states that he exercised great care with regard to preparations for a sacrifice (7.13 [7.12]), and describes Confucius observing the rituals that were followed prior to sacrificing to the spirits: “In periods of ritual purification, he always wore a clean robe made of hemp. At such times, he invariably changed his diet and sat in a seat different from his ordinary one” (10.7). The rituals associated with preparing to communicate with deceased ancestors and other spirits included transforming oneself internally with vigils of purification and externally with changes such as one’s clothing and diet. Sommer writes, “Descendants performing ancestral sacrifices approached the preparation of sacrificial offerings with emotional hypervigilance and performed them with the expectations of heightened sentiments of filial piety, reverence, devotion, joy, equanimity, and attentiveness”

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<sup>15</sup> Lin Fang asks about the roots of ritual in *Analects* 3.4 and Confucius responds by praising his question and emphasizing the emotions that inform and motivate the rites, including that it is “better to be spare than extravagant.” In addition to 2.24 and 3.5, *Analects* 5.18 also describes an example of this type of breach of ritual propriety.

(Sommer 2003: 210). The preparatory vigils for ancestral sacrifices were up to 10 days in length, and included cognitive exercises such as thinking about the deceased, what they looked like, the sound of their voice, and the things they enjoyed. Practitioners believed that contemplating the emotional life of the deceased deepened their devotion and filial piety toward their ancestors, and that those who properly observed pre-sacrificial vigils would be able to see and hear the ancestral spirit to whom they were sacrificing (Sommer 2003: 212).

Other passages suggest that Confucius participated in rituals relating to other kinds of spirits, too: “When the members of the community were performing their demon-expelling rites, he put on his court robes and stood on the eastern steps” (10.14 [10.10]). The entire community participated in a demon-expelling ritual (*nuo* 雩) at the New Year, which was designed to drive out troublesome spirits that remained from the previous year. Traditional commentators interpret this passage differently. While KONG Anguo 孔安國 maintains that Confucius is standing on the steps of his ancestral temple and comforting his ancestral spirits in order to prevent them from fleeing with other spirits during the ritual, other commentators view this as an instance of Confucius providing an example for the community by assuming an appropriate reverential demeanor during the ritual.<sup>16</sup> Neither of these readings suggests that Confucius is insincere in his participation in the ritual or that he does not believe in the spirits in question or the effectiveness of the ritual. Indeed, none of the passages we have examined suggest either of those. In addition, neither this passage nor any of the passages examined above suggest that Confucius was a monotheist; instead, they provide evidence that he believed in ancestral spirits and other deities as well. According to the *Analects*, then, Confucius embraced at least some of the religious beliefs and practices of his culture—including a belief in different kinds of spirits and the view that we can and should engage them through appropriate ritual sacrifices.

It is important to recognize that beliefs and practices concerning spirits do not imply a lack of concern with this world, especially because some have mistakenly identified beliefs in spirits with other-worldly concerns and argued that Confucius did not hold such beliefs because he was exclusively concerned with this world. As Sommer points out, these religious practices were not “an experience of escape from the mundane world, but. . .an experience of connection and communication with people and beneficent forces both seen and unseen” (Sommer 2003: 210). The goals of sacrificing to the spirits included developing virtues such as filial piety, which were central to a good life, for Confucius. This is not an insignificant point, for it shows that one’s relationships with spirits were not seen as radically disconnected from one’s relationships with other humans. Confucius is explicit about this in *Analects* 11.12, when Zilu 子路 asks how one should serve the ghosts and spirits: “The Master said, When you don’t yet know how to serve human beings, how can

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<sup>16</sup> For a helpful discussion of the commentaries on this passage, see Slingerland 2003: 105. On the demon-expelling ritual, see *Zhouli*, chapters 48 and 54.

you serve the spirits?”<sup>17</sup> This passage expresses the view that there is an important connection between one’s relationships with humans and with the spirits.<sup>18</sup> Confucius does not deny the existence of the spirits, nor does he tell Zilu that he should not serve the spirits. Instead, he suggests that we cannot serve the spirits properly or in a way that is meaningful until we have learned to properly serve humans. In *Analects* 3.11 Confucius suggests again that understanding ancestral sacrifices has important ties to one’s understanding of the world, perhaps suggesting that it is an important part of governing: “Someone asked about the meaning of the ancestral sacrifice. The Master said, I don’t know. Someone who knew its meaning would understand all the affairs of the world as if they were displayed right here—and he pointed to his palm” (3.11).<sup>19</sup>

A number of passages concerning the spirits have presented challenges to both traditional and contemporary interpreters. *Analects* 7.35 [7.34] says, “The Master was gravely ill. Zilu asked to be allowed to offer prayers for his recovery. The Master said, ‘Is that done?’ Zilu replied, ‘Yes. The *Eulogies* say, ‘Prayers are offered for you to the upper and lower spirits.’” The Master said, ‘My praying began a long time ago.’” Contemporary interpreters differ in their readings of this passage. Sommer writes, “One might conclude from this that he believed he had already served the spirits all his life and felt no need to do so specially now” (Sommer 2003: 215). Such a reading takes Confucius’ comment here to be quite straightforward and literal: When Confucius says he has been praying all his life, he means he has been praying to the spirits all his life. Ivanhoe offers a different interpretation, writing that Confucius “expressed little regard for prayers of supplication, insisting that by following the Way he had been praying throughout the course of his life” (Ivanhoe 2007: 215). Similarly, Edward Slingerland writes that “one should live one’s entire life in a disciplined and reverent manner, rather than adopting discipline and reverence only when one wants to curry favor with the spirits or receive special guidance from Heaven” (Slingerland 2003: 76). On this view, Confucius’ comment is not to be taken literally; rather, Confucius sees the way he has lived and all that he has done as a prayer or offering and thereby as having religious significance.

Other passages have offered an even greater challenge to interpreters and have led to more serious, substantive disagreements over Confucius’ religious beliefs. Much

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<sup>17</sup> Zilu goes on to ask about death and Confucius answers “When you don’t yet understand life, how can you understand death?” For an analysis of this passage and other passages concerning death in the *Analects*, see Ivanhoe 2011.

<sup>18</sup> ZHU Xi maintains that Confucius responds this way because he thinks Zilu is not ready to learn about these things, while some other commentators maintain that Confucius responds this way because his teachings deal solely with our concrete daily lives. The disagreement here concerns whether Confucius had teachings about death and spirits and simply chose not to share them with Zilu.

<sup>19</sup> The idea that one’s sacrifices to ancestral spirits is viewed as having political implications is not surprising, since the *Analects* suggests in multiple places that there is an integral connection between filial piety and political order (1.2, 2.21). Since one’s relationships with spirits are seen as a part of one’s filial obligations, one’s relationships with spirits would also be seen as having a connection to political life.



has been made of passages from the *Analects* in which Confucius seems to express reservations about interactions with the spirits. In *Analects* 6.22, FAN Chi 樊遲 asks about wisdom, and Confucius says, “Work to lead the people toward what is right. Respect the ghosts and spirits but keep them at a distance—this can be called wisdom.” What does “respecting the ghosts and spirits but keeping them at a distance” mean? A number of contemporary interpreters have emphasized the latter part of this line, suggesting that Confucius distances himself from traditional religious beliefs and practices in this passage. Here we find those on both the monotheistic and a-theistic ends of the spectrum in agreement. Legge maintains that Confucius’ response to FAN Chi “was likely to make him doubt the existence of spiritual beings, or at least to make him slight their worship. . . . And indeed the worship of ancestors and of the departed great was a practice of doubtful propriety, and so liable to abuse, that I am pleased to think that Confucius wished to guard his disciples and others against the superstition and other evils to which it might lead” (Legge 1880: 140–141). Ames quotes this passage as evidence for the claim that in classical Confucianism “the focus of religiousness is reverence for the continuity of one’s lineage and its community expressed through family feeling (*xiao*), rather than any ‘worship’ of dead people” (Ames 2009: 265). Ames suggests here that “keeping the spirits at a distance” implies a rejection of the practice of ancestor veneration. These readings conflict with the passages we examined above, which state that Confucius observed at least some traditional sacrificial practices, and they do not explain why “keeping the spirits at a distance” should be given more interpretive weight than “respecting the spirits.”

Traditional commentaries may be of some assistance here. Slingerland argues that “‘Respecting the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance’ is understood by most as fulfilling one’s sacrificial duties sincerely and in accordance with ritual (3.12), without trying to flatter the spirits or curry favor with them (2.24). . . .” (Slingerland 2003: 60). Such a reading does not see the passage as suggesting that Confucius is skeptical about the existence of the spirits. As Slingerland points out and as we have already seen, there is textual support for the view that Confucius disapproves of those who try to curry favor with the spirits. In *Analects* 5.18, ZANG Wenzhong 臧文仲, a Lu minister, attempts to impress the spirits with ritual objects and decorations that were reserved for the ruler of a state, and Confucius suggests that he lacks wisdom: “The Master said, ZANG Wenzhong housed a large tortoise shell for divination in a hall whose pillars were capped with hill-shaped designs and whose joists had a duckweed pattern. What can one think of the wisdom of such a person?” Here we see another example of someone engaging in ritual activities relating to the spirits that are inappropriate for their particular position, all in an attempt to flatter the spirits and get them to act on his behalf.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> The precise source of the inappropriateness is not entirely clear; some traditional commentators see Zang’s housing the sacred tortoises as a usurpation of the prerogatives of a feudal lord, but others say it was part of his official ministerial duties and that the mistake was decorating the hall with motifs that were the ritual prerogatives of the ruler.

Puett offers a reading of *Analects* 6.22 that takes into account both respecting and distancing ourselves from the spirits: “Confucius was not claiming that spirits do not exist. Indeed, he explicitly called on people to be reverent toward them. His point is, rather, to keep them at a distance and to focus on the human realm” (Puett 2002: 97). Ivanhoe notes that the general attitude that underlies 6.22 is similar to that of Confucius’ claim in 7.35 that he had been praying throughout the course of his life (Ivanhoe 2007: 215). Along these lines, keeping the spirits “at a distance” might suggest not neglecting one’s other moral duties in favor of one’s relationship with the spirits. Another possible reading is that “distancing” (*yuan* 遠) is meant in the sense of filial piety, as in maintaining appropriate filial distance from the spirits in order to show them respect. *Analects* 16.13 says, “the *junzi* 君子 maintains a certain distance in relations with his son” and as the Song 宋 commentator SIMA Guang 司馬光 writes, “To ‘keep at a distance’ refers not to being cold or alienating, but rather to being timely in the way one allows one’s son to approach, and always receiving him with ritual propriety. The point is simply that father and son do not consort with one another day and night in an indecently familiar manner” (Slingerland 2003: 198).

Another passage that has created controversy is *Analects* 3.12: “Sacrifice as if they were present means to sacrifice as if the spirits were present. But the Master said, ‘If I can’t take part in the sacrifices, it’s as though I haven’t sacrificed at all.’” Contemporary interpreters have tended to focus on the first half of this passage, while traditional commentators focused more on the latter half. In focusing on the first line, many contemporary interpreters have perhaps inadvertently focused on the part of the passage that is not attributed to Confucius: “Sacrifice as if they were present means to sacrifice as if the spirits were present.” Slingerland notes that there is no attribution for the first line, arguing that “its form (cryptic text followed by an expanded, explanatory version) suggests that it might be a fragment from a lost ritual text interpolated by a later editor” (Slingerland 2003: 22). Many contemporary interpreters have read this line as suggesting that Confucius thinks we should continue to follow the rites and have the proper feelings when doing so even if we do not believe the spirits exist, and they see this as a reflection of Confucius’ own religious skepticism. It is not clear why we should see this line as reporting Confucius’ view, though, given that the line is not attributed to him, nor is it clear why we should read this as an indication of skepticism that the spirits exist as opposed to anxiety over whether one’s sacrifices have successfully invoked the presence of the spirits and thus whether the sacrifice will be effective. Given the extensive concerns in early China about controlling the spirits, it would not be surprising to find passages that express these sorts of worries.

Traditional commentaries focus on the latter part of the passage, and the line that is attributed to Confucius. The disagreements between traditional commentators have primarily concerned how to interpret “taking part” in the second line. Some commentators read this line literally, as being present at sacrificial practices instead of sending a proxy. Other commentators interpret “taking part” as being fully present in the psychological sense—not just going through the motions or seeking material blessings but being attentive to one’s actions and having appropriate feelings and motivations. As Ivanhoe points out, “Sacrifice was an occasion for

the cultivation of proper attitudes and the expression of ideals—not the satisfaction of appetites” (Ivanhoe 2007: 215).

Puett argues that this passage is one of several places where we can see that the *Analects* presents a critical response to the ritual specialists in charge of dealing with the spirits. On this reading, 3.12 is

a critique of contemporary sacrificial practice, in which one engaged a ritual specialist to perform sacrifices properly. The goal of such sacrifices was to transform the spirits so that they would act on behalf of humanity. Confucius’ argument is that one should focus instead on the human realm: the point of sacrifice is not to persuade the spirits but to transform the human performing the ritual. Accordingly, one must perform the act oneself, and one must do so even though the spirits may not be present during the ritual. This position does not deny that spirits act in the world. Rather, it argues against the view that humans should attempt to control the spirits with sacrifices: the goal should be self-transformation (Puett 2002: 98).

Puett’s interpretation not only avoids focusing exclusively on one part of the passage, but also resists seeing a belief in spirits and a concern with sacrificial practices as necessarily opposed to or even in tension with a concern with moral cultivation and personal transformation. Contemporary interpreters tend to see an emphasis on self-transformation as reflecting a rejection of traditional religious beliefs, and specifically belief in the spirits. But Puett argues that this is not the case: “Confucius, by decrying the instrumental use of sacrifices by ritual specialists, denied the powers that were used in the Bronze Age to mollify divine forces and to make them work for the living. Instead, he urged that we simply cultivate ourselves and accept whatever the divine powers do” (Puett 2002: 98).

Another passage that has led some to question Confucius’ beliefs concerning the spirits is *Analects* 7.21 [7.20]: “Subjects the Master did not discuss: strange occurrences, feats of strength, rebellion, the spirits.” This passage resembles 5.13: “Zigong 子貢 said, ‘The Master’s views on cultural and emblematic matters—these we have heard. But his views on human nature and the Way of Tian—these we have never been able to hear!’” Some traditional commentators suggest that these things collectively refer to things that are beyond human control and Confucius focused on things within human control. Puett points out that in 7.21, and I would add, in 5.13 as well, “there is no claim that the items on the list do not exist. Nor is there any claim that they are insignificant” (Puett 2002: 98). Rather, Puett argues, the sense running throughout all of these passages is that “spirits do have great potency, but humans should not speak of them, should avoid worrying about them, and should perform ritual actions not to influence them but to cultivate themselves. And yet one must still revere them” (Puett 2002: 98).

One might embrace a range of plausible interpretations of these passages, but readings that doubt Confucius’ belief in spirits have been prevalent. In support of a monotheistic interpretation, Legge writes that “I cannot but think, indeed, that Confucius himself stood in doubt about the worship of the dead which he inherited as an ancient institution of his people. He was not sure about it. . . .” (Legge 1880: 259). In support of an a-theistic interpretation, Hall and Ames write, “Concerning the unknown realm of gods and spirits, Confucius maintained an attitude of respectful detachment” (Hall and Ames 1987: 196). Ames writes that classical

Confucianism is a religious tradition without a God and without church, altars, and clergy (Ames 2009: 268). Yet a number of passages from the *Analects* undermine these readings. Although it is accurate to say there is no “church” or “clergy”—since these are terms for Christian houses of worship and religious authorities— we certainly do find references to houses of worship and religious authorities, as well as altars or sacred places designated for offering sacrifices. As we have seen, multiple passages describe Confucius observing sacrificial rituals. Additionally, the passages that are often cited as evidence for Confucius’ rejection of traditional beliefs about the spirits are not clearly evidence for such a view. All of this undermines both monotheistic and a-theistic interpretations, as well as those that present Confucius as a secular humanist. As Sommer points out, attending to the historical and cultural context should inform our interpretive work: “Out-and-out skepticism about the very existence of a spirit world. . . is not characteristic of Zhou texts” and those who characterize Confucianism “as a kind of secular humanism (an old saw that still appears in much secondary literature) might keep in mind the extent to which communicating with the spiritual and the numinous was integrated into the fabric of state, family, and personal life” (Sommer 2003: 216).

That does not mean, though, that Confucius accepts wholesale the views of his contemporaries. Puett’s reading shows how Confucius’ view is both different from and in other ways similar to aspects of Western theistic views—something that is seen at once in Confucius’ failure to reject the existence of spirits, as well as his critique of traditional ritual specialists. By examining textual, cultural, and historical evidence we can appreciate, then, how Confucius neither wholly accepts nor wholly rejects traditional beliefs and practices concerning spirits. This characterizes not only Confucius’ attitude toward the spirits but also *Tian*, which we shall examine next.

## *Tian* 天

Along the spectrum of views we have been examining, the strongest claims about the continuity or discontinuity between Western monotheistic views and Confucius’ view stem from passages concerning *Tian*.<sup>21</sup> The concept of *Tian* is historically related to some of the earliest conceptions of a supreme deity in China, including Shangdi, who existed alongside various ancestral and nature spirits. Those who defend a monotheistic interpretation of *Tian* tend to view Shangdi and *Tian* as the same idea, which supports their interpretation of *Tian* as a theistic concept.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> For a helpful overview of different positions on *Tian* not only in the *Analects* but throughout the history of early and later Confucianism, see Huang 2007. In this essay, I confine my discussion to views of *Tian* in the *Analects*, and I will not attempt to review all of the positions that have been taken on this topic but rather to sketch the basic range of positions.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Legge 1880: 10–11; Ching 1977: 116–118, 143; Clark 2005: 109, 2009: 234.

However, most specialists in early Chinese thought now recognize that although the two ideas are related and even used interchangeably in some texts, the concept of *Tian* in the *Analects*, as well as in other classical Chinese texts, is distinguishable from conceptions of Shangdi seen in earlier writings. In addition, contrary to what monotheistic interpreters suggest, precisely what or who Shangdi was is not a settled issue. Puett discusses this at some length, concluding that although in some contexts Shangdi was regarded as a kind of primordial ancestor, “The most reasonable hypothesis is that Di was not recognized as part of the Shang ancestral line, and he was probably not an ancestor at all” (Puett 2002: 49). As Ivanhoe points out, Shangdi “possessed no clear character or personality and held no particular concern for any living creature,” yet at the same time “was thought to possess immense power to control the flow of events in the human and spiritual realms” (Ivanhoe 2007: 212). Based on the current evidence, we cannot assemble anything as detailed and systematic as a theory—in the scientific sense of the term—concerning who or what Di was. There is no evidence which clearly shows, or even indicates, that Shangdi was an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent God or that he was the only deity recognized by the Shang people, whose religious activities included appeals and sacrifices to numerous deities in an effort to gain their support. While those appeals often included requests to influence Shangdi, this does not suggest that Shangdi was the only recognized deity.<sup>23</sup>

How should we understand the relationship between Shangdi, earlier Zhou views of *Tian*, and the view presented in the *Analects*? Concerning Zhou understandings of *Tian*, Ivanhoe writes,

In early contexts, it was used to refer to various spirits associated with the sky and to the sky itself in the sense of “the heavens.” *Tian* also came to mean the collective will of or supreme power in the spiritual realm. . . . Like Shangdi, “Heaven” lacked a distinct personality. Nevertheless, it was thought to be conscious, purposeful, and capable of action. Unlike Shangdi, “Heaven” was thought to have endowed humans with a distinctive ethical nature, to harbor a lively and stable concern for human beings, and on occasion to act in order to promote a more just, peaceful, and flourishing world (Ivanhoe 2007: 212).

The conception of *Tian* in the Zhou period was evolving and changing, as Ivanhoe points out, and *Tian* gradually became less like Shangdi. In some ways, earlier Zhou views of *Tian* resemble a transitional fossil in between Shangdi and the view of *Tian* we find in texts like the *Analects*: it contains features of each but is not identical to either, and it represents a changing phenomenon. This is particularly important for our purposes because it can help us to understand more clearly—and perhaps even explain—some of the differing interpretations of *Tian*. Monotheistic interpreters tend to view *Tian* as largely identifiable with Shangdi, perhaps due to the mistaken assumption that there was little change in understandings of what *Tian*

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<sup>23</sup> As we saw earlier in Legge’s remarks, among those who defend a monotheistic interpretation of early Chinese religious thought, there has been a tendency to read Catholic conceptions of the relation between saints and God into the relation between Shang deities and Shangdi, and between ancestral spirits and *Tian*. Most polytheistic traditions see some deities as more powerful than others; this though does not suggest that lower deities are not really deities.

was; they maintain that since the terms Shangdi and *Tian* are used interchangeably in some Zhou texts, the two concepts remain interchangeable. In contrast, those who stress the discontinuity with theism describe Confucius' view of *Tian* in a way that resembles Xunzi's 荀子 later view of *Tian*—as the impersonal processes of nature. So if one fails to fully appreciate just how dynamic and changing views of *Tian* in the Zhou were—as well as the diversity of views that existed alongside one another, one might mistakenly identify the view of *Tian* that is expressed in the *Analects* with either earlier or later views.

One of the best ways to remedy such tendencies is to closely examine what the *Analects* actually says about *Tian*. In 3.24, the border guard of Yi emerges from a meeting with Confucius to tell his followers “You young men should not worry about your present bad luck. For a long time now the world has been without the Way. *Tian* is going to use your Master as a wooden-clappered bell.” The latter refers to bells used to summon people for important announcements, and the basic claim here is that *Tian* will use Confucius to summon people. This suggests agency: *Tian* is something that can act in the world by using people to accomplish its goals. A number of other passages provide further evidence for the view that *Tian* is an active agent, including 7.23 [7.22]: “The Master said, *Tian* has implanted this virtue in me. HUAN Tui 桓魋—what can he do to me?” HUAN Tui, minister of war in the state of Song, had reportedly threatened to kill Confucius, and in this passage Confucius expresses both that he thinks *Tian* endowed him with *de* 德 and that HUAN Tui will be unable to hurt him as a result.<sup>24</sup> In asking what HUAN Tui can do to him, Confucius expresses the view that *Tian* is protecting him, perhaps *through* the *de* it has given him or *because* it has endowed him with *de* and does not want it to go to waste. Like 3.24, *Analects* 7.23 suggests that *Tian* is using Confucius to accomplish its ends in the world and that it takes an active role in doing so—a view that is further supported by 9.5: “The Master’s life was endangered in Kuang. He said, King Wen 文王 is deceased, but his culture (*wen* 文) remains here with me. If *Tian* had intended to destroy that culture, then those who come after him could not have inherited that culture. But if *Tian* is not ready to destroy that culture, what can the people of Kuang do to me?” According to the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*), when Confucius was passing through Kuang he was detained and imprisoned after being mistaken for the criminal YANG Hu 陽虎. Yet as in 7.23, he expresses a lack of fear because he thinks that *Tian* is not ready to destroy King Wen’s culture. This implies once again that he thinks *Tian* is protecting him from harm so that he can accomplish its goals in the world. All of these passages express the view that *Tian* is an active agent in the world, that it is using Confucius to accomplish its ends, and that as a result it protects him from harm.

Other passages suggest that *Tian* sometimes knows what people think and do. In 9.12, Confucius is gravely ill, and Zilu directs his followers to attend him in the way retainers would if he were a government official. When Confucius

<sup>24</sup> According to the *Shiji*, Huan Tui attempted to kill Confucius by cutting a tree down while Confucius was practicing the rites beneath it.

recovers somewhat, he says, “How long you go on, You, practicing these deceptions! To pretend that I have retainers when I have no retainers—who would I be deceiving? Would I be deceiving *Tian*? Moreover, rather than dying in the hands of retainers, isn’t it better that I die in the hands of you, my disciples? And although I may not be entitled to a grand funeral, it’s not as though I were dying by the roadside, is it?” Here, Confucius suggests that it is not possible to deceive *Tian* about his status. He also expresses that he is not discontent with his position, even though he is not an official—which suggests that he is content with the way *Tian* is using him and thankful to be surrounded by those who care about him. In *Analects* 14.35 [14.37], Confucius says that no one understands him, and when Zigong asks why he thinks that is so, Confucius answers, “I bear no grudge against *Tian*; I do not blame others. I study affairs close at hand and try to become adept in higher matters. Perhaps it is *Tian* that understands me!” Neither of these passages state that *Tian* is omniscient, but they do suggest that Confucius thought there was no point in trying to deceive *Tian*, and that when humans don’t understand him perhaps *Tian* does. At the very least, then, these passages suggest that *Tian* knows and understands quite a bit about Confucius’ thoughts and actions. This is important not only because of the suggestion that *Tian* understands more than humans, but also because it affirms the view that *Tian* knows and understands. These are intentional states, which personal agents possess but purely impersonal natural forces lack.

Two passages refer to incurring *Tian*’s wrath. In *Analects* 3.13, WANGSUN Jia 王孫賈 asks Confucius about the folk saying, “Better pay compliments to the kitchen stove than to the southwest corner,” and Confucius responds “Not true! If you incur blame with Heaven, there is no one to whom you can pray.” Many commentators argue that the folk saying and Confucius’ response are metaphorical references to WANGSUN Jia’s behavior as a minister in the state of Wei, but if we take this passage literally, Confucius is stressing the importance of performing ancestral sacrifices (which were traditionally done in the southwest corner of the house) and he implies that one can incur blame with Heaven if one does not.<sup>25</sup> Further, he suggests that unlike humans, Heaven does not forgive. *Analects* 6.28 states that Confucius had an audience with Nanzi 南子—the consort of Duke Ling of Wei 衛靈公 and a woman with a bad reputation—and that “Zilu was not pleased. Confucius swore an oath, saying, ‘If I have done anything wrong, may Heaven cast me aside! May Heaven cast me aside!’” A number of commentators explain that ritual dictated that one request an audience with the local ruler’s wife or consort upon arriving in a state, and so it seems that Confucius acted in accordance with ritual propriety and that is why he seems reasonably confident that he has not done anything wrong. If Confucius’ remarks about Heaven are to be taken literally here, then like 3.13 they suggest that Heaven casts people aside for violations of ritual propriety.

<sup>25</sup> The translation of 3.13 is my own. Some commentators maintain that “paying compliments to the kitchen stove” refers to making offerings to the stove or kitchen god instead of the ancestors. See Brooks and Brooks 1998: 82 and Ames and Rosemont 1998: 85.

In *Analects* 17.19 we find another passage that suggests *Tian* has an active but silent role in the world: “The Master said, ‘I wish I could just say nothing.’ Zigong said, ‘But Master, if you do not say anything, what will we, your followers, have to pass on to others?’ The Master said, ‘What does *Tian* say? The four seasons proceed in order, the hundred creatures live their lives, but what does *Tian* say?’” In this passage, Confucius responds to Zigong’s question concerning how they could learn from him if he didn’t speak, by suggesting that *Tian* doesn’t speak and yet the seasons continue to change and the creatures in the world live their lives. He draws an analogy between his students’ capacity to learn even if he keeps silent, and the fact that the seasons turn and life proceeds even though *Tian* keeps silent. Confucius wishes to model himself after *Tian* in being able to fulfill his role without speaking. Perhaps *Tian*’s role is to ensure that the seasons change and the creatures live their lives, which would imply an active role as a sort of driving and governing force in the world.

The primary disagreement over *Tian* in the *Analects* concerns the degree to which interpreters understand *Tian* as an agent that sometimes acts in the world (as well as what kind of agent *Tian* is) as opposed to something that is a part of—or another name for—the world. Ames and Rosemont take the latter view, writing that “*Tian* in classical Chinese *is* the world. *Tian* is both *what* our world is and *how* it is. The ‘ten thousand things (*wanwu* 萬物),’ an expression for ‘everything,’ are not the creatures of a *Tian* which is independent of what is ordered; rather, they are constitutive of it” (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 47). They go on to write, using language drawn from Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy, that “*Tian* can be described as an inhering, emergent order negotiated out of the dispositioning of the particulars that are constitutive of it. But *Tian* is not just ‘things’; it is a living culture—crafted, transmitted, and now resident in a human community” (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 47). For Ames and Rosemont, *Tian* refers to both the natural world and human culture. Their description implies that it is impersonal and they stress that it is not independent of the world. Yet they add that *Tian* is anthropomorphic, something that according to Hall and Ames is evident in *Tian*’s “capacity for conscious intervention in human affairs.” However, they maintain that “it does not follow that, because of this, [*Tian*] is equatable with the Western conception of the deity,” primarily because *Tian* is “unqualifiedly immanent” (Hall and Ames 1987: 206).

Since Ames and Rosemont do not cite any passages from the *Analects* in support of their claims, it is unclear what textual evidence supports their interpretation. This is a particularly pressing problem because, as we have seen, there are a number of passages in the *Analects* in which *Tian* is described as an agent that acts in the world—not as the world itself. Although Ames and Rosemont, as well as Hall and Ames, seem to acknowledge this by noting that *Tian* is anthropomorphic, it is unclear how *Tian* can at once be anthropomorphic—which means that it has human-like properties and is distinguishable from the world—and also be “both what and how our world is.”

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Legge, who writes that *Tian* “has had much of the force of the name Jahve, as explained by God Himself to Moses” and that Di “was to the Chinese fathers, I believe, exactly what God was to our fathers. . . . Thus the two characters show us the religion of the ancient Chinese as a monotheism”



(Legge 1880: 10–11). Legge maintains that “the connection between the two names [Tian] and [Di], Heaven and God, tended to prevent the rise of polytheism, and to bring about the extrusion of it, if it did at any time manage to obtain a foothold in the religion of the country” (Legge 1880: 51–52). As we saw earlier, Legge maintains that beliefs in ancestral spirits do not undermine the view that the classical Confucians were monotheists because the spirits were thought to serve as intercessors with Shangdi and *Tian*. While Legge draws on the analogue with Catholicism in order to make a case for monotheism, he nevertheless betrays his Protestant sensibilities when he criticizes the view “that such intercession is necessary” and maintains that that the supposition “that such spirits have the government of parts of the world and the care of human affairs committed to them, prevents the Chinese from rising to the full conception of the divine omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence” (Legge 1880: 254–255). He maintains that in this respect, “the worship of God as taught by the Christian church is superior to that practiced in Confucianism” (Legge 1880: 255–256). Legge is also critical of Confucius for talking only about *Tian* and not Shangdi, writing that “it is not in the sphere of morality so much as in that of religion that fault is found with Confucius. I have complained myself of his avoiding the personal name of [Di], or God, and only using the more indefinite term Heaven. . . . His avoiding the name [Di] seems to betray a coldness of temperament and intellect in the matter of religion” (Legge 1880: 139). Nevertheless, Legge maintains that *Tian* “was to him the name of a personal being” and offers as evidence Confucius’ claim that one who offends *Tian* has none to whom he can pray (3.13) and also his claim that only *Tian* understands him (Legge 1880: 140). While these passages *could* be used to support the view that *Tian* is a personal being—since they suggest that it can be offended and has understanding—such capacities could also be characteristic of an impersonal being or entity. In addition, as I argue below, there are several capacities personal beings have that *Tian* appears to lack. In any case, such passages do not clearly support a monotheistic interpretation of *Tian*, much less an omnipredicate conception of God.

Two views that fall in the middle of the spectrum again are those of Puett and Ivanhoe, who also offer detailed accounts of the textual evidence for their interpretations. Puett maintains that Confucius’ view that we ought to simply cultivate ourselves and accept what the spirits do “explains both the reverence that Confucius expressed toward Heaven, the greatest of the divine powers, as well as his view that we must not attempt to influence Heaven but accept whatever Heaven sends at us” (Puett 2002: 98). Confucius thinks we should not perform sacrifices in order to try to control or influence them—for such motives do not show real respect for *Tian* or the spirits. Rather, we ought to perform sacrifices in order to transform ourselves; this is the way to show genuine reverence for them. Puett points out that Confucius clearly embraces the idea that humans should follow the mandate of Heaven (2.4, 16.8) and argues that there is no sense that *Tian* rewards the worthy or punishes the unworthy: “Indeed, for Confucius, the mandate of Heaven appeared to involve no ethical calculus whatsoever, and this presumably is a part of why it took Confucius until age fifty to understand it” (Puett 2002: 99). Repeatedly, Puett argues, Confucius emphasizes “the degree to which events are

out of the control of humans. For example, when Confucius rails at *Tian* over YAN Hui's 顏回 death, "There is no sense here that YAN Hui had done anything to deserve dying young. On the contrary, Confucius' response was to rail at Heaven, since it is Heaven that controls the mandate" (Puett 2002: 99). Puett writes that "Even the question of whether the Way will prevail is out of human hands: humans can put the way into practice only if Heaven wishes them to" (Puett 2002: 100). We must simply accept what Heaven has ordained, on this view.<sup>26</sup>

Puett points out some additional features of the account of *Tian* in the *Analects*, including the view that no one should resent it (14.35), and the view that "Confucius believed that human culture itself derives in part from Heaven and argued that cultural patterns emerged when the initial sages modeled themselves on Heaven and then transmitted those patterns to humanity," a view seen in 8.19 (Puett 2002: 100).<sup>27</sup> Puett further argues that as *Analects* 9.5 shows, "Heaven is also seen as being responsible for the continuation of these cultural patterns" and he concludes, "Heaven is thus granted a normative role. The patterns of human culture (*wen*) emerged from Heaven, and it is Heaven that allows those patterns to continue" (Puett 2002: 100). In the *Analects*, then, "Heaven is revered, and both living up to and accepting what Heaven ordains are man's highest goals. But since, in Confucius' view, man cannot influence Heaven through sacrifices (or, to be more explicit, through sacrificing to the spirits who then petition Heaven on behalf of the living), man must simply cultivate himself and accept whatever Heaven does" (Puett 2002: 101).

Ivanhoe argues that during the classical period in which Confucius lived, different thinkers conceived of *Tian* in a variety of ways. At one end of the spectrum is Mozi 墨子, for whom *Tian* was a very active agent "employing ghosts and spirits in order to ensure strict justice throughout the world." At the other end of the spectrum is Xunzi 荀子, who describes *Tian* as the impersonal processes of nature. In the middle are the positions of Confucius and Mengzi 孟子, who maintain that "Heaven is an impersonal yet concerned agent and a force for human good" (Ivanhoe 2007: 213). Ivanhoe maintains that Confucius "believed that Heaven has a plan for human beings—their proper end is a just, peaceful, harmonious, and flourishing society—and that Heaven chose him to play a special role in the realization of this plan—to preserve, codify, and propagate the *dao* or Way that enables human beings to achieve

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<sup>26</sup> On this reading, Confucius appears to accept a version of fatalism about *Tian* and its actions in the world; some (but not all) events are fated to occur by *Tian*, and cannot be influenced by us. In addition, we do not find Confucius offering a theodicy for the existence of evil or suffering in the world, e.g., YAN Hui's death. Instead of trying to justify Hui's death and absolve *Tian* of the injustice it represents, Confucius responds with frustration at *Tian*. But significantly, none of this leads him to reject the Way, which proceeds from *Tian*. His emphasis on moral self-cultivation rather than on serving the spirits is apparently unaffected.

<sup>27</sup> Here we can see that Puett's view is incompatible with the view of Ames, Rosemont, and Hall that *Tian* is identical with this culture. One of the merits of Puett's view is that it enables us to make sense of the fact that only one human culture is presented in the text as being in accordance with (or having proceeded from) *Tian*. It seems that on Ames, Rosemont, and Hall's view, all human cultures are identical with *Tian*, since they describe *Tian* as being identical with both nature and culture generally.

this end” (Ivanhoe 2007: 213). *Tian* is “aware of what people do and even of what is in their hearts (see 9.12). If not omniscient, Heaven seems at least capable of understanding anything it chooses to understand” and it “endowed at least certain human beings with a particular *de* ‘virtue’ or ‘power’—a kind of moral charisma that facilitates the achievement of the ideal society” (Ivanhoe 2007: 213).

Ivanhoe offers a close textual account of how Confucius “believed that he was a herald and teacher of the Way if not quite a prophet. Since Heaven reveals its will through deeds and not through verbal commands (see 17.19), it did not directly announce itself to Kongzi or assign him his mission in life. Nevertheless, he came to understand his life as dedicated to serving Heaven and. . .he believed that Heaven protected and aided him in his efforts” (Ivanhoe 2007: 214).<sup>28</sup> Ivanhoe notes that Confucius did not believe that he or anyone else could understand everything that *Tian* chose to do, and when faced with inexplicable events, he maintained that we should “neither complain against Heaven nor blame others” (14.35) but rather have confidence that *Tian* works for the best (Ivanhoe 2007: 214).<sup>29</sup>

Puett refers to *Tian* as “the greatest of the divine powers” and Ivanhoe notes that *Tian* came to mean “the supreme power in the spiritual realm,” but both explicate the idea primarily by discussing the text instead of offering abstract descriptions or definitions of *Tian* (Puett 2002: 98; Ivanhoe 2007: 212). Additionally, both Ivanhoe and Puett highlight the differences between *Tian* and monotheistic views of God. Neither of them translate *Tian* as “God,” and while Puett argues that “a highly theistic vision of the world” pervades religious activities during this time, it is not a monotheistic vision but one that acknowledges many different divine forces, including various spirits and *Tian*. Ivanhoe stresses that early Confucians “did not believe in a creator deity who exists independently of the Natural order, who created the universe *ex nihilo*, and, through revelation, makes its will known in the world” (Ivanhoe 2007: 211). He adds that Confucius “did not regard Heaven as a personal deity” and points out that it did not exist apart from and prior to the world (Ivanhoe 2007: 217, 214 n. 7).

## Conclusion

There are some key issues at stake in these competing interpretations of Confucius’ remarks about both spirits and *Tian* in the *Analects*. First, there is the question of whether Confucius is fully rejecting or fully accepting received cultural views of the spirits and *Tian*. Those who emphasize the discontinuity between the *Analects* and Western monotheistic views argue that Confucius is rejecting many if not most of the

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<sup>28</sup> Here we see another important difference between *Tian* and the God of the Abrahamic faith traditions: *Tian*, unlike God, does not directly reveal its plans or its will to human beings; there is no analogue to “special revelation” in early Confucianism, it seems.

<sup>29</sup> Although this sort of view falls short of being a theodicy proper, it is nevertheless similar to theistic views which assume that God or the gods are benevolent and work for the best. Of course, being benevolent and being omni-benevolent are two different things.

religious views of his culture, while those who emphasize the continuity argue that he wholly accepts the views of spirits and *Tian* associated with the Zhou. Neither the view that Confucius accepts all of the views of his culture nor the view that he rejects them all seems plausible based on the textual evidence. On the one hand, the *Analects* describes in detail how Confucius follows many of the traditional rites associated with the Zhou, and he makes a number of claims suggesting his allegiance to Zhou traditions, including his well-known description of himself as a transmitter rather than an innovator. On the other hand, the *Analects* highlights some of the ways in which Confucius challenges received views and practices, including his description of the *junzi* as a cultivated person who does not just behave in an exemplary way but whose accompanying emotions and intentions are exemplary, too. In addition, some of the passages we have examined above clearly suggest opposition to the dominant forms of religious practice—even though they do not represent a thoroughgoing rejection of traditional religious activities.

The view that Confucius either wholly rejects or accepts an earlier Zhou view of *Tian* and the spirits is also problematic for cultural, historical, and sociological reasons. It neglects both the diversity of views within the Zhou and the changing nature of those views. This is not just true of Zhou culture but of any culture: there is seldom if ever a single, fixed view of concepts like *Tian* but a range of views, at least many of which are evolving and changing as a culture evolves and changes. Further, few if any of us *wholly* accept or reject the cultures and traditions in which we are raised; we regularly engage in the activity of modifying and adapting traditional views and practices, whether consciously or unconsciously, even when such changes are relatively minor. Our capacity to do this helps to explain why traditions change over time and also why they survive. Similarly, even when we react strongly against and explicitly reject many or most aspects of traditional views and practices, we never escape them fully; our thinking and who we are has been and continues to be shaped by them, often in ways we are wholly or partially unaware of.

A second issue that arises repeatedly in these discussions is the strong focus on whether transcendence is a part of early Chinese thought. Puett traces the genealogy of these views, showing that the terms of the debate originate with Weber. Puett's argument against Weber's view and the subsequent views that assumed the truth of his position give us good reasons to question whether transcendence and immanence are the most fruitful categories for understanding religion in texts such as the *Analects*. Rodney Taylor questions whether it is even important to settle the question of *Tian*'s transcendence: "It is unfortunate that so much attention has been given to the question of transcendence in *Tian*, as if its existence or nonexistence was the key to understanding the religious character of the tradition as a whole" (Taylor 1998: 89). A number of problems have emerged here: Interpreters often seem to mean different things by "transcendence," and they tend not to acknowledge different senses of transcendence. If we continue to utilize these categories, we would do well to distinguish between different kinds of transcendence, as I suggest above.

A third and related issue concerns whether *Tian* is personal or impersonal. One reason why this is a difficult issue is that the concept of *Tian* does not easily fit our

categories. Considering all of the evidence, it seems that in the *Analects* *Tian* is what we might call a *quasi-personal* entity or agent, neither completely personal nor impersonal. It has some person-like attributes, such as having intentions and plans, and the ability to act in the world. Yet it does not have a distinct personality, nor do we see clear evidence that it has emotions or feelings. Emotions are an important part of what make a being or entity *personal*, and although Confucius suggests that it is possible to incur the wrath of *Tian*, there are no references to *Tian* feeling angry, happy, or sad.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, *Tian* lacks many of the personal attributes that are usually ascribed to the God of the Abrahamic faith traditions.

Both with respect to the question of *Tian*'s transcendence and its personal or impersonal nature, it may be helpful to take our cue from the traditional commentators, who focus more on offering a close interpretation of the text and how it relates to traditional views and practices than on which categories are most appropriate for describing *Tian*. Of course, traditional commentaries do not focus on whether *Tian* is transcendent or personal because these are foreign categories, which is something contemporary interpreters ought to consider. Of the interpretations examined here, the approaches of Puett and Ivanhoe are most like those of traditional commentators, as they engage closely with the text, informed by its cultural and historical context. This does not, of course, guarantee that their interpretations are correct, but it does seem to give them greater *prima facie* plausibility than their rivals.

A fourth issue concerns the degree of attention given to religious practice in relation to religious thought. A great deal more emphasis has been placed on what Confucius says in the *Analects*, as opposed to what the *Analects* says he and others *did*. Interpreters on both ends of the spectrum would benefit from attending more carefully to the practices that are described in the *Analects* as well as the cultural and historical background of those practices.

Finally, interpreters must be on guard against reading their own religious views into the text. One noticeable similarity between those on opposite ends of the spectrum of interpretations we have examined is that each align the views of particular Western thinkers or traditions closely with those of Confucius, and those views happen to be the very ones that are embraced by the scholars who advocate such interpretations. For Legge, Confucius' *Tian* is strikingly similar to the Christian God he believed in. What might motivate this sort of claim? Taylor writes that personal theological agendas played a key role in early attempts to find proof of belief in God in Confucianism (Taylor 1998: 89), and it is worth considering the potential theological motivation for working to find evidence of monotheism in early Chinese texts. After all, many Christians simply approach the Chinese tradition by noting the absence of theistic belief and basing the superiority of Christianity and the corresponding need for conversion on that absence. In contrast, one family of theological views found in both the Catholic and Calvinist traditions (including the

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<sup>30</sup> While one might argue that incurring wrath presupposes the concept of anger, this is not necessarily so. If the wrath of *Tian* means merely that *Tian* punishes—which is an action—this can be understood as a kind of automatic response to wrongdoing rather than an intentional state.

Presbyterian tradition to which Legge belonged) maintains that God has implanted in all humans an innate tendency to believe in God—a feature of Christian natural theology.<sup>31</sup> Those who have defended the claim that early Chinese texts express a monotheistic view have tended to operate with assumptions derived from this theological tradition, whether explicitly stated or not. If one could demonstrate that the early Chinese were monotheists, this would lend support to the claim that humans in different cultures have exhibited the tendency to believe in God.

On the other end of the spectrum, those such as Hall and Ames note the striking similarity between Confucius' religious views and those of Western thinkers including John Dewey. Ames writes that his interpretation of Confucius “provides us with a sophisticated example of a kind of nontheistic religious ‘humanism,’ or better, ‘naturalism,’ that was advanced with little success by an American movement that included Felix Adler, Curtis W. Reese, Charles Francis Potter, and John Dewey early in the twentieth century” (Ames 2003: 166). He writes that for these philosophers, developments in human culture and especially the sciences “placed humanity at a crossroads, making the supernatural dimensions of religious practices such as a theistic ‘God’ not only obsolete but degrading, thus requiring a wholesale revisioning of religious sensibilities that celebrates the unqualified value of the human community.” Ames adds that this religious humanism failed to win an audience in part due to “the inability of a population with allegiance to the supernaturalism of the dominant theistic religions to hear this new message, and he suggests that “the classical Chinese experience will enable us to understand better these religious reformers” (Ames 2003: 166).<sup>32</sup>

It seems clear that those on both ends of the spectrum interpret Confucius in the *Analects* as a proponent of their own preferred view—be it monotheistic or a-theistic—and then go on to argue that Confucius' view is almost exactly like a particular incarnation of that view—Christianity, for example, or Dewey's naturalized “reconstruction” of religion. One of the difficulties is that these types of interpretations tend not to be driven by textual evidence. Neither side can show that the passages on *Tian* in the *Analects* unambiguously support their view. In fact their interpretations seem oddly disconnected from the textual evidence and in order to see the connection we must first understand the interpretation, and only then can we see how the text might be connected to it. This is a contrast to the readings offered by Puett and Ivanhoe, both because neither argues for a close correspondence between Confucius' view and any Western view, and also because

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<sup>31</sup> Important Catholic sources on this view include Aquinas and Francisco Suarez. For the Calvinist view, see Calvin 1960, I, iii, 3.

<sup>32</sup> This position is also committed to religious anti-realism, which denies the reality of the objects of religious belief and practice (e.g., spirits). This is an often-overlooked feature of naturalistic interpretations of religion such as Dewey's, which affirm the value of a “religious” point of view but in the process strip that point of view of any non-natural or supernatural content. Since most ways of defining the concept of religion make reference to such content, these kinds of interpretations also require that we “reconstruct” or fundamentally change the meaning of the concept of religion. In contrast, the view that *Tian* is an agent or an existent entity of some sort that acts in or on the world clearly presupposes a commitment to religious realism.

both are grounded in the text. It is not, of course, impossible that Confucius' religious view is the same as Christian monotheists or Deweyan atheists, but it would be surprising if that were the case, for both positions would involve a *radical* departure from the cultural views of Confucius' time. This is what is especially compelling about the arguments presented by Puett and Ivanhoe; they each show how Confucius' view fits into and responds to the views of his day, and how his view is distinctive though not wildly deviant.

Perhaps the continuities those on both ends of the spectrum notice with Western views are simply a product of their actual observations about the texts. But there is a strong temptation to read our own preferred views into the texts we like. This is at once a good and bad tendency, for it shows our desire to read texts charitably while also demonstrating our tendency to look for and perhaps over-emphasize particular things—which can distort our view of what is actually there. As a general rule, I would argue that interpreters should assume that if it looks like Confucius holds precisely the same religious views they do, it is likely that they are mistaken about his view and need to examine it further. As I note above, it isn't *impossible* that Confucius had the same religious views as Christian theists or John Dewey, but it is highly unlikely for cultural and historical reasons. This is one more reason for attending carefully to the text and to its cultural and historical context: it can help us to see the text itself more clearly, and to avoid seeing our own reflection in the text.

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# Chapter 14

## The *Analects* and Forms of Governance

Tongdong Bai

### The *Analects* as a Text of Political Philosophy

It is a controversial issue whether the *Analects* should be considered a text of philosophy or not.<sup>1</sup> I have argued elsewhere why many classical texts in the Chinese traditions should be considered works of philosophy (Bai 2009: 3–11, 2011a: 7–9, 2011b).<sup>2</sup> I won't here go into the details of these arguments and will only make the following statements about how I understand the *Analects* as a philosophical text. Even if the *Analects* were *proven* or were reasonably conclusively shown to be written by different authors with different intentions (I think that there are at best arguments that, inconclusively, support this claim), it is still philosophically meaningful to read the *Analects* as a whole. The *Analects*, like many texts in Chinese philosophy, contains not detailed arguments, but argumentation sketches that demand that readers fill in the gaps. Similarly, it contains an implicit system, and a reader is required to read a system into or out of it. These requirements are not novel: Many commentators in the past were doing exactly this work. Following this understanding, I consider the *Analects* a text of philosophy that contains, implicitly and explicitly, systematic argumentation.

Moreover, to call a text a philosophical one means to me that it deals with philosophical issues. I understand philosophical issues as those not limited to a particular person or people, a particular region, and a particular time. If they are,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Bryan van Norden claims that the *Analects* should not be so considered, because it lacks the kind of systematicity a philosophical text must have (van Norden 2002: 230–231). All translations from the Chinese in this chapter are the author's own, following Lau 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Bai 2011b contains the most updated and comprehensive arguments on this matter, and Bai 2011a is the only English version that contains some of these arguments.

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they would be issues of anthropology, sociology, history, or cultural studies. Clearly, in order to understand a philosopher and his or her work, we need to understand the world he or she lives in and the problems he or she is faced with. However, this world and its problems must have a dimension that transcends the limit of time, space, and a particular person or people, and a philosophical system must be able to address or to be understood (adapted) to address issues of a different time, region, and people.

Now, if we accept the *Analects* as a work of philosophy, what kind of philosophical work is it? The New Confucians, who have constituted the dominant school among those who wish to preserve and revive Confucianism in the modern world, consider the *Analects* and Confucianism in general – more precisely, what they consider the good kind of Confucianism – first and foremost a work of ethics and spirituality, i.e., a philosophical reflection on personal conducts and beliefs. The political aspect of this text is at best secondary to its ethical and spiritual dimension, or is simply ignored. The reason, I believe, is that in spite of their apparent culturally conservative façade, New Confucians are all firm believers in liberal democracy as the best available political institution, and they only differ from Chinese “Westernizers” in their belief in the vitality of Confucianism as a culture, a spirituality, or an ethic. They may be critical of politics in the West, but their criticisms are directed against background culture and ethics, and not against the basic institution of liberal democracy. Mou Zongsan 牟宗三, one of the most influential New Confucians, for example, tries to derive democracy from Confucianism, and this attempt reveals his underlying belief that democracy and its institutions are desirable and Confucianism can have legitimacy only if it is proven compatible with it (Mou 1980). Liu Shuxian 劉述先, another influential New Confucian, heartily agrees. He says that “for the East Asian region, a reconciliation with Confucianism must be made if democracy can be adequately developed there, while Confucianism itself must turn its idea of ‘people first’ (*min ben* 民本) to the idea of democracy,” and he refers to Mou’s work immediately after making this claim (Liu 2001: 24). In many places, Liu repeatedly claims that there are three kinds of Confucianism: the spiritual, the politicized, and the popular (for example, Liu 2001: 16, 2009: 3 and 50).<sup>3</sup> For him, popular Confucianism is very close to a vulgar version of Confucianism. Politicized Confucianism is what traditional Chinese governments utilized in order to justify their authoritarian rule. Thus these two kinds of Confucianism are denounced by Liu, and only the spiritual version, which is “referred to the great tradition of Confucius-Mengzi, Cheng-Zhu 程朱, and Lu-Wang 陸王”, is what he advocates (Liu 2001: 16). Liu’s anti-political understanding of Confucianism (the *Analects* included) is a rather typical attitude among New Confucians.<sup>4</sup>

In the English-speaking world, perhaps due to the same faith in democratic institutions, interest in Confucianism in general and the *Analects* in particular is

<sup>3</sup> In Note 1 on page 50 of Liu 2009, he offers some other references.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed criticism of New Confucianism, see Bai 2010.

also focused on the ethical aspect. Some are critical of certain political ideas of liberal democracy, such as the conception of rights, and these criticisms are often based upon a comprehensive understanding of humans that is often highly different from, and critical of, some radical version of individualism.<sup>5</sup> More importantly, these criticisms are still within the boundary of democratic institutions. In this sense, these criticisms are not that different from the New Confucians' in that they focus on some cultural or moral-metaphysical aspects of Western democracies, and shy away from questioning the latter's basic political institutions.

There is, however, a new trend in both Chinese and English-language scholarship, in which Confucianism is taken as a form of political philosophy that is not secondary to the ethical dimension of Confucianism, and, as a political philosophy, it is explored to challenge present democratic institutions. For example, with Confucianism so understood, Daniel Bell, JIANG Qing 蔣慶, Joseph Chan, and I have criticized democratic institutions and their underlying ideas, and have offered Confucian alternatives (Bell 2006; Jiang 2003; Chan 2007; Bai 2008, 2009). Bell, Jiang, and I all find that the democratic governments' heavy reliance on popular will is the root cause of many problems in democratic societies, and propose that Confucian meritocratic elements should be introduced to balance popular will. None of us proposes to eliminate democratic elements, but considers some forms of hybrid regime superior to present democratic regimes. But we differ on why popular will should be preserved, why problems with democracy cannot be addressed "internally" (i.e., tinkering from within the democratic regime), and why a hybrid regime is superior. Chan argues that Confucians consider the selection of leaders to be aimed at selecting the wise and virtuous, whereas democratic ideologies often consider the selection procedure (in the form of democratic elections) to be aimed at weeding out the bad. Different understandings of the selection processes may lead to different democratic cultures, which are a reason for a democracy to function well or badly.

It should be noted, however, that the main resources from the Confucian traditions on which these works rely are often not the *Analects*, but the *Mengzi* 孟子 and other Confucian texts. One reason is that the style of the *Analects* is aphoristic, while works such as the *Mengzi* contain more elaborate argumentation that is more convenient for today's scholars to explore. Another reason is that the *Mengzi* contains more explicitly egalitarian messages, and thus it seems to have more points of contact with democratic theories and institutions. But many ideas in the *Mengzi* can be traced back to the *Analects*, and, with regard to the differences between these two texts, the positions in the *Analects* are worth investigating and may offer even more different perspectives on the issue of desirable governance.

To sum up, I understand the *Analects* as a work of political philosophy. We need to understand the world Confucius lived in and the political problems he addressed. We should also ask why these problems were not limited to Confucius' times. Then, we need to understand what systematic answers Confucius offered to

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, some of the essays in de Bary and Tu 1998 and in Shun and Wong 2004.

these problems. Since we take his answers as philosophical, we should consider how these answers can be applied to similar philosophical issues of a different time. If these issues remain relevant even today, we should ask how Confucius' answers, with some necessary adaptations, can enjoy some contemporary relevance.

## The World of Confucius<sup>6</sup>

The political structure in the Western Zhou dynasty (the middle of the eleventh century B.C.E. to 771 B.C.E.), prior to Confucius' time, was a feudalistic, pyramid-like, and expanding system. Atop this pyramid was the king of Zhou, the "Son of Heaven" (*tianzi* 天子). He enfeoffed his relatives, loyal and competent ministers (many of whom were also the king's relatives), and nobles of the past Shang 商 dynasty. These people became the princes of their own principalities. Some of these principalities were in remote areas of the empire, and, in a way, they were colonies in otherwise "barbaric" areas (Qian 1996: 57). The establishment and expansion of these *de-facto* colonies thus helped to broaden the imperial reach. When the principalities expanded, their rulers did as kings did, enfeoffing their own relatives and ministers. In the entire empire, the king ruled over princes (of various ranks), princes over lesser lords, and so on. At each level, it was one master ruling over a limited number of subjects, making it possible for the master to rule through personal influence, blood relations, contracts between rulers and their subjects, and codes of conduct.

But this hierarchical system was collapsing during the Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu* 春秋) period (770 B.C.E.–476 B.C.E.), in which Confucius (551 B.C.E.–479 B.C.E.) lived. Rulers on every level were increasingly challenged by their inferiors, and the traditional nobility that constituted the ruling class gradually lost their "natural" status, including their natural "right" to rule. Boundaries of principalities were no longer respected, and through wars and conquests, states nominally under the Zhou king became ever larger and more populous. The collapse of the old ruling structure and the expansion of the state led rulers to face directly subjects who were strangers to them. The survival of these states and their rulers increasingly depended upon their physical strength alone.

It is interesting to note that the transitions these Chinese states experienced are comparable in many respects to the European transitions from the Middle Ages to (Western) modernity. In this sense, the Chinese thinkers during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國, 453–221 B.C.E.) periods were already dealing with some form of the issues of modernity. This might be a profound reason that Confucianism could inspire so many Enlightenment and modern European thinkers when it was introduced to Europe through the Jesuits and others. To be

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<sup>6</sup> For a more elaborate account, see Bai 2011b. Bai 2011a contains an earlier and English version of some key arguments.

clear, this is not to deny that there are differences between these two kinds of transitions, although some of the differences may have been more apparent than real. Let me focus on two issues related to governance and common to both China and Europe during these transitions.

First, in the feudal systems of China and Europe, on each level of the pyramid-like ruling structure, there was only a small community of a few hundred or a few thousand people. But this pyramid was collapsing, and rulers of the emerging independent states were challenged to effectively rule over thousands and even millions of strangers. What effectively tied smaller communities together – noble codes of conduct and virtues that were based upon a comprehensive conception of the Good and were easier to maintain when the community was small – could not work on a larger scale. In the absence of these old bonds, there emerged the issue of what effective social glue could bond a society of strangers, especially rulers and subjects.

Second, clearly, a ruling structure had to be built anew. The traditional nobility that constituted the ruling class was disappearing. This led to a *de facto* equality and freedom. Hereditary inequality was seriously weakened, and so was the idea that people were born into a class or a profession. The issue became: Should we keep this newly emerged freedom and equality or should we go back to the old nobility? If we decide to move on, how can we rebuild a ruling structure on the basis of this equality and freedom? These issues, I believe, are what dominated Confucius' and other pre-Qin Confucians' minds. Their apparent ethical concerns are derivative from these political issues, and not, as the New Confucians and other contemporary scholars of Confucianism would have it, the other way around. Furthermore, if we acknowledge the similarities between the Zhou-Qin transitions (from the feudalism of Western Zhou to the *jun xian* 郡縣 centralized system of the Qin 秦 dynasty) and Western modernity, we should not dismiss Confucian considerations of political institutions because they were about political changes of a bygone era. With the relevance of early Confucianism so understood, it is very interesting to see how the Confucian political proposals, though bearing some similarities to Western modern thinkers' and contemporary democratic theorists', contain profound differences from the latter.

### **Confucius: The Middle Way Between the Old and the New, Between Equality and Hierarchy**

Understood as facing the aforementioned drastic political upheavals, Confucius is often interpreted as a conservative. Apparently, his answer to the social and political changes was to go back to the old political system. He explicitly expressed his admiration of Zhou Dynasty (3.14), although he didn't specify what aspects of Zhou he admired. From Chapter 28 of the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), it seems that what he admired is the *li* 禮 of Zhou (Chan 1969: 111). “*Li*” is a

difficult term to translate, and it includes rituals, rites, and codes of conduct. For convenience, I'll use the transliteration of this term in this chapter.

Other passages in the *Analects*, however, reveal a different Confucius. In *Analects* 9.3, Confucius clearly states that some particular *li* can be adjusted. The justification of these changes, according to Confucius, comes from *ren* 仁. “Ren” is another difficult concept to translate: It means “benevolence,” “kindness”, and plays on the Chinese term for humans, *ren* 人. Thus I choose to translate it as “humanity” or “humane,” depending on the context. In 17.21 of the *Analects*, Confucius and his disciple Zaiwo 宰我 discussed whether the 3-year mourning period for parents, which would include not participating in official duties, should be kept. Interestingly, Zaiwo’s reason for cutting it down to 1 year is, “if the superior person (*junzi* 君子) doesn’t practice *li*, *li* are sure to be in ruins.” It seems that Zaiwo wished to adjust some particular *li*, the *li* of mourning, in order to save *li* in general or the *li* other than the *li* of 3-year mourning. Confucius, however, doesn’t seem to be moved by this “conservatism.” He asked Zaiwo if he’d feel at ease if he still had all the luxuries in the 3-year mourning period, and then claimed that to feel at ease is “inhumane.” In another place, Confucius put it straightforwardly: “what can a man do with *li* if he is not humane?” (3.3). Thus, Confucius is ready to reinterpret, reevaluate, and reform the old, and the foundation for all these is humanity. Under a conservative façade, he started a revolution.

If we recall the two crucial problems of governance in Confucius’ time, we should see that the focus on humanity (*ren*) may have been Confucius’ answer to the problem of social glue. That is, in a large and populous society, the ruler doesn’t have a close familial and ritual tie with his subjects anymore. Why, then, should he bother to rule? Humanity, for Confucius, may have offered a justifiable moral motivation for the ruler to rule. It grows out of our natural care for family members, and if we keep cultivating it, it will be sufficient to motivate us to care about strangers and common people. From this idea comes the Confucian idea of “people as the foundation [of the state]” or “people first” (*min ben* 民本). For example, in *Analects* 12.9, a ruler was worried about not having enough to cover expenditures due to a bad harvest, and Youzi 有子, a close friend or disciple of Confucius’ suggested, counter-intuitively, that the ruler lower taxes. Naturally, the ruler was confused, and Youzi explained, “if the people have sufficient, who is there to share your insufficiency? When the people have insufficient, who is there to share your sufficiency?” In an earlier passage, Confucius claimed that three things are essential to governance, in order of importance (from low to high), are arms, food, and people’s trust in the government (12.7).<sup>7</sup> In another place, Confucius was happy to see a state teeming with population. Asked about what further benefits to add, he said “enrich them.” Asked about even further benefits, he said “cultivate them”

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<sup>7</sup> Some people believe that East Asians value food and other material necessities higher than anything else, including abstract rights, and contrast this with “Western” values. But from this passage of the *Analects*, we can see that there are things higher than the material necessities according to Confucius. Thus, if there is an East Asian value that puts material necessities higher than anything else (which is questionable), it’s hard to attribute it to Confucianism.

(13.3). In short, for Confucius, the government should value people's basic needs the most, and these include not only material needs, but also spiritual needs, such as education and trust in government.

With government's responsibilities so understood, we can then understand a famous or infamous idea of Confucius', the idea of "getting names/titles right" (*zhengming* 正名). When asked about governance, Confucius said, "Let the ruler be a ruler, the subject a subject, the father a father, the son a son" (12.11). The sentiment Confucius here expresses is frowned upon by some contemporary readers because the message seems to be a defense of the status quo or the powers that be. Clearly, if a ruler is a ruler, the subject will be a subject, namely, obeying the ruler. But we have to see that this obedience is based upon the fact that the ruler is indeed a ruler. That is, his deeds have to match his title. What is required of a ruler is to satisfy his people's material and spiritual needs. He wants to do so because he is humane. Only then can he be rightfully called a ruler and be obeyed by his subjects. Confucius was too subtle to spell out the revolutionary side of this message, while Mengzi didn't shy from it, claiming that a king can be removed if he fails to do his jobs, offering a Confucian version of accountability (*Mengzi* 1B6 and 1B8).<sup>8</sup> Again, Confucius' idea is a double-edged sword, maintaining and revolutionizing the status quo at the same time.

Like many modern European thinkers, the early Confucians developed a new idea of the legitimacy of the state to replace the divine right of the king. It is the satisfaction of the people's material and spiritual needs that offers legitimacy to the sovereign. This further supports my bold speculation that the Zhou-Qin transitions in China were a form of modernization, but the similarities don't stop here.

The emerging equality and freedom that resulted from the collapse of feudalism and hereditary nobility led in Europe to mass education. Similarly, Confucius was said to be the first private teacher, daringly teaching commoners what was hitherto reserved to the nobility. He taught anyone who could show a token of gratitude to his teaching (7.7) and explicitly stated, "in education/cultivation there are no class distinctions" (15.39).

However, unlike Mengzi and Xunzi 荀子, Confucius never claimed that all human beings have the same potential to become wise and virtuous, let alone sage-rulers. It is said that "one cannot get to hear Confucius' views on human nature and the Way of Heaven" (5.13), and he only claimed, "by nature we are close to each other, and by habituation/practice we grow apart" (17.2).

In fact, not only did he never claim that human beings are equal in potential, but Confucius apparently had a rather low opinion of the masses. Although claiming to educate people regardless of their classes, Confucius seems to have believed that some people (the wisest and the stupidest) simply cannot be changed through education (17.3). He didn't specify who these people are here, but in another passage, in which he articulates a hierarchy of learning, the lowest are those who "don't study even after having been vexed by difficulties," and they are the masses

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<sup>8</sup> For an English translation, see Lau 2003.



(16.9). It should be noted that one could interpret this passage as saying that those who are considered commoners in the feudalistic hierarchy cannot learn. But the wording of this passage and the general tendency throughout the *Analects* that reinterprets many social distinctions in the feudalistic system with Confucian meritocracy suggest that a better interpretation of this passage is that those who refuse to learn are defined as commoners. That is, to be a commoner is a rank in Confucian meritocracy (someone who lacks the ability and motivation to learn), regardless of the social class based upon the feudalistic system (someone who is born into a low social class in this system).

This meritocratic reading of distinctions among people is more explicitly revealed when Confucius warned against educating the commoners or the masses. He maintained that one cannot tell those who are below average about higher things (6.21). In another place, he said, “To fail to speak to someone who can be spoken to is to let a man go to waste. To speak to someone who cannot be spoken to is to let one’s words go to waste. A wise man lets neither men nor words go to waste” (15.8). Finally, he explicitly stated, “the common people can be made to follow the way, but they cannot be made to understand it” (8.9).<sup>9</sup>

Given these claims, how can we reconcile Confucius, the first private teacher and the first “mass educator,” with Confucius, the “elitist?” Due to the aphoristic style of the *Analects*, we will have to speculate on the reasons underlying Confucius’ apparently conflicting views. Even if we acknowledge distinctions among human beings, the most salient question seems to be how discriminating judgments about them are made. As already noted, Confucius did not seem to believe that only the hereditary nobility can be educated; otherwise, he would not offer lessons to those who were considered commoners in the feudalistic system. Generally, Confucius did not seem to believe that one can tell whether someone is educable or not by dint of inherited rank. This is why he tried to educate everyone who came to him. However, if after effort by both teacher and pupil, the pupil turns out not to be promising, a continuing education is a waste of time and energy on both sides. To continue to teach in spite of a student’s lack of promise or potential is indeed, as Confucius said, a waste of words. Thus, although education may have been open to everyone at the beginning, after some attempts and tests, many will be proven unfit. They will be considered commoners in the Confucian meritocratic system and excluded from further education. Maybe at the beginning we all can be educated somehow (after all, by nature we are close to each other). But for whatever reasons (reasons Confucius did not specify), we grow apart through practices and habituation. Some do not bother to learn, and some cannot learn in spite of all possible effort. They will constitute the common people or the masses in the Confucian hierarchy, which, though using class terms that were used in the previous feudalistic system, was based upon a reinterpretation of previous social and political

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<sup>9</sup> There have been efforts to tone down the elitist message here. But I will stick to the interpretation that is offered above. For it is perhaps the most natural or the least forced interpretation of this passage, and it is also in line with other passages which have been quoted.

distinctions. That is, who is a commoner and who is a superior person is determined by performance in education, and not by birth. Thus a meritocracy is built to replace the old aristocracy, or rule by nobles.

This Confucian competence- and virtue-based meritocracy is Confucius' answer to the other crucial question brought about by the collapse of feudalism – how to rebuild the ruling class.<sup>10</sup> The right to rule no longer belongs to anyone by birth. Rather, we are all equal at the starting line and only those who pass certain landmarks can become members of the ruling class. This Confucian meritocracy is based upon some form of equality, and it offers upward mobility to the masses. But whether one can move up the ladder depends upon his or her effort and some other unspecified factors. One can argue that the apparent equal opportunity offered by upward mobility can be unfair, for those who are wealthy can afford better education and can translate their economic status into political status. Although Confucius didn't address this issue directly in the *Analects*, we can speculate that since he believed that the government is accountable for satisfying people's basic needs, including material and educational (as indicated in the aforementioned passage 13.3), the unspecified factors should not include economic ones. Of course, this understanding of governmental responsibility becomes far more salient in the *Mengzi*. There the unspecified factors that are considered acceptable by early Confucians could be, for example, luck or fortune that is beyond human control. One could be born with a rather low intelligence or low motivation. One could grow up with friends and neighbors who look down upon education in spite of governmental encouragement of it. Such bad influences might lead a person to miss the opportunity to be educated.

By offering upward mobility, the Confucians tried to replace the rigid political hierarchy in feudalism. But this upward mobility can be abused by someone who has neither the ability to learn nor the willingness to learn, but falsely believes that he or she has the merits to move up. Misunderstanding one's capabilities and abuse of upward mobility could threaten meritocracy and may even bring down the whole state. For Confucius, both upward mobility and stability are desirable for good governance. Thus it is necessary to tell someone "time to stop," and to accept his or her place in the hierarchy, instead of cherishing a false understanding of one's ability and a false hope to move up the ladder of Confucian meritocracy. In other words, the Confucian meritocracy that champions upward mobility also needs a built in mechanism to check abuses of the system, thus ensuring stability of the political structure. This may have been another reason Confucius seems to exclude education for some.

For Confucius, members of the ruling class, i.e., those who ascend highest on the meritocratic ladder, are always few in number. They need to be wise and humane, and, the reason for their scarcity seems to be the extreme difficulties of becoming

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<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Confucian learning includes both technical knowledge and virtues (humanity in particular), which is why the merits in question here include both competence and virtues.

superior people, difficulties Confucius repeatedly describes throughout the *Analects* (see, e.g., 4.6, 6.29, 6.30, 9.18, 15.13). But this doesn't mean that Confucius simply favored a paternalistic government which is run by the few alone, and under which the common people are kept in the dark and coerced to obey.

First, the selection of the ruling members is open to all at first. As was argued earlier, the government, in early Confucians' view, should be accountable for leveling the playing field by satisfying people's basic material and educational needs. This guarantees that equal opportunity is real, and not merely formal and in name only.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, although Confucius warned against continuing to educate those who failed, he never said there is a clear line where any further effort should be abandoned. This means that although one can fail in the system, there is still a chance for this person to try again. Using a contemporary example, an adult should be allowed to come back to school if he or she is now willing and ready, although he or she failed before. Confucius and the early Confucians only believed that when a learner doesn't try, there should be a restriction on what he or she can get involved in. For example, if, in spite of the opportunities offered, someone does not bother to learn where Mexico is and what relation it has to American politics, his or her voice should not be given much attention when the issue of the U.S.-Mexico relations is discussed. In short, for Confucians, there is as much upward mobility as possible as long as some basic social order can be maintained.

Second, although Confucius didn't think highly of the common people, this does not entail that the common people should be left completely in the dark. In the *Analects*, in spite of his repeated emphasis on the difficulty – almost the impossibility – of becoming a person of humanity, Confucius said, “Is humanity really far away? It is here as long as I desire it” (7.30). An answer to the apparent tension between Confucius' statements is that to achieve the highest kind of humanity is indeed difficult, perhaps even impossible, but to achieve some basic level of humanity is possible even for the commoners. This is explicitly stated in the *Doctrine of the Mean*:

The Way of the superior man functions everywhere and yet is hidden. Men and women of simple intelligence can share its knowledge; and yet in its utmost reaches, there is something which even the sage does not know. . . . The Way of the superior man has its beginnings in the relation between man and women, but in its utmost reaches, it is clearly seen in Heaven and on earth. (Chapter 12 of *The Doctrine of the Mean*; c.f. Chan 1969: 100.

Thus although it is a waste and even a danger to teach the masses higher things, they still need and can be educated on a rudimentary level. The rudimentary education includes basic skills such as literacy, and basic moral education such as a proper care for family members and strangers and a proper respect for authority.

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<sup>11</sup> It has to be acknowledged, however, that the detailed discussion of the minimum standards that can guarantee real equal opportunity was lacking in the *Analects*. Obviously, working opportunities should be secured to those who are willing to work, so that each family can earn its basic living. Public schools or similar educational institutions should be established. Unfortunately, one serious flaw in traditional Chinese politics was precisely the lack of public schools, in spite of the alleged Confucian heritage.

Third, as implied by some of the aforementioned passages of the *Analects* (and which is made far more explicit in the *Mengzi*), the legitimacy of the government comes from satisfying people's needs. It is a government for the people. Thus, the people's voice has to be heard so channels for people to express themselves have to be kept open. However, unlike a democracy, it is not that people's voice will determine government's actions. In *Analects* 15.28, Confucius said, "be sure to investigate the case if someone is disliked by the multitude; be sure to investigate the case if someone is liked by the multitude." We can see that the opinions of the multitude clearly count, but they don't directly lead to policy-decisions, or promotions or demotions of an official. Rather, superiors have to investigate the case. On another occasion, Confucius went even further. He claimed that it is better for someone to be liked by the good people in the village and disliked by the bad people in the village than being liked (or disliked) indiscriminately by all in the village (13.24). It is debatable whether Confucius was talking about selecting political leader here, but from the general tone of the *Analects*, it is a reasonable speculation to say that he was talking about this. Indeed, perhaps to find out by whom and on what basis a person is liked or disliked is what the superiors in *Analects* 15.28 need to investigate.

While people's opinions matter in Confucius' ideal government, they don't have the kind of determining role they enjoy in a democracy. Moreover, the relevant opinions probably concern how one feels about his or her present situation. The views of the people that matter would be some like what Ronald Reagan sought to capture during a presidential debate with Jimmy Carter: "Are you better off than you were four years ago?" That is, the concerns of the people a Confucian would seek are probably not about policy-making. For in the *Analects*, there are two occurrences of the same claim by Confucius, "don't plan on the policies of the office you don't hold" (8.14, 14.26).<sup>12</sup> One reason for this claim is perhaps to find a cure for the chaos of Confucius' times. As mentioned, one problem of those times is the collapse of the feudalistic structure and the usurpations on every level due to this collapse. Thus this statement by Confucius, as well as his idea of getting names and titles correct, is an effort to restore order.<sup>13</sup> Another reason, which is more relevant to our discussion, may have been Confucius' suspicion of the value of an outsider's political opinions. Words are cheap. The people who don't hold a

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<sup>12</sup> Ironically, Confucius himself was running around, planning policies of the office he didn't hold. In 1.10 of the *Analects*, it is reported, "when Confucius arrives in a state, he always gets to know about its government/policies." Thus, it is an important issue to reconcile this with his claim discussed in the main text. But I won't go into it in this chapter.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that the call for one person to do his or her own job is an idea shared by many other thinkers faced with chaos, such as Hanfeizi 韓非子 and Plato. For Hanfeizi's idea of one man's doing his specified job, see, for example, the famous story of the royal hat-keeper in Chapter 7 (*er bing* 二柄) of the *Hanfeizi* (Watson 1964: 32). In Plato's *Republic*, a recurring definition of justice is one man, one job. See, for example, 370b of the *Republic* (Bloom 1991: 47). There are, however, profound differences among these thinkers' idea of "one person one job," but this is a topic beyond the scope of this chapter.

particular office may have no capacity of handling policy problems, no extensive exposure to every aspect of such problems, no full dedication to resolving such problems, no resources to solve such problems, and no comprehensive grasp of all the practical difficulties. Policy issues should be left to the experts, i.e., those who hold certain offices. People's opinions, then, should only come in the form of "do you feel better off or worse off than you were a certain time ago," and nothing more. To be clear, Reagan's question was intended to make people select the president based upon the answer to this question, but Confucius would ask the meritocrats to evaluate people's answers and do something accordingly.

In short, for Confucius, the few virtuous and wise people should constitute the ruling class. Since ruling is a specialized job, members of the ruling class should focus on this job and nothing else. In 9.6 of the *Analecs*, an official challenged the opinion that Confucius is a sage. He questioned how, if Confucius is a sage, he could be skilled in so many things. Confucius agreed, explaining the fact that he was of lowly background as the reason that he was skilled in so many lowly things. He further stated that a superior person (*junzi* 君子) should not be so skilled. Here, I think, Confucius was playing with the double meanings of *junzi*. Originally, it was meant to denote a member of the nobility and the ruling class in a feudalistic regime. But Confucius tried to replace the feudalistic regime with a meritocratic government. Still, in this government, superior people should not be skilled in so many things because of their concentration on running the state.

When wise and virtuous rulers run a state, they are not busybodies. Their being the moral exemplars for the whole state will have a positive influence on the common people (2.1). Thus, it is crucial for the ideal Confucian government that its rulers are virtuous and set themselves "right" (*zheng* 正) (12.17). If they are not, their orders won't be followed, and they will chase after the problems they themselves, in a way, cause (13.6). In particular, laws and litigation are considered the last resort. One cause of crime is the greed of rulers. Talking to a lord who was worried about thieves, Confucius said, "if you yourself were a man of few desires, no one would steal even if stealing carried a reward with it" (12.18). Another reason people do wrong is that they are not properly educated. In the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學), Confucius stated that what is necessary to eliminate litigation is instilling a sense of awe in the people, making those who lie not dare to finish their words (Chap. 4; c.f. Chan 1969: 88). In contrast, if people are not properly educated but are punished with death when they commit capital crimes, it is cruelty or abuse (*nue* 虐) (20.2). In general, Confucius argued that if we only use rewards and punishments to regulate people, people may save themselves from trouble, but they will be shameless, implying that they are always ready to do bad things if given a chance. While guided with virtue and *li*, they will have a sense of shame and follow the rulers willingly (2.3).

To be clear, Confucius was not saying that laws should not be used. Rather, there should be something else, guidance by, and education in, virtue, that is added to the use of laws. Moreover, the laws themselves should be embodiments of virtues. Confucius stated, "when *li* and music don't flourish, punishments will not be exactly right; when punishments are not exactly right, the common people will

not know where to put their hands and feet” (13.3). Clearly, it is laws that directly regulate the common people, but these laws should embody *li*, which in turn is based upon humanity.

Before I move on to discuss directly the contemporary relevance of Confucius’ view of governance, let me make two clarifications. Traditional Chinese political regimes are often said to be authoritarian and even autocratic, and Confucianism is blamed for them. But as mentioned, Confucius in the *Analects* rarely said anything explicit about his institutional design, and we can only speculate on the kind of regimes he would support. One possible speculation is that he wanted to restore feudalism.<sup>14</sup> In contemporary China, thanks to the anti-traditional movements such as the May Fourth movement and the Communist Revolution, “feudalism” and “authoritarianism” are often combined to describe traditional Chinese regimes. But as we saw, feudalism collapsed during the Spring and Autumn period, and was eventually replaced by the centralized *jun xian* system, which lasted for 2,000 years. It is then simply wrong to call traditional Chinese politics “feudalistic.” More relevant to our discussion here, in the feudalistic regime of the Western Zhou dynasty, the king had direct control only over the princes, especially those who served as his ministers (*Mengzi* 5B2). He never enjoyed the centralized power as emperors since the Qin dynasty had enjoyed. Even within his sphere of influence, as *Mengzi* described, the king was merely one level above the princes (*Mengzi* 5B2), and the princes who served as his ministers had a significant role in political decisions on this level. Therefore, if we take Confucius as conserving feudalism, it can hardly say that he was embracing autocracy or authoritarianism. Besides, the ideal rulers for Confucius are Yao 堯 and Shun 舜. Yao passed on his throne to Shun instead of his own son because Shun was a wise and virtuous ruler. This idealized tale of Confucians also suggests that their ideal regime is not authoritarian or autocratic, because the latter regimes tend to be hereditary.

In this chapter, I take the interpretative position that considers Confucius revolutionizing the political system under a conservative façade. Instead of going back to feudalism, he advocated a form of meritocracy. Some may consider it the rule of the few, and it seems, by definition, that this regime is oligarchic. But Aristotle, for example, argued that the fact that it is the few who rule in an oligarchy is accidental (because the wealthy tend to be few in a society), and he understood oligarchy as the rule of the wealthy (Aristotle 1984: 1279b11–1280a5). Using Aristotle’s definition, Confucian meritocracy is clearly no oligarchy, because wealth is not considered a primary merit in this meritocracy. Moreover, as argued, this meritocracy, which is different from oligarchy, has to be for the people, be it the rule of the wealthy or the rule of the few, because the latter usually means the few or the wealthy rule for their own interests. The Confucian requirement that

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<sup>14</sup> To be clear, this is not a position I take in this chapter. But I think that Confucius and *Mengzi* as well as some later Confucians did have sympathy with certain elements of feudalistic system, especially the kind of local autonomy in comparison with the centralized *jun xian* system that was first strongly supported by the so-called “Legalists” and had been the mainstream political structure of traditional Chinese politics since the Qin dynasty.

government is for the people is not empty, meaning that people's voice has to be heard. In this sense, the Confucian government has democratic elements as well. Therefore, the Confucian meritocracy is no oligarchy.

## Why Is Confucius' Government by Superior People Superior?

As mentioned earlier, those who have recently focused upon defending the merits of a Confucian government vis-à-vis today's democracies tend not to focus on the *Analects* alone (if at all), and an important reason is that its aphoristic characteristic is inconvenient for people to develop an institutional plan. If one relies on the *Analects* alone for a blueprint of governance, one might be easily accused of committing over-interpretation, and thus one would have to defend much harder his or her interpretations. To avoid this trouble, one might wish to use the *Mengzi* or other texts that offer more explicit systematic argumentation. It is important to note that the ideas introduced in the previous section can all find resonance in the *Mengzi*, which offers some justification to my interpretation.

Let me sum up the kind of government Confucius envisaged in the *Analects*, according to my interpretation. People are not considered unequal at birth, and the government should be accountable to satisfying the basic material and spiritual (including educational, in particular) needs of the people. Members of the ruling class should be selected from those who have succeeded in education, broadly construed. They should be respected, and should be given greater power than the commoners to run state affairs. The reason for them to devote themselves to politics and for them to be selected is that they are humane (i.e., caring for strangers, the people of their state, and even the whole world), and are competent to express their humanity, i.e., are able to serve the people. But the common people are still to be educated, not of higher things, but of basic morals. Their opinions about how they fare under an official, a policy, and a government matter, but these opinions will be investigated by the wise and virtuous. The ideal government is first and foremost trying to run the state under the guidance of certain morals, with laws and institutions as the last resort. Indeed, laws and institutions themselves should embody these morals.

In my own works (as well as in some others' works mentioned in section "[The \*Analects\* as a text of political philosophy](#)"), I have defended in detail the merits of the aforementioned Confucian government, not only for China, but for the whole world (Bai 2008, 2009). After all, Confucius and many Confucians never thought that their political designs are only for the Chinese; rather, they are for all civilized peoples. In the following, I will only give a general account of this defense. Let me first show the merits of two minor features of the Confucian government.

First, in this government, one becomes a member of the ruling class because he or she is superior in terms of humanity and wisdom. It thus assumes that some

people can be morally and intellectually superior to others. In contemporary democracies, one widespread assumption is that we are all self-interested, and thus we'd better watch out and impose checks and balance on the political leaders who, in terms of morality, are not better than the common people. This basic tenet behind many contemporary democracies is apparently self-defeating. What gives political leaders the right to run the state if they are not better than us? Since the government consists of those who are just as self-interested as the common people, it should be closely watched. But what gives the "watchers" authority to watch? The inherent contradiction leads to the ironical political reality, for example, of United States politics: American politicians often claim to be an outsider of the government in order to get elected into the government, and present their role in government as to get rid of it. When a ruling branch of a government consists of 'simple folks' who despise government (i.e., themselves), it is hard to imagine that this branch will turn out to be respected, even by the people who put them there. This is probably why, as Fareed Zakaria notes,

the U.S. Congress – in principle, the most representative of political institutions – scores at the bottom of most surveys asking Americans which institutions they most respect whereas the Supreme Court, the armed forces, and the Federal Reserve System (all appointed rather than elected bodies) score highest. (Zakaria 2003: 248).

In contrast, under the Confucian government, this self-defeating logic is avoided. One tries to be a part of the government because he or she is morally and intellectually superior, more so than those whom he or she tries to replace. It is a competition to show one's superiority, and not the race to the bottom that shows one's opponent's inferiority. This candidate, if elected, and the institution itself then command respect.

But the claim of morality may appear suspicious to many contemporary liberal thinkers who take pluralism as a fact of life and assign morality to the realm of private sphere or background culture. But first, it is well-known that Confucians see a close connection between family and the state (see, e.g., 1.2). One's public-mindedness gets its first natural training ground in the family. If this is the case, the division between the private and the public is not as sharp as liberal thinkers want us to believe. Thus, there may be family values and other moral values that rightfully belong to or are inseparable from the public sphere.

Second, although these values may be "thicker" than moral liberal thinkers tend to endorse (as public virtues), the former may still be a part of the overlapping consensus shared by people with different comprehensive doctrines. After all, the morality Confucians emphasize is humanity, or compassion for strangers. This seems to be a value necessary to anyone who wishes to live in a harmonious society of strangers. Another example is that, no matter what faith one has, he or she may embrace arrangements promoting familial stability if he or she cares about the stability of the state and understands that it is closely tied with the stability of the basic unit of the state, i.e., the family. Thus, the contemporary democratic evasion of certain "thick" moral values may be overly cautious and detrimental to a good state, and the Confucians are right to emphasize the moral content of laws and



institutions and moral cultivation outside the regulations by laws and institutions. This emphasis will complement the reliance on laws and institutions and reduce the over-reliance on the latter.

As we have seen, Confucius emphasized the significance of the opinions of the people, but he also argued for a greater share of power to the wise and the virtuous. How can we envision a government that addresses both concerns? One possibility is a hybrid regime that contains both the popular (“democratic”) element and the meritocratic element. For example, there can be a bicameral parliament that consists of a lower house that represents people’s opinions and an upper house the members of which are meritocrats (as previously defined).

Why is this hybrid regime better than a democracy? A key feature of democracy is that its policies are beholden to the interests of presently living voters. The interests of, for example, foreigners and past and future generations tend to be institutionally neglected. Even in terms of the presently living domestic voters’ interests, they are often defined as short-term material interests and, even in terms of these interests, voters are often incompetent to make good judgments (of voting for the right policies or for the right policy-makers). This incompetence is widely acknowledged by political scientists and theorists, but many wish to improve the competence of the voters from within the democratic institutions. But I have argued that this incompetence is fundamental to most modern democracies. The reasons, very simply put, are, first, most contemporary states are large and populous (more than one million citizens), and second, in most contemporary states, most citizens have to work to earn their living. When the state is large, the state affairs are hopelessly beyond common people’s understanding, and the meager understanding common people have isn’t even sufficient for them to select the right representatives. A large state also leads to concentration of wealth, and it then leads to the manipulation of information by big money. On top of this, people are working all the time, leaving themselves little time to understand politics. Even if they could, their votes will be cancelled out by millions of ignorant voters. The meritocrats, then, who are more competent to understand political affairs, have more leisure, and are virtuous (i.e., being able to see beyond narrow self-interests and to devote themselves to the public interest and even the interests of all human beings, past, present, and future), may offer us some hope to address these problems.

There are many details about this hybrid regime that need to be discussed. Again, I have done so in other works of mine, and won’t do it here. Let me just address one issue which may be important to many readers who believe in equality and which may serve as an example of how other detailed issues can be addressed.

The Confucian hybrid regime combines a hierarchical element with an egalitarian element, and a contemporary reader may not feel comfortable with the idea of hierarchy. But we should see that democratic governments also (implicitly) contain hierarchy and inequality. For example, in the United States Congress, it is a well-known fact that the percentage of those who are millionaires and have college education is far higher than that among the American public. The Confucian wisdom, then, is that if hierarchy is unavoidable, instead of hopelessly and often counterproductively eliminating hierarchy and inequality (the repeatedly

failed – often with horrible costs – experiments of communism come to mind), we should focus instead on what hierarchy best serves those whose interests should be served. For Confucians, the government is ultimately for the people. If a political hierarchy best protects the interests of the people, it is justified. We can call this, after John Rawls' idea of the (economic) difference principle (Rawls 1971: 75–83), a “political difference principle.”

I admit that the defense of Confucian political institutions is extremely sketchy in this section. But I hope through it, and through this chapter, readers can sense the contemporary relevance of Confucius' political ideas as they are revealed in the *Analects*. To understand them, then, is not only for doing justice to the (long) dead, but also to the living.

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## Chapter 15

# Why Care? A Feminist Re-appropriation of Confucian *Xiao* 孝

Li-Hsiang Lisa Rosenlee

This chapter deals with the contemporary debate on the intersectionality of Confucianism with feminism in general and its compatibility with care ethics in particular.<sup>1</sup> My intent here is to propose a hybrid feminist care ethics that is grounded in Confucianism by, on the one hand, integrating specifically the concepts of *xiao* 孝 and *ren* 仁 into existing care ethics so as to strengthen and broaden its theoretical horizon and, on the other, revising Confucian gender requirements in light of feminist demands for gender equity. But before I get into the core of the argument, let me give a bit of background that helped shape this paper for me academically as well as personally. As we sometimes do, when we promise to deliver a paper, we procrastinate till the last minute, and as the deadline approached, I had a rather peculiar dilemma: Should I do everything humanly possible to complete the paper that I had promised to deliver or should I care for my mother-in-law, who is now quite ill and requires daily assistance? The issue of elder care is no doubt an existential question all must ponder, especially those of us with increasingly frail parents and demanding careers. But this is even more so for me not just personally, but academically. As you see, the subject that I intend to dissect is precisely the dilemma that I am facing: Why should I care?

### Personal Autonomy vs. Filial Obligations

In fact, according to the Western social convention, none of the family members is morally obliged to care for my mother-in-law. A quick glance at contemporary Western scholarship where the issue of familial care is, by and large, absent shows

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter employs the Ames and Rosemont 1998 translation of the *Analects*.

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that familial care simply is not considered a “moral” issue worthy of rigorous scholarly attention. And part of the neglect is due to the conflict between familial obligation and the liberal principle of voluntarism and self-determination. Since familial relationships are involuntary and adult children’s filial obligation cannot be voluntarily formulated, it follows that there is no familial obligation at all. As Christina Sommers observed back in 1989,

The contemporary philosopher is, on the whole, actively unsympathetic to the idea that we have *any* duties defined by relationships to which we have not voluntarily entered. . . . Because the special relationships that constitute the family as a social arrangement are, in this sense, not voluntarily assumed, many moralists feel bound in principle to dismiss them altogether (Sommers 1989: 730).

In other words, for the vast majority of ethicists in the West, one’s familial obligation, if there is any at all, belongs to the realm of the personal, the involuntary sentiment that is altogether outside the consideration of the rational and the ethical. One might be the beneficiary of the care performed by one’s family, but one has no filial duty to reciprocate. So, according to liberal social convention, I have no obligation, moral or otherwise, to care for my mother-in-law despite the affective ties that have intimately bounded us for the last 12 years. This liberal insistence on self-determination and voluntarism, according to Sommers, indeed “undermines the network of mutual obligations that characterizes the family and its members” (Sommers 1989: 730).

At best, one’s familial obligation can only be subsumed under the model of voluntary friendship first proposed by Jane English where the extent of one’s filial duty is determined solely by the strength and the duration of one’s friendship with one’s parents. And in the event of estrangement, the grown child, as English argues, has no obligation to care for his parents beyond his “general duty to help those in need” (English 1989: 687). In other words, one has no special duty to care for one’s parents whom one is no longer friendly with, and the general duty to care for those in need applies equally to one’s parents and strangers on the street. The familial tie that binds oneself to one’s parents, at face value, renders no moral obligations at all. As English writes simply, in response to her own essay title – “What do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?” – “I will contend that the answer is ‘nothing’” (English 1989: 683). Nicholas Dixon’s revival of English’s friendship model continues to assert the voluntary aspect of familial obligation, as if familial obligation and peer friendship rest on the same ground of personal choice. As Dixon writes, “Central to the friendship model is the extent of filial obligation is determined by the extent of our friendly relations with our parents. Exactly the same holds in the case of peer friendships, where deeper friendships generate more extensive duties of friendship” (Dixon 1995: 83). Simply put, one cares for one’s parents voluntarily the same way as one cares for one’s friends, but there exists no filial duty, as such, in its own right. In the case of my mother-in-law, my voluntary care for her can only be justified based on the duration and the strength of my friendship with her. And if it so happens that there is no friendly relationship existing between us, I am, based on this liberal, friendship model, free to walk away. And worse yet, if the choice is to care between my peer friend and my

mother-in-law whom I might or might not be quite fond of, based on this model, my obligation to help must gravitate towards my peer friend instead of my mother-in-law. After all, few of us are our in-laws' BFF.

Even in Simon Keller's recently formulated "special goods theory" that attempts to go beyond the voluntary "friendship" model in order to provide a distinct theoretical ground for filial obligation, filial obligation continues to be placed below the value of personal autonomy. According to Keller, even though we have a special obligation to care for our parents due to the unique position that we occupy to provide for and to receive special goods from our parents, if the demand of filial obligation conflicts with personal autonomy, then it ceases to be relevant, since personal autonomy is an immutable value in Western culture. Keller reflects on the two restrictions on his "special goods theory" of filial obligation: "First, the child's duties to provide special goods to the parent should not be such as seriously to impede the child's ability to live a good life" and the ability to make autonomous choices about the shape of one's own life "is regarded in contemporary Western culture as being, a central component of the good life and a central entitlement of the individual" (Keller 2006: 269). And second, not all children have a special obligation to care for their parents, if the parents are proven to be undeserving, or there is a personality conflict, or one has a limited ability to provide special goods to the parents (Keller 2006: 269). In short, personal autonomy is the supreme good, against which all other goods, including one's filial duty, must be ranked accordingly. Caring for one's family simply has no *prima facie* value in developing one's moral sense of self in liberal, Western discourses on ethics. Obviously, in the liberal universe, my personal autonomy and self-determination are the central focus of my ethical reasoning, and caring for my mother-in-law should then be treated as an act of charity. In a nutshell, according to the liberal principle of personal autonomy and voluntarism, one gives only when one is willing and when one is able. Familial relationships exert no moral pull over the self whose moral reasoning rests solely on its rational detachment and a de-subjectivized viewpoint.

It is against this philosophical background that the rise of care ethics in the early 1980s, in part, can be seen as a response to the Western canonical dichotomy of the public, "masculine" sense of disinterested justice vs. the private, "feminine" sense of affective care. Carol Gilligan's seminal work, *In A Different Voice*, provides an alternative care centered perspective that is said to be more common among women in contrast to the principle, rule based perspective among men in the discourse of ethics (Gilligan 1993). Sarah Ruddick in her pioneering piece, "Maternal Thinking," explicitly builds the care perspective on the practice of mothering in the mother-child relationship, where the needs of the dependent and the vulnerable forms the basis of one's moral thinking (Ruddick 1980). It is a common stance among care ethicists that women's experiences and practices of care in private, unchosen relationships inform us a great deal about the nature of morality; to some, care must come even before justice in the practice of ethics (Held 2006). Yet, morality, seen through the traditional, "masculine" lenses, only deals with the disinterested public affairs that are determined by a disembodied self-conscious will, and hence the private, affective ties in unchosen familial relationships fall outside the consideration

of what is moral. As far as morality is concerned, one's family and strangers on the street have the equal weight in one's moral deliberation; one's affective familial ties, in and of themselves, simply have no moral pull over one's own person. In other words, my rational, noumenal self where moral deliberation takes place, as Immanuel Kant insists, is completely unencumbered by my affective phenomenal self. My contingent relationship with my mother-in-law, hence, does not oblige me in any special way to care for her in times of need and my indifference to her needs in turn does not diminish my moral sense of the autonomous self.

Of course, my mother-in-law has a right to seek medical care, but no one is compelled, on the liberal, Kantian ground where personal autonomy reigns supreme, to care for her beyond the care provided by the medical institution or hired personal assistance at home. When my mother-in-law's condition reached a critical point, the discussions in the family, to my astonishment, continued to center around two things: First, that my mother-in-law needs to be more independent; and second, that it is up to her and her husband to hire an additional help. In fact, due to her love of independence, my mother-in-law once drove herself to a local store under heavy medications that included *Oxycodone* and *Dilaudid*, strong narcotic drugs that have the same side effects as morphine and heroin. So considering all this, what should one do? Do I leave her to die in a slow and self-destructive way since no one expects anything of me, or should I step in and make a case for Confucian *xiao* in life as well as on paper?

Obviously, my choice is clear: I choose to care. And I can honestly say that my eventual commitment to caring for my mother-in-law is, by and large, propelled by my understanding of Confucian *xiao*, a moral vision that sees human interdependency as a strength in, and not a distraction from, human flourishing. It is my take that, echoing the words of Confucius, *xiao* is the root from which humanity grows (Ames and Rosemont 1998: 1.2). Or as Confucius says, told through the beginning chapter of the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing* 孝經), *xiao* is the root of excellence and whence comes the birth of moral education (*Xiaojing* 1).<sup>2</sup> In other words, one's moral sense grows from one's genuine feelings and care for one's intimately relationships in the family. Morality for Confucius as well as for care ethicists, unlike the liberal model, simply cannot bypass one's affective ties in the familial realm. Caring for the needs of the dependent and the vulnerable in the personal realm is the beginning of one's moral thinking for care ethics. In the same way, Confucian *xiao* is the root, the beginning, of one's cultivation into the moral mutuality of *ren*. Caring for my mother-in-law, therefore, is constitutive of the substance of my sense of the self; it forms part of my life's journey to self-realization, not only in the realm of morality, but also in the realm of feminism as well.

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the *Xiaojing* are from the Rosemont and Ames 2009 translation.

## Intersectionality of Confucianism with Feminism

Some would contend that if feminism is what one seeks, conventional wisdom dictates that Confucianism is fundamentally incompatible with feminism. Some feminists bluntly neglect Confucianism's relevance to feminist theorizing, while others overtly reject it, characterizing it as antithetical to the feminist movement and agenda. Most noticeably, early French feminist, Julia Kristeva in her book *About Chinese Women* boldly entitles a chapter as "Confucius – An Eater of Women" (Kristeva 1977). In the mid-1990s when there was a resurgence of interests among Confucian scholars to join Confucianism with contemporary ethical theories, including care ethics, Confucianism was still by and large characterized as a patriarchal ideology that should be discarded as irrelevant to the modern, and supposedly superior, Western way of life. For instance, Margery Wolf, in her assessment of Tu Wei-ming's 杜維明 popular re-interpretation of Neo-Confucianism, writes:

The Confucian principles defining the propriety of hierarchical authority structures and the orderliness of the patriarchal family system seem anachronistic in this age of multinational corporations in Fujien, and young people from Shanghai acquiring Stanford MBAs. But to my surprise, books about Confucianism still sell well, and a superb Harvard scholar named Tu Wei-ming writes cogent 'reinterpretations' of Neo-Confucian thinking that are very close to being 'guides' for modern living (Wolf 1994: 253).

The disparaging undertone in Wolf's perception of Confucianism is clear. For her, Confucianism – a useless ideology of Old China – is nearly synonymous with patriarchy and misogyny. This perception of Confucianism continues in recent feminist works. Virginia Held, a leading care ethicist, briefly but boldly declares that Confucianism is incompatible with feminism due to its patriarchal nature (Held 2006: 22). And the list goes on and on. Feminists or not, many scholars view the intersection of Confucianism with feminism as impossible.

Indeed, feminist ethics by and large are unilaterally dominated by western theories. There is very little interaction, if any at all, between the West and the rest of the world. The obvious absence of non-Western philosophy in mainstream feminist scholarships attests clearly to the *de facto* practice of identifying feminism exclusively with Western philosophy. So one might say that the contemporary flow of feminist ideas has been uni-directional in the theoretical space, the West presumed to be the sole supplier of feminist ethics and the rest of the world a passive recipient. Susan Moller Okin's much talked about piece, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" is a case in point (Okin 1999). Although Okin's piece was published in 1999, the tension between multiculturalism and feminism continues to plague the liberal feminist community today; Anne Phillips' latest publication, *Multiculturalism Without Culture*, continues to wrestle with the problems set out by Okin's essay. As Phillips writes in the opening paragraph of her introduction, her first preoccupation is to address the feeling that feminism was "prone to paralysis by cultural difference," a feeling that "became especially acute after Susan Moller Okin published her essays on the tension between feminism and multiculturalism. . ." (Phillips 2007: 1). In Okin's case, the liberal West is held to



be far less patriarchal than all the rest, and women in other parts of the world would be better off if those so-called illiberal cultures were, in Okin's own words, to "become extinct" (Okin 1999: 22–23). In other words, Okin's world is neatly divided into liberal and illiberal, West and non-West, feminist and patriarchal. With the West representing the pinnacle of human achievement, what the non-Western world has left to offer is compliance and conformity to liberal values and principles. This sort of worldview mirrors its colonial predecessor seeing the world as merely composed of "Europe and the People without History," as theorized in Eric Wolf's anthropological study, where Europe dictates not just the future trajectory of the world, but also the way in which human past is understood (Wolf 1982/1997). History is then written in a language of segregation, where the culture of the inferior must be first assessed and then reconstituted in accordance with the image of the superior West. This sort of colonialist representation of the colonized continues to define the theoretical landscape of feminism, with feminist consciousness and women's liberation defined synonymously with the West, if not strictly with liberal values and principles.

But if a more inclusive form of feminism is to be viable, the colonial dichotomy between the progressive West and the oppressive non-Western world must be abandoned. Instead each culture must be granted a sense of dignity *a priori*, just each person, as formulated by Kant, is owed a sense of respect. The presumption of the dignity of culture is as basic as the presumption of the dignity of humanity; neither must prove itself to deserve *prima facie* respect. While some cultural practices can and should be changed, no culture or tradition deserves to "become extinct" or should be counted naturally inferior simply because of its morally questionable practices or misogynistic textual traditions. Just as is true of Kant, Confucius is no feminist. But the obvious textual misogyny and xenophobia in Kant's writings, most noticeably in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, have not stopped contemporary feminists from reappropriating Kant's theories, theories that originally excluded women, domestic servants, and other minorities (Schott 1997). In fact, Annette C. Baier, a Humean scholar, argues that to dismiss all misogynistic canonical texts indiscriminately could be a self-defeating move for feminists. As Baier reflecting on her re-appropriation of David Hume's epistemology writes,

To dismiss as hopelessly contaminated all the recorded thoughts of all the dead white males, to commit their works to the flames, could be a self-defeating move. At the very least we should, as Hume advocated, examine each work we are tempted to burn to see if it does contain anything that is more worth saving than patriarchal metaphysics (Baier 2000: 20).

The same sort of feminist reappropriation, seeking to extract what is useful for feminist liberatory movements in traditional thought, I propose, can be applied to Confucius as well. In other words, despite the obvious misogyny, textually and historically, Confucian ethics, just as Kantian deontology or Aristotelian virtue ethics, can also function as a great well of resources for all sort of progressive modern projects, including feminism. There is indeed no *a priori* reason that Confucianism should not intersect with feminism given that prominent Western

philosophical traditions, including Kant and others, are integrated into feminist theories that draw inspirations from them despite their original misogyny and exclusion of women. Surely feminism, which has been historically committed to reconceiving traditional cultural forms, cannot function based on the premise that non-Western traditions such as Confucianism are archaic in nature. Therefore, I take the intersectionality of Confucianism with feminism as a compelling desideratum in the effort to form an ever more inclusive feminist ethics.

## Hybridity of Confucian Care

The tension between feminism and multiculturalism, as noted earlier, is well brought to the surface by Susan Okin's much talked about piece, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women" (Okin 1999). A decade later, Ann Phillips in her *Multiculturalism Without Culture* continues to struggle over finding a balance between the multiculturalism's demand for respect for minority cultures and the so-called liberal "exit" strategy for women from an illiberal culture proposed by Okin (Phillips 2007). In other words, non-western cultures, by and large, are still seen as an impediment to women's liberation. Coupling feminism's suspicion of non-Western culture with the West's prevalent sense of moral superiority, there is indeed very little, conscious integration of non-Western intellectual traditions into feminist theorizing, as if feminist consciousness is an exclusively Western prerogative. The interaction between Confucianism and feminism, as Terry Woo observes, has been a largely one-sided affair: Feminists criticize Confucianism for victimizing Chinese women (Woo 1999: 110). However, interestingly, constructive comparative feminist studies have been quite vibrant in the Asian and Comparative philosophical community: for instance, Chenyang Li's pioneering piece on Confucian *ren* and care ethics (Li 1994), Henry Rosemont Jr.'s comparative study of Confucian and feminist relational selves (Rosemont 1996), Tu Wei-Ming's audacious Confucian response to the feminist critique (Tu 2001), the special issue on "Femininity and Feminism: Chinese and Contemporary" in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (2009: 32.2). But despite the vitality of comparative feminist studies within the circle of sinologists and comparative philosophers, the assessment of Confucianism as anti-feminist continues to persist today among many western-focused feminists. As mentioned earlier, in a rare engagement between a contemporary western feminism and Confucianism, Virginia Held briefly but decisively rejects the compatibility between care ethics (as well as feminism) with Confucianism (Held 2006: 21–22). It is indeed quite curious to note that despite numerous similarities between care ethics and Confucian ethics pointed out by sinologists and comparative philosophers, care ethicists largely ignore or reject the viability of a collaborative project between these two ethical theories. Intercultural transaction remains one of imposition from the West to the rest of the world. But if we are willing to discard unilateralism in the feminist space, it must be possible to culturally appropriate care ethics by Confucianism and *vice versa*. What then would a hybrid Confucian care look like?

## ***Xiao* and Contextualized Personhood**

Confucian care will begin with a richly contextualized notion of personhood, not as a contrasting notion to the liberal autonomous self, as if one is either completely in possession of one's core self or hopelessly enmeshed in externally imposed social roles to the detriment of one's well-being. Instead, Confucian care serves as an alternative model to conceptualize the self as an open-ended process of moral cultivation through the embodiment of inclusive social roles and mutual obligations. In other words, the uniqueness of the individual is manifested not through her ability to shed all external attachments and relations down to the bare core self, but through her ability to respond productively to the existential demands of human relations that grow ever more inclusively. It is a world-view that accords moral values to an inclusive progression of human attachments and relationships. Hence a Confucian self, just as a care ethicist would suggest, cares naturally, starting with an attentive and productive response to the needs of loved ones. Confucian *xiao*, or familial reverence, captures the essence of a Confucian care at home: the young is raised by the old with affection and the old in turn leans on the young to move forward, as the etymology of *xiao* indicates (Knapp 1995: 196; Holzman 1998: 186; Rosemont and Ames 2009: 1). A Confucian self, just as advocated by care ethicists such as Virginia Held and Eva Kittay, recognizes that vulnerability and interdependency characterize human existence (Held 2006; Kittay 1999, 2002). Hence to productively meet the needs of others in the way we would want our own needs to be met constitutes the starting point of the moral self that owes its beginning to the care of others.

But to talk about Confucian *xiao*, let alone to revive it, in this day and age, may seem to many quite antiquated and old fashioned, to put it mildly. A quick survey of popular Western perceptions of Confucian *xiao* shows disdain and incomprehension. As Bertrand Russell puts it in his assessment of the problems of China in early twentieth century, "Filial piety, and the strength of the family generally, are perhaps the weakest point in Confucian ethics, the only point where the system departs seriously from common sense" (Russell 1922: 40). Russell considers the necessary reforms that China must undertake in order to face the impending challenges of modernization at the turn of the twentieth century, and concludes that Confucian ethics emphasizing family feeling and the authority of the old "make it a barrier to necessary reconstruction. . ." (Russell 1922: 40). It is clear then not only that Confucian *xiao* has no moral content but, worse yet, it is seen as antithetical to common sense and a major impediment to China's modernization.

The perception of Confucian *xiao* as morally perverted, obsolete, and fanatical continues to find its way into more recent Western scholarship. For instance, Walter Slote, in his psychocultural analysis of the Confucian family, counts *xiao* "the principal instrument" through which Confucianism as a form of authoritarianism is established and maintained (Slote 1998: 46). Donald Holzman, in his textual survey of *xiao*, calls it a "peculiar passion," a kind of "extreme devotion" to parents that is characteristic of China, and yet is unknown or very uncommon in the West (Holzman 1998: 185, 190). He then compares Chinese attitudes towards *xiao*

with religious fanaticism in the West. As Holzman concludes from his observation of popular Chinese filial anecdotes:

I believe the sometimes exaggerated and fanatical behavior we have seen in the anecdotes above show us that we are in the presence of the kind of fanaticism we are more familiar with in the West as associated with religion and, in particular, with the actions of Christian saints who attempts to show their absolute devotion to Christ and to God by performing acts of total self-abnegation and altruism, acts that are often at least as shocking and or as repulsive as those performed by the Chinese saintly sons and daughters. . . we have just seen (Holzman 1998: 198).

Chinese attitudes towards *xiao*, in other words, are as fanatical, irrational, and extreme as those associated with a religious cult. If so, then it stands to reason that anyone with mildly good sense must depart from *xiao*, a peculiar character of the Chinese. In the same way, Ranjoo Seodu Herr in her effort to assess the compatibility between care ethics and Confucianism sees the constant demand of Confucian *xiao* placed on the adult child as a rather bizarre feature of Confucianism. As she writes,

If we consult the *Analecets* and the *Mencius*, the central question with respect to intimate relationship is how to express love and respect for one's *parents*. In contrast to the almost complete silence with respect to parents' obligations toward children, the constant demand for filial piety seems almost bizarre (Herr 2003: 481).

Just as is true for Russell and Holzman, for Herr the Confucian emphasis on *xiao* on the ethical plane seems inscrutable, if not outright morally perverted.

Historian Lisa Raphals' reflection on the nature and nurture aspect of *xiao* in a rather comprehensive anthology on filial piety, unfortunately, also characterizes Confucian *xiao* as an archaic mode of cultural expression. Through her study of Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國) and Han 漢 texts, Raphals considers *xiao* "as a specifically Chinese emotion that is gendered in very different ways for men and for women" and then offers her speculative suggestion that Confucius and his disciples valorized *xiao* "as a very culturally specific variant of love, and considered it a natural emotion. For men" (Raphals 2004: 216–217). In other words, Confucian *xiao* is construed here as a culturally gendered, yet natural, emotion for men. Raphals proceeds to compare *xiao* with medieval *accidie*, an archaic mode of religious emotion, and then asks rhetorically in the concluding sentence:

Is filiality, like *accidie*, an emotion whose time has come and gone, artifact of a strongly hierarchical Confucianism that is obsolete? Or can (and should) it be reconceived in ways yet to be determined, and is it being done, as we speak here?" (Raphals 2004: 222)

In comparing *xiao* with *accidie*, the answer to Raphals' question is obvious. Confucian *xiao*, a culturally specific emotion for men, in other words, is as obsolete as *accidie*; or worse yet, *xiao* is nothing but a remnant of a hierarchal Confucianism. In sum, in popular Western perceptions, *xiao* is seen as an archaic, fanatical cultural expression of the Chinese that is morally irrelevant to modern discourse on ethics.

Despite all this, the effort to revive Confucian *xiao* is under way and worth our while. For instance, Philip J. Ivanhoe's revised piece, "Filial Piety as a Virtue," and Roger Ames' and Henry Rosemont's philosophical translation of the *Xiaojing*

provide a starting point for the revitalization of *xiao* (Ivanhoe 2007; Rosemont and Ames 2009; see also Chap. 7 in this volume). Like Simon Keller, Ivanhoe rejects both the “gratitude” as well as the “friendship” account of filial obligation. In their stead, Ivanhoe proposes a virtue account of *xiao*, a virtue Ivanhoe considers not only central in Chinese culture, but also central in the general discourse of virtue ethics, since “as human beings, we all have to work out our way through the special relationship we have with our parents” (Ivanhoe 2007: 297). On the other hand, Ames and Rosemont in their proposed role-based ethics also argue for the importance of *xiao*. And by studying Confucian *xiao* as a viable alternative to our own ethical sensibilities, their hope is that a more inclusive, cross-cultural understanding can emerge (Rosemont and Ames 2009: xiii). As a self-proclaimed feminist, I will take a step further and make the revitalization of Confucian *xiao* not only an ethical and cultural movement, but also a feminist one as well. In other words, Confucian *xiao* is not only far from being an oppressive mode of cultural expression or inscrutable religious fanaticism, a blend of Confucian *xiao* and care ethics can provide a practical, ethical guide for all to navigate the terrains of life where each and every one of us are intractably interwoven in the fabric of interdependency. Life begins and ends in dependency, and hence any ethics that overlooks or minimizes the centrality of human interdependency that makes life possible in the first place will distort the existential facts of experience and therefore be inept in charting the actual contours of life’s challenges. Care ethics, unlike dominant Kantian liberalism, takes the caring labor in the context of mother-child relationship seriously and thereby brings forth the ethical value of caring for and meeting the needs of the dependent. Much like care ethics, Confucian *xiao* also recognizes the importance of caring for the dependent, but it takes caring a step further and extends that caring labor intergenerationally. *Xiao* is an intergenerational labor of love, or to borrow from care ethicist Eva Kittay, it is love’s labor (Kittay 1999, 2002). In conceiving caring labor intergenerationally, Confucian *xiao* expands the theoretical horizon of care ethics from a uni-directional personal care to a bi-directional social and political care. In return, feminist care ethics that brings a sharp focus on the gender inequities of the caring labor will thereby bring much needed modifications to Confucianism to meet the feminist demands of gender equity. In short, a proposed hybridized Confucian *xiao* is not only cultural and ethical, but also feminist as well.

In contrast to the Western ethical traditions that often neglect and marginalize the issue of family care viewed as devoid of any ethical values in the public realm, caring for one’s family has a central importance in the Chinese moral sense. As various historical studies have shown, the centrality of *xiao* (caring for one’s family) in the Chinese moral sensibility predates the rise of Confucianism (Knapp 1995; Holzman 1998). Indeed, *xiao* is a shared ethos in various textual traditions such as Ames and Hall (2003) *Daodejing* 道德經, Watson (1968) *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and Johnston (2010) *Mozi* 墨子, not just Confucianism (Chan and Tan 2004). But the ethical importance of *xiao* in Confucianism is also indisputable. As is said in the *Analects*, *xiao* and *ti* 弟 (deference) constitute the root of *ren*, the ultimate state of virtuous living (1.2). Or as found in the *Shuoyuan* 說苑 (*Garden of Sayings*), Confucius is quoted as saying,

“Among human practices, none is greater than *xiao* 孝” (Chan and Tan 2004: 1). This in turn is echoed in the familiar Chinese proverb, “Of the hundred excellent things, *xiao* 孝 comes first”. *Xiao*, in a word, is not only the starting point of Confucian *ren*, the ultimate realization of virtuous humanity, but more broadly constitutes a uniquely Chinese moral sense, or what Holzman calls a “peculiar passion” of the Chinese (Holzman 1998: 185).

Although the specific content of *xiao* varies throughout history, the general form of *xiao* as a concerted devotion to the welfare of one’s family, nevertheless, remains constant (Chan and Tan 2004: 1; Knapp 1995: 197). And one’s devotion to *xiao* is premised based on the understanding that one owes one’s existence to the care of one’s parents and those who came before (Shun 2003: 793). As is clear in the discussion of the practice of the 3-year mourning ritual in the *Analecets*, one’s genuine grief for one’s departed parents is but a sedimentary result of the parental affection and care that one has received when one was young (17.21). In other words, Confucius uses the vulnerability of the child in need of care, not the autonomous adult male in commerce or in politics, as the starting point of moral thinking. In a similar vein, care ethicists such as Virginia Held and Eva Kittay argue for the ontological primacy of caring relations in human existence where human children’s survival must presuppose the activity of care being performed (Held 2006; Kittay 1999, 2002). In Confucian moral sensibility, just as in care ethics, one’s personhood is first and foremost understood in the context of reciprocal care and human interdependency. In contrast to the liberal, Kantian vision of an autonomous self, unencumbered by affective phenomenal attachment seen as external to the noumenal self, utterly free and self-determined, the Confucian self takes the affective human attachment as a constitutive component of morality. And *xiao* as the root of *ren*, or moral perfection, starts with a genuine devotion to the welfare of one’s family.

To cultivate familial attachment, attachment to which one owes one’s existential self, is for the Confucians as basic as holding on to one’s moral self. Echoing Confucius in seeing *xiao* as the root of one’s moral character, Mengzi 孟子 writes, “There are many duties one should discharge, but the fulfillment of one’s duty towards one’s parents is the most basic. There are many things one should watch over but watching over one’s character is the most basic” (*Mengzi* 4A19).<sup>3</sup> Morality is nothing but holding onto one’s character and the most basic duty that one carries out in accordance with one’s moral character is filial duty. The self that is existentially constituted by human relationships starting with the familial ones, however, is not a hollow self that is nothing but a puppet strung together by social roles. Instead, the goodness of one’s moral self is always the center onto which one anchors one’s social roles. *Xiao* is practiced for the sake of cultivating the goodness of a moral self, but at the same time, one’s moral self cannot simply bypass the realm of the affective and personal for the realm of the disinterested and the universal. Morality is located in everyday life, and how to productively respond to the affective ties to which one’s existential self is invariably attached is the beginning of Confucian moral thinking. In short, *xiao* is a necessary and

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the *Mengzi* are from the Lau 1970 translation.

constitutive part of one's moral cultivation, but its parameter is always defined by the integrity of the moral self, a sense of moral goodness.

Unlike the moral theory of Kant where rational contemplation reigns supreme, *xiao* is not an absolute virtue that overrides all for its own sake, but neither is *xiao* a mere instrumental means to another noble end. *Xiao* functions as the root of one's moral character whose maturity is demonstrated through the ability to incorporate various virtues ever more inclusively, encompassing both private and public, familial and non-familial. So one's journey to moral self-cultivation must always begin with *xiao*, but it does not end there at the expense of other virtues. For one thing, *xiao* is not synonymous with absolute obedience to parental authority. Instead, *xiao* involves genuine love and respect for one's family. To merely be able to provide material comfort in accordance with social convention is not yet *xiao*; *xiao* is all about one's internal sense of deference and care. As Confucius observes in the *Analects*, "Those today who are filial are considered so because they are able to provide for their parents. But even dogs and horses are given that much care. If you do not respect your parents, what is the difference?" (2.7). Laboring for one's parents fulfills only the form of the *xiao* dictated by social convention, but the meaning of *xiao* hinges on one's genuine care and respect. Confucius responds to his student Zixia's 子夏 inquiry regarding *xiao*, emphasizing this: "It all lies in showing the proper countenance. As for the young contributing their energies when there is work to be done, and deferring to their elders when there is wine and food to be had – how can merely doing this be considered being filial?" (2.8). At the same time, when the parents go astray, Confucians recognizes that remonstrance is in order. For instance, in the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, the *Classic of Filial Piety (Xiaojing 孝經)*, and the *Xunzi 荀子*, to remonstrate against parents' morally questionable conduct is seen as a necessary part of the practice of *xiao* (*Analects* 4.18; *Mengzi* 6B3; *Xiaojing* 15; Knoblock 1999: 29.1–29.2).

Moreover, to be complicit in or to tolerate parents' unreasonable behavior is seen as antithetical to *xiao*. As recorded in the *Zhouzhuàn*, a fourth century B.C.E. text that records the story of Duke Zhuang of Zheng 鄭莊公 (dated 722 B.C.E.), Duke Zhuang was faulted for being unfilial for his constant pampering of his mother and younger brother who later on became bold and incited a rebellion against the Duke. The unfortunate event of exiling the mother, according to all the commentators, is first caused by Duke Zhuang's tolerance of the mother's unreasonable behavior and hence he is at fault for being unfilial (Holzman 1998: 186–88). When parents' malevolent intent is known, one doesn't simply comply at the expense of one's well-being. As recorded in the *Family Sayings of Confucius (Kongzi jiayu 孔子家語)*, disciple Zengzi 曾子 was scolded by Confucius for taking a severe beating from his violent father without protest (*Kongzi jiayu* 4.15; Wang 1996). The reasonable response in the face of a parent's serious mischievous behavior, according to both Confucius and *Mengzi*, is to flee from abuse and to make one's concerns known (*Mengzi* 6B3; *Kongzi jiayu* 4.15). In other words, in the face of violence and abuse that demands corrective action, *xiao* would not require complicit tolerance. The end of practicing *xiao* is to bring forth the moral goodness in of a parent–child relationship in which the parents are affectionate and the children are filial. King Shun 舜, the ultimate personification of *xiao* emphasized in the *Mengzi*,

is able through his tireless filial persuasion to lead his wicked father to see the light of moral goodness that the father should embody in the position of a father. *Xiao* thereby not only brings forth the moral goodness in the father, but also helps shape the moral character of the son (*Mengzi* 4A28 and 5A4). In short, *xiao*, the embodiment of a genuine care for the welfare of one's family in order to bring forth goodness within, is morally basic.

One's journey into the moral maturity of *ren*, perfect humanity, thus begins with *xiao*, which not only substantiates the affective tie between parent and child, but also provides a moral rectitude in the familial relationship. The Confucian self is a moral self that expands outward through strengthening and rectifying those existential, affective ties, starting with the familial ones. Generally speaking, without anchoring one's self in one's existential, affective ties is to be without a sense of the self, since one's attachment is what gives substance, or what gives "weight" so to speak, to the self. The Kantian noumenal self that only thinks from the vantage point of the rational and the universal unattached to this phenomenal world of relations and affections is unrecognizable to any of us who are someone's mother, daughter, spouse, friend or neighbor. Those affective ties are the fabric of our existential being and the anchor of life itself. To discount those existential attachments is to flee into the realm of Kantian abstraction where the self is with neither sense nor substance. As Bernard Williams puts it in his "wife rescuing" scenario in which a rescuer deliberates impartially whether or not to save his wife over a stranger, this sort of moral deliberation is really "one thought too many" (Williams 1981: 18). In the same way, to deliberate whether one has a filial obligation toward one's parents is also one thought too many. One's affective attachment to another person is what gives life substance and conviction in the first place. Just like one's attachment to one's spouse, one's attachment to one's parents is one of the deepest attachments that one is able to experience. Perfect detachment and neutrality demanded by the Kantian impartial moral law hence can only have an imperfect hold on oneself. As Williams goes on to argue, one's affective attachments to others might run the risk of offending against impartial moral laws, "yet unless such things exist, there will not be enough substance or conviction in a man's life to compel his allegiance to life itself." Furthermore, "[l]ife has to have substance. . . ; but if it has substance, then it cannot grant supreme importance to the impartial system, and that system's hold on it will be, at the limit, insecure" (Williams 1981: 18).

Just as Kant observes in the realm of knowledge that thoughts without content are empty and intuitions without concepts are blind, one might say that affective attachments are what gives life its content and without which life is also empty as well. And when life is devoid of affective attachments, it also loses its hold on one's commitment to life itself. Rae Langton's piece on the correspondences between Kant and Maria von Herbert provides a rare glance at the sort of challenges possible to Kant's detached moral will on the existential level, demonstrating the inadequacy of impartial moral law's hold on one's self when one's affective ties are in disarray (Langton 2000). Maria von Herbert is a sister of Baron Franz Paul von Herbert and a keen Kantian student seeking Kant's moral guidance on the



permissibility of suicide during a time of personal desolation. In Kant's initial response, he advises Herbert to follow the universal moral law of truth telling without taking into account the consequential impact on her friendship with her male suitor, from whom she has concealed a previous, intimate relationship. Once the truth was discovered, the male suitor lost interest in Herbert and she was left living in a state devoid of passion and contemplating suicide. Kant insists that the loss of affective ties should not impede one's ability to act morally, since the moral will demands a complete detachment from inclinations. To Kant, it is not only that one's moral will must be made in the absence of corresponding inclinations, such as sympathy, but more so that one must follow the moral law with a sense of "moral apathy" which Kant describes as a state of divine bliss, "a state of complete independence from inclinations and desires" (Langton 2000: 206).

But as a keen student of Kant, Herbert in fact finds following the moral law too easy in a life without passions, since moral imperatives are obeyed by default. Without the presence of passions, Herbert sees no point in living. She then proceeds to ask what sort of life Kant leads: "I would like to know what kind of life your philosophy has led you to – whether it never seemed to you to be worth the bother to marry, or to give your whole heart to anyone, or to reproduce your likeness" (Langton 2000: 204). Kant's indifference to the pursuit of familial, affective ties is a puzzle to Herbert who now finds life without passions empty of content and her commitment to life itself consequently slipping. Kant, after classifying Herbert's condition as feminine hysteria over romantic love, didn't respond to the query further, and Herbert then committed suicide. It is clear that to Kant affective ties are not only morally irrelevant, but an impediment to morality. Yet without affective ties to anchor one's sense of the self, one also loses conviction in life itself as well. Unlike Kant, Confucians understand the importance of human relations, and to substantiate familial, affective ties with moral rectitude is what makes life worth living in the first instance.

### ***Ren and Datong* 大同**

*Xiao* is the beginning of morality, but Confucian ethics does not stop at the door of one's household. Just as is true of care ethics, Confucian ethics also aims at providing a normative ethics beyond the personal. A hybrid Confucian care will extend the moral demands of familial care to wider social relations. Confucian moral cultivation, although it begins at home, must extend outward to encompass both familial and non-familial social relations as indicated in the Confucian five core social relations: parent-child (familial), ruler-subject (political), husband-wife (spousal), older-younger (communal), friends (social). For the self is conceived not as socially detached and free to discard external relationships; instead the self is conceived as a moral self that grows ever more inclusively in the web of relationships both familial and non-familial. Unlike its transcendental Kantian counterpart where the self is defined solely and exclusively by its rationality in

the noumenal world, the Confucian self is decisively an existential one whose moral perfection is achieved only through one's continuously productive responses to the needs of one's affective ties in this human-all-too-human phenomenal world.

The interrelationality of the Confucian self is clearly demonstrated by its interchangeability with the perfect virtue of *ren*. As stated in the *Mengzi* and the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸), “*ren* 仁 means person” and “to realize oneself is *ren* 仁” (*Mengzi* 7B16; *Zhongyong* 20, 25).<sup>4</sup> *Ren*, the most prominent Confucian concept, etymologically is composed of the character person (*ren*\*人) and numerical two (*er* 二), denoting the ethical effort in sustaining and expanding complex human relations in achieving the perfect virtue of *ren* (Hall and Ames 1987: 114; Tu 1985: 84). To be *ren*, at the most basic level, is to have compassionate feelings toward others. Confucius responds to the query on the meaning of *ren* in the *Analects* by saying simply, “Love others” (12.22). In the same way, *Mengzi* says, “The person of *ren* loves others” (*Mengzi* 4B28). Hence, generally speaking, cultivating affective ties constitutes the practice of *ren*, and the virtue of *xiao* that displays one's genuine care for one's familial ties is the starting point of one's moral cultivation.

However, *xiao* is not the end point of *ren*. *Ren* as an inclusive virtue encompasses all particular virtues that govern human relations such as *qin* 親 (affection) in the parent-child relation, *xin* 信 (trustworthiness) in friendship, *yi* 義 (righteousness) in ruler-subject relations and *bie* 別 (division of labor) in spousal relations, etc. Unlike the Kantian supreme moral law that can only be deliberated by a rational will unattached to the phenomenal world of relations and affections, the Confucian supreme virtue of *ren* can only be realized through the expansion of the web of human relations in which one is intractably embedded. A self structured by the Kantian liberal principles of personal autonomy and de-subjectivized rationality is a self that is unattached to anyone, a self that depends on no one and is not morally obliged to reciprocate either. By contrast, a Confucian self not only recognizes the dependency and vulnerability of human existence, but also is morally obliged to extend its sphere of concerns, beginning with the personal but expanding to the social, the political, and the global. In other words, the personal must be granted a moral claim over oneself by virtue of the fact that one's self is constituted by that very attachment.

In a contextualized personhood, the substance of one's self is necessarily and essentially dependent on the extent of the existential relationships that one is able to sustain qualitatively and quantitatively with moral rectitude. Taking care of others, especially those socially dependent and vulnerable ones, is then seen as a strength, not a distraction from human flourishing. The well-being of others is seen as intrinsically intertwined with one's own, and hence the journey to one's moral cultivation must be made intersubjectively. As said in the *Analects*, “*Ren* 仁 persons in seeking to establish themselves establish others, in seeking to promote

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<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from the *Zhongyong* are from the Ames and Hall 2001 translation.

themselves promote others” (6.30; with a minor modification). In other words, it is only through one’s caring labor intersubjectively one is able to realize moral maturity within.

Confucian ethics is not a familial ethics that is only applicable to intimate, familial relationships; neither is care ethics. A care ethics infused with Confucianism seeks comprehensive care for all by, on the one hand, expanding one’s sphere of concern motivated by one’s recognition of the interdependency and vulnerability of human existence, and, on the other, expanding the social capacity to care for all. This expanded care is clearly delineated in the celebrated Confucian ideal society of *Datong* 大同 (Great Community) where social harmony is measured by its capacity to care for the chronically dependent and vulnerable. As it says in the classical text of the *Record of Rituals* (*Liji* 禮記):

When the great *Dao* prevailed, the world belonged to the general public. They chose the worthy and capable, were trustworthy in what they said, and cultivated harmony. Therefore, people did not love only their own parents and did not treat only their own, rear their own children. Thus the aged could live out their lives, the strong have their function, the young have their growth, and the widowed, the lonely, the orphans, the disabled and the sick all find their care. Men have their roles and women have their homes. They hated casting away goods, but not necessarily to keep them for themselves. They hated leaving their strength unemployed, but not necessarily to employ it for themselves. Therefore, scheming had no outlet, and theft, rebellion, and robbery did not arise, so that the outer doors were left unlocked. This is called the Great Community 大同 (Lai Tao 2000: 226–227, with minor modifications; Legge 1885: 364–366).

Or as said again and again in the *Mengzi*, the greatness of a true king is measured by his compassionate care to all at home and abroad, and especially to the socially vulnerable, such as the old, the young, the widowed, and the orphan (*Mengzi* 1A7, 1B5, 1B12, 3A3, 4A13, 6B7, 7A22). In fact, the vulnerability of a newborn infant is taken as the measuring stick in understanding the extent of one’s care for others in the realm of the personal as well as in political governance. As told through the *Mengzi*, the Confucians praised the ancient rulers for acting “as if they were tending a new-born babe” (3A5) and claimed that “a great man is one who retains the heart of a newborn babe” (4B12). Citing the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經), the *Great Learning* (*Daxue* 大學) also states that one governs the state as if one is attending to the newborn babe (*Daxue* 1994: chap. 9). In other words, for the Confucians, the personal and the political are essentially governed by the same principle of attentive care for the socially dependent and vulnerable.

Confucian expanded care resonates well with care ethicist Eva Kittay’s triadic concept of “*doulia*” where society must assume commitment to preserve the well being of the dependent relation between the caregiver and the dependent (Kittay 1999, 2002). “*Doulia*,” derived from Greek meaning slave or servant, is redirected by Kittay to denote “a caregiver who cares for those who care for others” (Kittay 1999: 107). The principle of *doulia* recognizes the importance of the preservation of a caring relationship between the cared-for and the care-giver, and hence it demands that the public provides a condition in which the care-giver can give and thrive at the same time (Kittay 1999: 107). In other words, sustaining the caring

relationship must be a public responsibility. The cared-for, care-giver, and a social commitment to care for the care-giver form the triadic concept of *doulia*. For both care ethics and Confucianism, maintaining caring relations is seen as a moral good for the interdependent self as well as society at large, and hence the caring labor performed at home must be supported by society, so that the care-giver and the cared-for can both thrive. The greatness of society is, in turn, measured by the sort of commitment it makes to sustain that caring network to care for the socially vulnerable at home and abroad.

In order to facilitate the broadening of the scope of one's concerns, all human relationships in Confucian care are viewed as only different in degree, but not in kind. As is evident in all five Confucian social relations, all relationships are characterized by reciprocity and mutuality. Confucian care views human relations as a continuous spectrum with strangers on the one end and intimate loved ones on the other. The difference between strangers and family is only one of degree, since strangers have a potential to be made intimate through marriage or friendship, for instance. Our colloquial expression that refers to our best friends as our family is really indicative of the permissibility of the boundary between familial and non-familial relationships as well as the centrality of family in our conception of the most endearing and intimate attachment that one can possibly experience existentially.

The centrality of family, as Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames point out, permeates all areas of Chinese history including the sociopolitical, economic, metaphysical, moral, and religious (Rosemont and Ames 2009: xi). Family, for a Confucian self, is an inclusive metaphor that exerts moral pull to incorporate distant others into the intimate circle of mutual trust and care either by direct interaction or by moral extension through sympathy. Confucian ethics emphasizes the moral nature of the human heart in its encounter with or in its anticipation of human suffering as seen in the Mengzi's example of seeing a child about to fall into a well (*Mengzi* 2A6, 3A5). In the same way, care ethics also emphasizes the imperative to care extending from the understanding that infants' survival depends on our willingness to respond to their needs. As Held puts it, we all start out as "human children" (Held 2006: 66), or as Kittay writes, "we are all some mother's child" (Kittay 1999: 19). In other words, Confucian care sees caring for others as a spontaneous act of the moral heart that internalizes the needs of dependent and vulnerable others and hence can respond to it with utmost sincerity. There are various degrees of intimacy in one's existential relationships ranging from strangers, friends, to intimate loved ones, but the ultimate moral aim for Confucian care is to incorporate others into one's inclusive metaphor of family where *xiao* in the non-voluntary familial relationship is the moral origin for all voluntary relationships. Once again, as said both in the *Analects* and the *Xiaojing*, Confucius takes *xiao* as the root of all moral excellences and urges his disciples not only to be filial at home, deferential in the community, but also to be trustworthy in one's words and "love the multitude broadly" (1.1, 1.6; *Xiaojing* 1). Confucian care is extensive in its scope and at the same time is solidly grounded in the intimate relationships at home.

Extending the love and respect that one has for one's family to the rest, for the Confucians, is not just a good moral practice in one's private life but also is the key to good governance. Thus the *Mengzi* states, "Treat the aged of your own family in a manner befitting their venerable age and extend this treatment to the aged of other families; treat your own young in manner befitting their tender age and extend this to the young of other families, and you can roll the Empire on your palm" (*Mengzi* 1A7). And, "Loving one's parents is *ren*, respecting one's elders is *yi*. What is left to be done is simply the extension of these to the whole Empire" (*Mengzi* 7A15, with minor modifications). In other words, the moral challenges for the Confucians are to find ways to extend one's affection and care for one's family to others, so as to seamlessly expand the scope of one's moral concerns in the web of one's existential relationships. The point is that strangers are not completely outside the purview of one's moral compass for Confucian care. Instead, precisely because strangers are defined by a lack of intimate relationship with oneself, a Confucian self that grows in the web of relationships seeks to extend intimacy to strangers as well, so as to transition strangers to acquaintance, to friends, and ultimately to family.

## Gender Rectification and Culture of Care

In its intersection with feminism, it is obvious that Confucianism's gender based roles will have to change, since feminism as a whole aims at abolishing all forms of gender-based oppression. The spousal relationship, as one of the five cardinal social relations, governed by the virtue of *bie*, the division of labor, will have to give way to a genuine sense of cooperation based on mutually beneficial task sharing that enhances both partners' long-term capacities instead of diminishing them. Feminism brings gender into a sharp focus in any intercultural dialogue, and the way women are fashioned into particular genderized beings often significantly limits their practical abilities to experience the world, to share in cultural capital, and to fully thrive and flourish beyond the dictates of gender roles. Care ethics in particular sheds light on the importance of caring labor, but also the disproportionate amount of burden that women shoulder in caring for others at home as well as in the work place. Confucian ethics, if it is to be relevant to women, will have to come to terms with that. As mentioned earlier, Kittay's triadic concept of *doulia* is helpful here to alleviate the burden placed on women by making caring for the caregiver a societal commitment. The Confucian's contribution of *xiao* further normalizes the existential facts of interdependency and vulnerability in human lives, acknowledging that the young are cared for by the old, who in turn, leans on the young to move forward. But none of these caring tasks should be gender specific; that is to say, women should not be the only ones who care for the young, the old, the widowed, the lonely, the orphans, the disabled, and the sick, while men are free to choose whether to care or not to care. There has to be a better solution, and both Confucian ethics and care ethics must go beyond the emphasis on the importance of caring for others by dealing directly with the inequity between men and women in performing actual caring labor.

To urge women to abandon their caring tasks is not the solution. As Kittay, who has a disabled child, writes passionately:

Someone must care for dependents. If men do not take up the role, women will not simply abandon it. Feminists may persuade women that liberation and equality demands refusing nonreciprocated affective labor directed at fully functioning adults. . . . But no feminist movement would, could, or should urge women to neglect the needs of their dependent children, or those of their disabled, ill, or ailing family members and friends (Kittay 2002: 238).

No ethical theory, let it be feminist or otherwise, should advocate voluntary abandonment of meeting the caring needs of the vulnerable simply because equally capable others will not take up the task of caring labor. Like care ethics, Confucian *xiao* is a life-long commitment that one has toward one's family, both living and dead. The different perception on the inevitable dependency that comes with old age, according to early twentieth century Chinese writer LIN Yutang 林語堂, is what separates the East from the West; the old in the West, due to their love of independence and their shame of being dependent on others, prefer living alone (Lin 1989: 679). But there is no greater joy than being cared for by one's own children when one is infirm. To love and care for one's parents, for Confucians, is a mark of cultural maturity. As the saying goes, "A natural man loves his children, but a cultured man loves his parents" (Lin 1989: 677). And in China one lives for nothing else but growing old gracefully and being loved and cared for by one's family (Lin 1989: 679). Confucian *xiao* is an intergenerational labor of love, or as Kittay reflects on her care for her chronically dependent daughter, it is love's labor (Kittay 1999, 2002). And no one should walk away from that. Life is based on mutual help starting at home. Men no less than women should cultivate that sense of care for the young, the old, the widowed, the lonely, the orphans, the disabled, and the sick. But here lies the difficulty: As Kittay writes, "It seems to me that the difficulty is, first, to cultivate in men a sense of care as deep and extensive as we find today in women. . . , and second, to join the sense of care with the sense of justice" (Kittay 2002: 245).

Leaving aside the question of whether Kittay genderizes care and justice, the inequity between men and women in performing actual caring labor is a practical problem. On what ground, can men be mandated to be caring, and in a sense be "coerced" into performing caring labor? Just as in most traditions, Confucian tradition also relies on women to perform most caring labor, as is delineated in the classical text of the *Liji* (*Record of Ritual*) regarding the two different sets of educational curricula, where boys are to receive extensive literary education while girls are instructed on domestic skills and household management (Legge 1885: 471–479). Or as said in the *Mengzi*, the caring labor to keep the aged warmly clothed and fed on a daily basis falls on women (*Mengzi* 7A22). This sort of gender-based division of labor is the beginning of the inequity of caring labor. And nothing is more pronounced than the caring labor performed by mothers and wives. As stated earlier, gender-based division of labor in the spousal relationship will have to give way to a genuine sense of cooperation that mutually benefits both partners in enhancing their long-term capacities instead of diminishing them. In my estimation,

spousal relationship will have to give way to peer friendship in order to address the problem of inequity in caring labor. Such a substitute is not altogether unjustified. If one takes away biological reproduction as the sole basis for marriage, then what is left is companionship between two mature adults in search of a shared sense of the good life. Peer friendships and spousal relationships converge even more in modern times, since marriage is nothing but two strangers coming together to form voluntary peer friendship and then through mutual commitment make a cohesive family. Gender-based division of labor will have no role to play in mutual peer friendship, since a shared sense of the good life is its only *raison d'être*.

As we do what is reasonable for the sake of the well being of our friends, we do what is reasonable for the sake of the well being of the family unit. For some feminists such as Susan Okin, a complete “equal split” in every task might be the vision of gender equality (Okin 1989). But others, such as Richard Arneson, have criticized the inefficiency of this “equal split” scenario and some sympathetic theorists, such as Anne Phillips, see mandating such an equal split impractical (Arneson 1997; Phillips 2007). At one point or another, we all have done more than our fair share for our friends; friendship is not about a formally equal take-and-give contractual transaction. Rather, it is a commitment to each other’s well being. Such friendship based on virtue obviously is different from the sort of friendship built based on utility or pleasure, as shown in various kinds of friendship delineated in the *Analects*: “One stands to be improved by friends who are true, who make good on their word, and who are broadly informed; one stands to be injured by friends who are ingratiating, who feign compliance, and who are glib talkers” (16.4). From the standpoint of a Confucian self, friends demand goodness from each other in addition to mutual affection and trust. As said in the *Analects* in regards to the moral cultivation of the *junzi* 君子 (exemplary person), “Take doing your utmost and making good on your word (*xin* 信) as your mainstay. Do not have as a friend anyone who is not as good as you are. And where you have erred, do not hesitate to mend your ways” (1.8). Friends are made for the sake of improving one’s moral self, and in taking care of one’s friends or one’s family, one doesn’t lose sight of what is good. A relationship that demands self-abnegation that significantly diminishes one’s capacity to experience the world, to share in cultural capital, and to thrive and to flourish falls below the minimal threshold of what is reasonable.

One cannot walk away from caring for the vulnerable, but one can definitely demand help from other equally capable adults to contribute to the growth of a productive web of human relationships. The Confucian concept of ritual and shame can definitely play an effective role in “coercing” free riders to do their reasonable share. And if all things fail, the less effective means of laws and social policies can then serve as the last corrective measure for a short-term gain. As Confucius says in regards to effective governance, “Lead the people with administrative injunction (*zheng* 政) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing* 刑), and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de* 德) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves” (2.3). In other words, Kittay’s *doulia* that mandates social policies to care for the caregiver is only

part of the solution; to form a culture of care, in which to care for dependent others and to be cared for as the circumstances demand is no longer seen as contrary to one's wholesome self, should be the main task at hand. To cultivate a sense of Confucian *xiao* as an intergenerational dependency and care at home should then be the starting point, as Confucius avers in stating that *xiao* is the foundation of all moral education (1.2; *Xiaojing* 1). By embodying Confucian *xiao* inter-generationally, one is thus fashioned into a caring being with a proper sense of shame that instills self-corrections according to what is appropriate and reasonable in response to the needs of the vulnerable starting with one's loved ones.

## Conclusion

In the end, caring for my mother-in-law is as much as about meeting her needs as it is about meeting my moral self, face to face. As Kittay so powerfully observes, “. . .no feminist movement would, could, or should urge women to neglect the needs of their dependent children, or those of their disabled, ill, or ailing family members and friends” (Kittay 2002: 238). I too will not walk away, not even when nothing is expected of me in a society that is dominated by the liberal emphases on individual autonomy and detachment. Learning from Confucian *xiao*, I understand that intergenerational dependency is an existential given. The asymmetry of dependency between my mother-in-law and me is not the sole determinant of the extent of my caring labor, since I too stand in asymmetry with my own now already departed parents for whom I can no longer care to reciprocate all the goods that have been bestowed on me. In a real sense, I can only pay it forward. And in a broader sense, we all are recipients of all the social goods that we have enjoyed thus far. The quintessential image of Confucian *xiao* as the old leans on the young to move forward crystallizes the centrality of intergenerational dependency in the making of one's moral self that perpetually stands in asymmetry with those who cares for oneself and whom one cares for. Paying it forward intergenerationally, as dictated by Confucian *xiao*, seems not only fair and reasonable, but also moral as well. And through my caring labor, I see my own feminist self in the making.

## Postscript

After the initial draft of this paper was completed, my mother-in-law passed away. Even with all the difficulties in caring for her to the end of her life, I am grateful for all the experiences that my mother-in-law had afforded me. In my caring for her, my mother-in-law taught me that caring for one's family is not an inconvenience to achieving one's goals in life; quite the opposite, only through caring for others, does life have a meaning at all. I can only hope that I have shown my own daughter that caring for one's family is what we are. For what is family, if we cannot count on



each other for good times and bad times? The great lesson about life is the greatest lesson that I have learned from my mother-in-law and with that I am forever grateful for having the privilege of being her daughter-in-law. I would like to dedicate this paper to my mother-in-law, Judith E. Rosen (1940–2012), through whom I meet my feminist self within.

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# Chapter 16

## Balancing Conservatism and Innovation: The Pragmatic *Analects*

Sor-hoon Tan

At the age of 14, I picked up a copy of the *Analects* for the first time.<sup>1</sup> A quick browse revealed content that reminded me so much of my mother's lectures about proper behavior that I promptly put it aside as a tract of old fashioned thinking and conservative manners. Through my early adulthood, my feelings about Chinese culture were close enough to the May Fourth intellectuals' sensibilities that I did not question interpretations of the *Analects*, and more generally Confucianism, as teaching a kind of conservatism incompatible with modern life. However, subsequent study has convinced me that such interpretations are one-sided and often motivated by ideologies that misunderstood or misappropriated Confucius' thinking. This is not to deny that there are elements of conservatism in Confucius' teachings in the *Analects*, and even more in the traditions that grew around the text, but the meaning of that "conservatism" (perhaps "conservatisms") is neither straightforward nor simple, nor is it always opposed to innovation in all forms. This chapter will explore the tension between the conservative and the innovative tendencies in the text.

### Introducing an Approach to Reading the *Analects*

Some might object that approaching the *Analects* from the perspective of conservatism versus innovation is anachronistic, since conservatism is a modern political doctrine or philosophy with its roots in Edmund Burke's 1790 work,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, passages from the *Analects* quoted in this chapter are from the translation of Ames and Rosemont 1998.

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*Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Burke 2004), although some have traced it further back to Aristotle (Quinton 1993: 248), and the contemporary preoccupation with the tension between conservatism and innovation had no place in Confucius' day. And so it is; but I submit that anachronism need not be objectionable as long as a reader does not completely reduce the text to her limited present horizon and become deaf and blind to its "otherness," but instead interacts with the text in ways that allow that otherness to manifest itself, to make itself heard, to raise questions and cast new light that could not have arisen in a closed horizon defined only by contemporary concerns. This does require the present day reader to discover and understand the historical and other contexts in which the text was formed, transmitted, and read through the ages and in different situations. However, it does not require complete exclusion of contemporary concerns or conceptual tools. Some anachronism is unavoidable if one is not reading the *Analects* merely as a relic, an ancient curiosity that belongs only to the museum, with nothing to say to contemporary problems.<sup>2</sup>

Confucius himself was guilty of anachronistic readings of ancient texts in the context of the problems of his day. Much as Confucius loved the ancients, it was not for their sake that he recommended that his students read the texts transmitted from the past; he did so out of a confidence in the perennial value of what they could learn from those texts. Confucius' approach to the *Book of Odes* (*Shijing* 詩經) shows clearly that his concerns in "cherishing the ancients" were not scholastic but pragmatic (7.1). He urged his students to study the *Odes* not just to preserve texts transmitted from the past or to understand them only in their own terms (of the past), but also for their continued relevance to practices of their time.

Reciting the [*Odes*] can arouse your sensibilities, strengthen your powers of observation, enhance your ability to get on with others, and sharpen your critical skills. Close at hand it enables you to serve your father, and away at court it enables you to serve your lord. It instills in you a broad vocabulary for making distinctions in the world around you (17.9).

Confucius instructed his son that, "If you do not study the [*Odes*], you will be at a loss as to what to say" (16.13). In his opinion, striving to become a person without mastering the "*Zhounan*" and "*Shaonan*" sections of this text "is like trying to take your stand with your face to the wall" (17.10). He valued the study of ancient texts because they provided a language that was useful for understanding the world the readers lived in, for articulating contemporary concerns, and other skills that helped readers live a better life in the contemporary world. He praised Zixia 子夏 and Zigong 子貢 for their readings of the *Odes* in the contexts of their own experience and concerns they shared with their contemporaries and for their ability to

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<sup>2</sup> A related objection is whether the approach unjustifiably imposes a "Western" conceptual framework onto the text. I believe this can be addressed in a similar way by being sensitive to the cultural differences between the contexts in which "conservatism" first arose and the contexts in which it has been employed in Chinese intellectual discourses, just as readers need to be sensitive to the differences between the contexts in which Confucius and his students live and learn, the contexts in which various audiences have understood the *Analects* in different times, and the contexts of today's readers of the text.

apply their understandings of texts in new situations “yet to come” (3.8; 1.15). The exploration that follows will show that balancing the conservative and the innovative is central to the pragmatic project of the *Analects*, which is not confined to Confucius and his students, or to pre-Qin China.

Conservatism is very much a contemporary issue for today’s Chinese, and Confucianism is often involved in the debates among Chinese conservative thinkers, and between them and their opponents. There is renewed academic interest in the works of those who defended Confucianism, and more generally Chinese traditions, against the iconoclastic attacks of the New Culture movement during the Republican era, described as cultural conservatives, after half a century of neglect or vilification (Furth 1976; Fung 2010). The “importation” of what was broadly termed neo-conservatism, varied modern interpretations of Confucianism accompanied by a commitment to preserve or revive the Confucian tradition, played a key role in the revitalization of the Confucian discourse in mainland China during the 1980s (Lin et al. 1995: 735). Later the term neo-conservatism is also used differently to describe a loose set of arguments calling for political stability, central authority, and tight social control, favoring the role of ideology and nationalism, which has emerged as one of the prominent post-Tiananmen Chinese intellectual currents (Chen 1997: 593; Fung 2010: 264–266). It shares with earlier Chinese conservatism a high respect for tradition and overlaps with a broader revival of interest in Confucianism, which some neo-conservatives believe can be the basis for rebuilding national identity and renewing political legitimacy (Xiao 1994: 24).

Against this background, many scholars have commented that the revival of interest in Confucianism in mainland China of the last few decades have been supported by the Chinese Communist Party in the hope of finding a replacement for a fast becoming defunct Marxist ideology (De Bary 1995: 179; Wang 1998: 22; Lin and Galikowski 1999: 56; He and Guo 2000: 28–30).<sup>3</sup> The Communist state’s intentions and attitudes towards Confucianism are probably more ambiguous and mixed. Furthermore, whatever the state’s motives, support for the Communist state need not be and probably has not been the driving force for many Chinese scholars and other ordinary Chinese who have taken advantage of the resources made available to research and other activities that support the interest in Confucian and other Chinese traditions, including those parents who have sent their children to “Classics recitation” classes that became popular in recent years.<sup>4</sup> What they share is more likely a belief that Confucianism and other Chinese traditions have a role to play in contemporary life and in China’s future. If attachment to traditions is conservative, Chinese conservatism today appears to be thoroughly pragmatic.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. John Makeham’s rejection of the thesis that “official patronage” played a key role in the revival of Confucianism in China (Makeham 2008: 54–57). The pronouncement of Marxism’s death also may prove to be exaggerated.

<sup>4</sup> Instead of following the lead of state propaganda, ordinary Chinese citizens tend to be put off by state orchestrated promotion of “traditions.” An example is the call for boycott of the film on Confucius (starring Hong Kong movie star Chow Yuen Fatt) in 2010 due to a perception that it was endorsed and promoted by state authorities (Magistad 2010; Pierson 2010).

The current “neo-conservatives” in mainland China are very different from the “neoconservatives” in the United States – not surprising since American neoconservatism grew out of very specific ideological and policy background quite different from Chinese experience of the past century (Stelzer 2004). Chinese neo-conservatives are deeply suspicious of liberal democracy, oppose radical changes to China’s political system, and support strengthening state authority to maintain order and stability, if necessary by employing ideological tools, such as nationalism built on cultural traditions. Although often influenced by European and American thinkers such as Spengler, Eucken, and Babbitt, the cultural conservatism of the Republican era developed within the context of China’s own problem, particularly in response to radicalism of the New Culture/May Fourth movement, and China’s need to find a place in a rapidly changing world (Fung 2010: 64–72). The Chinese neo-conservatism of the 1990s grew out of reflections on the implications for China of the collapse of the Soviet Union and an apparently new world order, as well as new domestic problems. Although different, there are some similarities between Chinese conservatisms and what Western thinkers identify as conservatisms – although Western thinkers also disagree among themselves – for example, privileging of order and stability against revolutionary change, respect for and commitment to the conservation of tradition, and a holistic view of society often understood as a “social organism” (Quinton 1993; Scruton 2001). Like all “isms,” the meaning of “conservatism” is essentially contested. It is not necessary for our purpose to venture too far into those conceptual contests. This chapter is primarily concerned with the issue of respect for tradition and related attitudes to change and innovation.

## **The Conservative Confucius: Transmission Through Critical Reflection and Change**

Confucius has often been called conservative, for example, in his attitudes to rites (*li* 禮) (Shun 1993: 465), which are central to the Confucian way of life. Li Zehou 李澤厚 attributed to Confucius a desire to restore the clan-based social organization and government of the early Zhou dynasty (Li 1996: 7). In *Analects* 3.4, Confucius said, “The Zhou dynasty looked back to the Xia 夏 and Shang 商 dynasties. Such a wealth of culture! I follow the Zhou.” To some, Confucius’s thinking was a “conservative reaction” to the breakdown of the world order decreed by heaven in ancient China (Graham 1989: 1–33). Much of this reputation for conservatism rests on Confucius’ own confessed “love for the ancients (*haogu* 好古),” his frequent references to exemplary conduct and personalities of the past, and his emphasis on the study of transmitted texts such as the *Book of Odes* and the *Record of Ritual* (*Liji* 禮記 1992). The tension between conservatism and innovation, between tradition and creativity, is linked to Confucius’ love for the ancients in *Analects* 7.1:

The Master said, “Following the proper way, I do not forge new paths; with confidence I cherish the ancients – in these respects I am comparable to our venerable Old Peng.”<sup>5</sup>

Confucius claimed that he sought most of his knowledge in what was already known to the ancients (7.20). His work as a teacher is itself a process of transmission, and part of what he taught his students is to value what was handed down from the past, and to put that tradition-based knowledge into practice. Confucius’ student, Zengzi 曾子, examined himself daily by asking, “In what has been passed on to me, have I failed to carry it into practice? (*chuan buxi hu* 傳不習乎?)” (1.4).<sup>6</sup>

Why look to the past for knowledge? Confucius was mainly concerned with how one should act and live. The Master said, “There is nothing I can do for someone who is not constantly asking himself: ‘What to do? What to do?’” (15.16) The phrase “what to do (*ru zhi he* 如之何)” occurs frequently throughout the *Analects*. In pondering this question in various situations, Confucius found the ancients to be worthy of emulation, and their conduct illuminating of the excellence that Confucius sought in his own conduct and tried to transmit to his students. The ancients were exemplars because they were responsible for what Confucius saw as impressive achievements of the civilization of past ages. Confucius explicitly justified his admiration and praise for those living in past ages in terms of their contribution to the excellence of their communities.

The Master said, “When it comes to other people, I am not usually given to praise or blame. But if I do praise people, you can be sure they have proven themselves to be worthy of it. It is because of such people that the Three Ages – Xia, Shang, and Zhou – steadfastly continued on the true path (*dao* 道)” (15.25).

Confucius’ frequent praise for the ancients, given very deliberately and only after careful evaluation, is all the more significant, given that he prided himself on being careful with his praise and blame of others, and seemed critical of Zigong’s fondness for judging others (14.29).

In two passages in the *Analects*, Confucius compared his own contemporaries unfavorably with people of the past. “Scholars of old would study for their own sake, while those of today do so to impress others” (14.24). Even the faults of common people had become worse over time.

The Master said, “In the old days, the common people had three faults that the people of today perhaps have done away with. Of old, rash people were merely reckless, but nowadays they have managed to overcome all restraint. Of old, proud people were merely

<sup>5</sup> Other translations of the key phrase, “*shu er buzuo* 述而不作,” include “I transmit but do not create” (Chan 1963: 31); “I transmit but do not innovate” (Lau 1979); “I have transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own,” (Waley 1996); “I transmit, I invent nothing” (Leys 1997).

<sup>6</sup> An important Ming 明 dynasty Confucian work, *Chuanxilu* 傳習錄 (*Instructions for Practical Living*), derived its title from this *Analects* passage. It consists of records of conversation with students, letters and short essays by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), one of the most important figures in the Confucian tradition.



smug, but nowadays they are quarrelsome and easily provoked. Of old, stupid people were frank and direct, but nowadays they are positively deceitful” (17.16).<sup>7</sup>

Given this comparative evaluation, it is not surprising that he often held up past examples as models to guide present conduct. The “way of the ancients” set the criteria for excellence in archery: “Marksmanship does not lie in piercing the leather target, because the strength of the archers varies. This is the way of the ancients” (3.16). Archery is not only an important sport for the exemplary person (*junzi* 君子), one of the six arts a cultivated person should master, but it is also representative of personal cultivation and exemplary conduct (3.7). Confucius cautioned against being too hasty in speech by referring to conduct of past ages. “The ancients were loath to speak because they would be ashamed if they personally did not live up to what they said” (4.22).

According to the “*Zhongyong* 中庸” chapter in the *Liji* 禮記 (*Record of Ritual*), “Zhongni (Confucius) revered Yao 堯 and Shun 舜 as his ancestors and carried on their ways; he emulated and made illustrious the ways of Kings Wen 文 and Wu 武 (*zushu yaoshun xianzhang wenwu* 祖述堯舜憲章文武)” (*Liji* 32.30/147/8; Ames and Hall 2001: 111).<sup>8</sup> This became an idiomatic description of Confucius’ teachings in the Chinese tradition. Historical (or legendary) figures are paradigmatic characters with an important role in Confucius’ ethics and pedagogy (Tan 2005). In his conversations with his students, Confucius drew on shared narratives of the life and conduct of well-known personalities to elucidate his views about virtuous conduct and the way exemplary persons should aspire to.

The Master said, “How great indeed was Yao as ruler! How majestic! Only *tian* 天 is truly great, and only Yao took it as his model. How expansive was he – the people could not find the words adequate to praise him. How majestic was he in his accomplishments, and how brilliant was he in his cultural achievements” (8.19).

Shun was praised for having “effected proper order while remaining nonassertive (*wuwei er zhi* 無為而治)” (15.5; see also 8.18; 8.20). That Yao and Shun set the highest ethical standards is clear from the way Confucius would emphasize the difficulty of certain ethical achievements – the sagely achievement of being “broadly generous with the people able to help the multitude” (6.30) and “cultivating themselves while bringing accord to the people” (14.42) – by saying that they are difficult even for Yao and Shun (but not impossible).

From the Three Ages, Confucius singled out the exemplary ruler, Yu 禹, to whom Shun yielded the throne and who founded the Xia dynasty:

<sup>7</sup> His student Zigong took this further and condemned his own contemporaries for extremes that exceed the vices of the Shang tyrant Zhou (19.20).

<sup>8</sup> The chapter is more commonly known under James Legge’s translated title of “Doctrine of the Mean” (Legge 1960: vol. 1), although the implied comparison with Aristotle is misleading (Ames and Hall 2001: 150–152); Tu Wei-ming 杜維明 translated the title as “Centrality and Commonality” (Tu 1976). The term “ancestors” is used in the sense that Yao and Shun are the source of Confucius’ teachings rather than about biological ancestry.

He was simple in his food and drink yet was generous in his devotion to the gods and the spirits of his ancestors; he wore coarse clothing yet was lavish in his ceremonial robes and cap; he lived in the humblest circumstances yet gave all of his strength to the construction of drainage canals and irrigation ditches. As for Yu, I can find no fault in him at all (8.21).

Confucius placed Yu in the company of Shun when it comes to the “majestic” way they did not use their authority over the world for their personal benefits and enjoyment (8.18). He saw his own mission as continuation of the cultural and moral legacy of the Zhou king, Wen 文王 (9.5). In case anyone thinks that it is their positions as rulers that impressed Confucius, it should be noted that, among King Wen’s 文王 sons, he regarded the Duke of Zhou 周公 more highly than King Wu 武王. His only mention of the latter recorded in the *Analects* was implicitly critical (8.20). The Duke of Zhou’s talents provided a standard to measure others (8.11). Confucius kept him in mind constantly as an exemplar in his own personal cultivation: The Master said, “My, how I have regressed! It has been a long time since I dreamed again of meeting with the Duke of Zhou” (11.17).<sup>9</sup>

Confucius also praised the conduct of exemplary officials and subjects, such as Bo Yi 伯夷 and SHU Qi 叔齊 of the Shang dynasty, who rather starved than eat “Zhou grain” when the Shang dynasty was ended by King Wu (5.23; 7.15; 16.12), Bi Gan 比干 who lost his life remonstrating with notorious last Shang king, Zhou 紂, and two other virtuous officials of Shang dynasty (18.1). Several officials of various states throughout the Spring and Autumn (*Chunqiu* 春秋) period, some of whom had biographies or were mentioned in the *Chunqiu Zuozhuan* 春秋左傳 (*Zuo’s Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals*), also appear in the *Analects*. Some lived a century or more before Confucius: NING Wuzi 甯武子 of Wei 衛 (5.21), LIUXIA Hui 柳下惠 of Lu 魯 (15.4; 18.2), and Guan Zhong 管仲 of Qi 齊 (14.9; 14.16; 14.17). When it comes to learning from exemplary people, Confucius’ conservatism did not limit him to those who were long dead and gone. He also praised Ji Wenzhi 季文子 of Lu (5.20) who died only in 568 B.C.E., and many more who were alive during his own lifetime, such as Zichan 子產 of Zheng 鄭 (5.16; 14.8; 14.9) and YAN Pingzhong 晏平仲, also known as YAN Ying 晏嬰 of Qi 齊 (5.17). Among his contemporaries, Confucius praised Jing, the Prince of Wei 公子荆 (13.8) and several Wei officials, KONG Wenzhi 孔文子 (5.15), Priest Tuo 祝鮀, also known as Shiyu 史魚 (6.16; 15.7), and GONGSHU Wenzhi 公叔文子 (14.13), as well as officials of Lu, MENG Zhifan 孟之反 (6.15), MENG Gongchuo 孟公綽 (14.11), ZANG Wuzhong 藏武仲 (14.11; 14.14), and BIAN Zhuangzi 卞莊子 (14.11). Despite general comparisons that imply a deterioration of virtue over time, it seems that there was no lack of virtuous people among Confucius’ contemporaries.

Confucius’ student Zaiwo 宰我 once referred to ancient practices in answering a question about the altar pole to the god of the soil in terms that displayed his

<sup>9</sup> Mengzi described the Duke of Zhou as a sage (*Mencius* 2B9) and referred to “the way of the Duke of Zhou and Confucius (*Zhou Gong Zhongni zhidao* 周公仲尼之道)” (*Mencius* 3A4), rendering the Duke of Zhou the founder, or at least co-founder, of the *Ru* tradition (Lau 1970).

eloquence at the expense of the ancients. This drew the disapproving comment from Confucius that “you don’t level blame against what is long gone” (3.21). He rejected Zilu 子路 and Zigong’s questioning of Guanzhong’s claim to authoritativeness (*ren* 仁), over Guanzhong’s failure to die with his lord and instead went on to serve the man who killed his lord. Confucius maintained that Guanzhong was *ren* because, in helping the Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公, he benefitted many people and helped preserved Chinese civilization (14.16; 14.17). Confucius’ apparent disapproval of his students’ casting aspersion on the ancients does not mean that he could see no fault in the ancients. We find Confucius criticizing Duke Wen of Jin 晉文公 (697–628 B.C.E.) (14.15) for being devious, and ZANG Wenzhong 藏文仲 of Lu (died 617 B.C.E.) for being superstitious (5.18) and occupying his position under false pretense in not recommending LIUXIA Hui for office (15.14). Of the ancients he praised, Confucius’s evaluation of them was sometimes mixed. For example, though he defended Guanzhong against his students’ implied criticism and considered him an authoritative person (14.9), he himself noted Guanzhong’s lack in capacity, extravagance, and not knowing the rites (3.22).

Confucius did not slavishly imitate those whom he praised. In considering those who retired from the world, refused to serve regimes that ruled contrary to the way, in order to preserve their own integrity and virtue – including Bo Yi, SHU Qi, and LIUXIA Hui – Confucius distinguished himself from them in not having “pre-suppositions about what may or may not be done (*wu ke wu buke* 無可無不可)” (18.8). Although ancients could serve as exemplars generally, what one should do in a complex situation is determined by its specific unique set of circumstances, not some fixed rule of behavior derived from the ancients’ actions. As for why Confucius praised the ancients more than he criticized them, his apparent reluctance to do the latter, perhaps it is because doing the former served the purpose of criticizing the present and urging contemporaries to improve themselves and their world with the virtuous ancients as models, while the latter has the tendency of encouraging the complacency of those living, who might think that they were better than the ancients, which would not be as helpful to learning and self-cultivation. In the *Analects*, Confucius’s judgments of people, rather than trying to preserve a fixed way of life forever, were generally part of a pedagogy aimed at improving the conduct of those living and transforming the world they lived in for the better.

Insofar as conservatism “involves attempts to perpetuate a social organism, through times of unprecedented change” (Scruton 2001: vii), something Confucius could be loosely said to be involved in (despite the absence of any metaphysical theory of holism), it aims to preserve that which maintains and benefits the social organism, although in some cases change could be desirable or even necessary to that purpose. In Confucius’ case, one could argue that he was conservative about the preservation of excellence or virtue through self-cultivation and as the basis of good government, for he believed these excellences constituted the flourishing civilization of the Three Ages. Survival of a flourishing civilization requires continuity of the excellence that sustains it. As long as civilization is not completely destroyed, even if the general trend is decline, some excellence survives, and hence even in an age of decline there would still be some exemplars. Confucius probably

would agree with Zigong that he was able to learn from everyone because something of the ancients' way survived even in his contemporaries. Zigong says:

The way (*dao* 道) of Kings Wen and Wu has not collapsed utterly – it lives in the people. Those of superior character (*xian* 賢) have grasped the greater part, while those of lesser quality have grasped a bit of it. Everyone has something of Wen and Wu's way in them. Who then does the Master not learn from? Again, how could there be a single constant teacher for him? (19.22).

Confucius' own references to both ancients and contemporaries, and his arguments with his students about the ancients, show that the important thing about learning from others is correctly identifying and understanding the relevant excellence and conduct that exemplifies it rather than whether a person belongs to a bygone age or is a contemporary. Confucius' conservatism does not include the belief that ancient conduct is necessarily superior by virtue of being ancient.

Confucius was well aware that change is pervasive and inevitable; he did not consider all changes to be deterioration.<sup>10</sup> In modern times, Western and Chinese conservatives also have no problem accommodating change; they only object to sudden, radical, or revolutionary changes that attempt to destroy continuity altogether (Scruton 2001: 11; Fung 2010: 79). Confucius acknowledged that historically, there had been changes as the Xia dynasty gave way to the Shang, and the Shang to the Zhou:

The Yin dynasty adapted the observances of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) of the Xia dynasty, and how they altered them can be known. The Zhou adapted the observances of ritual propriety of the Yin, and how they altered them can be known (2.23).

One could infer that Confucius approved of these changes made to the rites over time since he considered Zhou to be superior because it was able to learn from the two earlier dynasties (3.14). Even though he is generally considered a conservative about *li*, which is not surprising given the way *li* works to hold community together both synchronically and diachronically – stability is necessary for *li* to work – Confucius did not rule out all changes in rites as unacceptable. He was prepared to go along with contemporary changes to ritual practice when the change was a matter of frugality, but not when the new practice reflected hubris (9.3). Changes in rites begin with some individual doing something differently from how it has always been done, arbitrarily or reacting to changes in circumstances generating pressures for change. Single acts deviating from past practices will change the practice itself only if taken up by sufficient numbers engaged in the practice. From Confucius' perspective, novelty is not necessarily good or bad, but requires careful assessment based on serious reflection about the values embodied in the practices in question and what the deviation signifies to decide whether the change is acceptable.

<sup>10</sup> From ancient times, the Chinese did not privilege stasis, but preferred to find ways of working with change and making change work for them: the historical importance of the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經) is a testimony to this attitude. Some scholars believed that Confucius himself studied this Classic, and *Analects* 7.17 may contain a reference to it (Yang 1984:71; Shiji 1997: 492a; Yang and Yang 1979: 22; Shaughnessy 1993: 222; cf. Nylan 2001: 241).

Confucius acknowledged that different ages had different strengths, and selected from past practices those which were most suited to contemporary situations. When YAN Hui 顏回 asked about “*weibang* 為邦 (making a viable state),” it is fair to assume that his interest was in making a state for his own age, among others. Confucius’ reply is telling:

The Master replied, “Introduce the calendar of the Xia dynasty, ride on the large yet plain chariot of the Yin, wear the ceremonial cap of the Zhou, and as for music, play the *shao* and *wu*. Abolish the ‘music’ from the state of Zheng and keep glib talkers at a distance, for the Zheng music is lewd and glib talkers are dangerous” (15.11).

This selection of different practices from the Three Ages is guided by what would work for their time rather than simply because those were past practices. The selections are not justified by their age alone, if at all, and the recommendations that followed are explicitly justified in terms of qualitative assessment.

Even when practices have ancient lineage, Confucius gave reasons for continuing with the recommended practices, since he did not advocate continuing all ancient practices. Confucius emphasized to Zizhang 子張 that the practice of 3 years mourning was not confined to one particular Shang ruler mentioned in an ancient text, but practiced by “all the ancients” (14.40). Although readers could infer that its being common practice among the ancients rendered it more significant for Confucius, he favored the practice not just because of its ancient lineage, as it became clear in his response to Zaiwo’s questioning of the practice.

“When exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) are in the mourning shed, it is because they can find no relish in fine-tasting food, no pleasure in the sound of music, and no comfort in their usual lodgings, that they do not abbreviate the mourning period to one year. Now if you are comfortable with these things, then by all means, enjoy them.”

When Zaiwo had left, the Master remarked, “Zaiwo is really perverse (*buren* 不仁), it is only after being tended by his parents for three years that an infant can finally leave their bosoms. The ritual for a three-year mourning period is practiced throughout the empire. Certainly Zaiwo received this three years of loving care from his parents!” (17.21).

Confucius’ conservatism did not lead him to insist on preserving ancient forms of behavior indiscriminately, but only when the reasons for those practice continue to be relevant in present circumstances.

In describing Confucius’ teachings as a “conservative reaction,” A. C. Graham nevertheless emphasized that Confucius was critical and selective in what he had tried to preserve and sometimes rebuild from the past (Graham 1989: 12–13). Transmission is not indiscriminate but passes on what is evaluated as worthy of conservation. There is a normative element in the Chinese term, “*shu* 述,” which is a homonym and cognate, sometimes even substitute, of “*shu* 術,” meaning “art” or “method” (*Shuowen jiezi* 1981: 70b). While “*shu* 術” may also mean a “device” or a “trick,” things that may seem ethically dubious, what is worth noting is that whether as “art” or “trick,” “*shu* 術” works within a particular context. In other words, just as in following a path rather than walking about randomly, one is selecting a better way, marked by the accumulated experience and wisdom of those who went before us or guided by some device, to reach a particular destination, Confucius’ transmission involved selecting what would continue to work for his time and later. The use

of *shu* in the *Analects* is also implicitly normative. Confucius scolded Yuanrang 原壤 for having “nothing to transmit” (14.43) – not nothing *simpliciter* but nothing worthy. Zigong protested Confucius’ desire to stop speaking with the question: “What would there be for us, your disciples, to transmit (*ze xiaozhi heshu yan* 則小子何述焉?)” (17.19).<sup>11</sup> Confucius’ students expected from their revered teacher not just any speech, but teachings worth passing on for generations, and the *Analects* resulted from the efforts of these students, and possibly also later followers, to transmit what they assessed to be valuable learning and knowledge.

Confucius’ selective and critical attitude towards tradition also extends to his transmission of the texts. For Confucius, textual study is part of acquiring learning and knowledge, and he himself described his own method as one of “learning much, selecting out of it what works well, and then following it” (7.28). It is reasonable to expect that he would also select for transmission only what worked well from the texts he received rather than pass them on without change. One possible reason Confucius considered himself only a transmitter is that he did not write any “original” works; his literary labors referred to in passing in the *Analects* seem to be confined to “putting in order” texts handed down from the past<sup>12</sup>:

The Master said, “It was only after my return to Lu from Wey that I revised the *Book of Music*, and put the ‘Songs of the Kingdom’ and the ‘Ceremonial Hymns’ in proper order” (9.15).

Confucius was credited with editing, and sometimes authoring, the *Five Classics* – the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing* 易經), the *Book of Odes*, the *Record of Ritual*, the *Book of Documents* (*Shujing* 書經 *Shujing*), and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Lushichunqiu* 呂士春秋), sometimes adding the lost *Book of Music* (*Yueji* 樂記) to make *Six Classics* – fairly early in the tradition. However, modern scholars disagree about the relation of Confucius to the Classics (Nylan 2001: 8). The *Mengzi* 孟子 claims that Confucius was the author of the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Mengzi* 3B9), a claim repeated in SIMA Qian’s 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BCE) *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*) (*Shiji* 1997: 493b) and other texts. SIMA Qian’s biography of Confucius (*Kongzi shijia* 孔子世家) maintains that there were over 3,000 songs, and Confucius selected only 305 “which had moral value (*ke shiyu liyi* 可施於禮義)” for transmission (*Shiji* 1997: 491b; Yang and Yang 1979: 22). By current standards of inquiry, these claims lack convincing evidence. However, whether he composed any part of the received texts, and whatever the exact nature of any editorial work he performed on the Classics, insofar as his teaching involved textual materials, part of his “transmission” process would have involved critical selection of what he assessed to be valuable and worth

<sup>11</sup> Lau 1979; cf. “How will we your followers find the proper way?” (Ames and Rosemont 1998 translation).

<sup>12</sup> Though “*zuo*” was not used explicitly to refer to authorship in the *Analects*, the *Mencius* uses it in that sense when referring to the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Mencius* 3B9; 4B21). This meaning was included in the *Shuowen jiezi*, citing an example from the *Book of Odes* (*Shuowen* 1981: 374a).

transmitting, guided by his own experience and what he considered relevant to his pedagogical project of helping others cultivate themselves and govern well.

As a transmitter, Confucius was critical and selective. In emulating the ancients, he did not merely imitate but understood the exemplars in the context of new situations for practice. Tradition, as the transmission of what has been valued and continues to be valued, unites old and new. A living tradition, tradition that remains part of our lives, rather than residing only in dusty texts and museums, unites past, present and future. Instead of resisting change, it is itself a process of change that is also continuity. Even as he sought to conserve the excellence of the past, Confucius himself could be seen as working to bring about change through his critique of his time by holding up cultural accomplishments of past dynasties as examples for his contemporaries, and in his role as a teacher who transformed his students by helping them cultivate themselves and walk the path of the exemplary person that ancient exemplars had walked, and in so doing extend that path beyond that of the ancients. There is no doubt that Confucius, even if he was conservative in some sense, did not oppose conservation to change. He would not approve of something just because it is old or has always been done, nor would he reject something just because it is new or has not been done before. Is this critical and selective transmission and openness to change sufficient for being innovative? Could Confucius himself be considered innovative?

### **The Innovative Confucius: Self-Image Versus Others' Evaluation**

If being innovative means introducing something so new that it is completely different from, and moreover has no connection to, everything that went before, then Confucius is not innovative. This equates innovation with *creatio ex-nihilo*, and in the realm of human endeavors, is probably more myth than fact. Human experience lies between two extremes, suggesting neither absolute stasis nor total absence of continuity in change. In describing those still attached to the Confucian tradition as cultural conservatives, intellectual historians make the point, either implicitly or explicitly, that these thinkers accepted or even actively promoted fundamental political changes; political institutions were not the objects they wished to conserve. The change they rejected was the total elimination of Confucian teachings and practices that they considered integral to Chinese culture. In China's nineteenth century encounter with Western powers, Confucian scholars clarified which changes were acceptable from their perspective and which were not, seeking to combine "Chinese substance and western applications (*zhongti xiyong* 中體西用)."<sup>13</sup> Although the idea is philosophically problematic and was ineffective

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<sup>13</sup> The best known advocate of this is ZHANG Zhidong 張之洞 (1837–1909). Extracts from his 1895 work, *Exhortation to Learning* (*Quan Xue Pian* 勸學篇), touching on this idea can be found in de Bary et al. 1960: 82–87; Zhang (1998).

as a solution to China's problems at the time (Levenson 1968: 1: 59–78), it is an example of how conservatives who are not totally against change need to, and how they might, separate acceptable from unacceptable changes. The “Chinese substance and western applications” idea bears some resemblance to Burke's distinction between acceptable “reform” and unacceptable “change.” Burke insists upon

[...] a marked distinction between change and reform. The former alters the substance of the objects themselves, and gets rid of all their essential good as well as the accidental evil annexed to them. Change is novelty; and whether it is to operate any one of the effects of reformation at all, or whether it may not contradict the very principle upon which reformation is desired, cannot be certainly known beforehand. Reform is not a change in the substance or in the primary modification of the objects, but a direct application of a remedy to the grievance complained. [...] To *innovate is not to reform* (Burke 1796: 169).

Both approaches understand conservation in terms of something fundamental or essential that must remain unchanged.

How did Confucius himself draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable change? He did not see the excellences of the ancients he tried to conserve in essentialist terms. Confucius' affirmative reply to Zizhang's query whether it would be possible to know “ten generations hence” need not be read in terms of something remaining unchanged throughout the ages, although that is a common reading. We could know the successor to the Zhou even ten generations later if we could trace the changes so that we could see how each generation built on the earlier by adding new elements and discarding old ones, in the same way Confucius could see continuity between Zhou and the earlier dynasties of Xia and Shang (2.23). This kind of continuity may be elucidated with the metaphor of a rope made of interwoven strands of fiber. For the rope to remain unbroken, it is not necessary for any *one* strand to run from the beginning to the end (the essentialist requirement). Instead, different strands enter the rope at different points, and end at different points, no one strand is essential, but the weave of the various strands ensures that, even if there is no common strand between two points of the rope, there is still only one unbroken rope. If Confucius failed to be innovative, it is not because he insisted on preserving some unchanging essence of tradition. Abandoning essentialism, one might distinguish conservative and innovative changes in terms of degree of novelty, whether a change is significant or extensive enough to be recognized as making what has been changed meaningfully *new*. In this sense, some of Confucius' achievements have been recognized as innovative.

A modern textbook which has gone through several editions in mainland China, continuing the tradition of attributing to Confucius a significant engagement with the *Classic of Changes*, claims that Confucius transformed the text from a manual of superstitious consultation with spirits to a philosophical text about human endeavors (Fan 1978–1986: 1: 172). Confucius' emphasis on texts was an “apparent innovation” since the *Ru* as a group had previously only focused on ritual mastery (Hansen 1992: 58). The textual tradition founded by Confucius involves a new form of social organization capable of generating new authority to challenge the state (Lewis 1999: 63–67). David Hall and Roger Ames' reading of Confucius “make of him an originator, ‘a great man,’ instead of the transmitter he understood himself to



be” (Hall and Ames 1987: 25). Herbert Fingarette presented Confucius “as a great cultural innovator rather than a genteel but stubbornly nostalgic apologist of the status quo ante” (Fingarette 1972: 60). Herlee Creel challenged the traditional portrayal of Confucius as a pedantic reactionary and emphasized his role as a reformer who was trying to start a “bloodless revolution” (Creel 1951: 4, chapter 10). Wu Teh Yao 吳德耀 was of the opinion that Confucius’ political ideas were “revolutionary in his own times,” though he may be called “an evolutionist-reformer” in advocating social and political reforms without resorting to arms or violence (Wu 1987: 72, 77). Julia Ching, who saw Confucius as “a traditionalist in some ways, a reformer in others,” also argued that Confucius was a “revolutionary” in the moral transformation he brought about (Ching 1997: 74). That a “traditionalist” can be critical and selective in his transmission of tradition, and that tradition is not transmitted completely without change, is not surprising in view of recent scholarship on tradition (Shils 1981; MacIntyre 1985; Xu 1993). I have shown elsewhere that there is more room for creativity in Confucianism than has usually been recognized (Tan 2008); there is both tension and interdependence between tradition and creativity in the *Analects*.

In his reflective selection of what he considered valuable and interpretation of what he learned from the ancients in ways that helped to diagnose the social malaise of his time and to formulate viable solutions, Confucius opened up a creative space in his transmission of tradition. This goes beyond the mere fact that change is inherent in the very process of transmission because however much we might try or suppose ourselves to have succeeded, nothing is ever transmitted exactly as it had been previously. We have reason to think that Confucius consciously sought what was new and recognized its introduction as valuable even in the process of transmission. To Confucius, “Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new, such a person can be considered a teacher” (2.11). Some might argue that this passage could be read as implying that some aspects of reality remain unchanged or some unchanging truth applies across time. To me this is a less persuasive reading because if the crux of the matter in learning and teaching is grasping what remains unchanged, why contrast the old with the new, why not “review the past as a means of knowing the present or future” instead? The contrast between old and new emphasizes change rather than something remaining unchanged through the passage of time. The challenge of teaching and, by implication, of learning as well, is to make what is old serviceable in new situations; Confucius’ own example, in the conversations about texts and past exemplars in the *Analects*, is a testimony to this.

Confucius’ teachings transformed the concepts of *li* and other virtues, the conception of human society and its possibilities; he created a new human ideal. His contributions were exceptional enough for him to be regarded as a sage by some people even during his lifetime (9.6); he became revered as the greatest sage in East Asia. Early Chinese inscriptions associate sages with “*zuo* 作,” which Confucius contrasted with transmitting in *Analects* 7.1 and which D.C. Lau translated as “innovate.” In elaborating this, the *Book of Rites*, though from a later period, still treats *zuo* as the task of sages. “Those who created are called sages; those who transmitted are called intelligent [*ming*]. Intelligence and sageliness are names for

transmitting and creating respectively” (*Liji* 19.3/99/21; Puett 2001: 73). According to Michael Puett’s study of inscriptions from the Shang and Zhou period, “*zuo* 作” meant “creating, making for the first time” very early on, and was a general term for activity, with a range of basic meanings, including “creating, making, doing, acting, rising, and other activities” (Puett 2001: 122–23; cf. *Shuowen* 1981: 374a). There is evidence in these early writings that sages were viewed as creators of human culture, understood as deliberate artificial inventions (Puett 2001: 23). Given that Confucius denied that he was a sage, it is to be expected that he would not see himself as qualified to engage in the sagely activity of *zuo*:

The Master said, “How would I dare to consider myself as sage or an authoritative person (*ren* 仁)? What can be said about me is simply that I continue my studies without respite and instruct others without growing weary” (7.34).

Confucius’ statement is a proclamation of modesty that does not devalue *zuo*. This is made clearer when Confucius contrasted his method of “learning much, selecting out of it what works well, and then following it” with “initiating new paths while still not understanding them (*bu zhi er zuo* 不知而作)” – it was the latter that is superior and Confucius admitted that in comparison his was “a lower level of wisdom” (7.28). Although Puett agrees with this reading, his study of the mixed treatment of culture in the *Analects* leads him to conclude that, although Confucius did understand “*zuo*” as a sagely act, it does not mean creation in terms of human inventions that are discontinuous with nature; instead *zuo* involves imitating or patterning oneself after heaven and bringing order to the human world (Puett 2001: 50). However, one could understand patterning oneself after heaven as an example of *creatio-in-situ* (Ames and Hall 2001: 30–38), where novelty is relative and does not require complete disruption and radical discontinuity.

## Pragmatic Balance Between Conservatism and Innovation

Whichever meaning of creativity or innovation we work with, there is clearly a discrepancy between Confucius’ self-image and how some others have evaluated him: a few modern scholars may consider him innovative, but Confucius did not see himself as innovative. Our discussion so far suggests that conservative and innovative need not be mutually exclusive, except at their abstract extremes, between which there is a continuum where they begin to overlap, with increasing novelty the closer we move towards the innovative end. Insofar as there is a contrast, despite overlap, between conservative and innovative attitudes, Confucius presented himself as more conservative than innovative, even though his endeavors and the changes they brought about turn out to be more innovative than conservative. One might say that only hindsight that could take into account all those subsequent changes is able to show us how innovative Confucius, and the *Analects*, has been.

This discrepancy between Confucius’ self-image and retrospective evaluation by others deserves deeper reflection in the present context of reading the *Analects* as

relevant to our present time. Should we be conservative or innovative? Generations of those who saw Confucius as the exemplar for their conduct followed the conservative route, but the consequences of that interpretation had often been unsatisfactory in improving themselves and the world they lived in. They were not innovative enough when these consequences are taken into account. According to Confucius, exemplary persons “are not inflexible in their studies” (1.8) and he himself eschewed inflexibility (9.4; 14.32). One should also be flexible when it comes to the choice between preserving the old and initiating or inventing something new. I propose that the contemporary message of the *Analects* and the example of Confucius do not call for a simple either-or choice between the two, a fixed answer for all occasions, but a flexible pragmatic balance guided by the needs of specific situations.

Confucius’ own conservatism had a specific context: the disintegration of a dynasty that had lasted several centuries and was perceived as the source of much that was good. Confucius did not see the problems of that time in terms of a static present in need of radical changes to make it better. The situation was unsatisfactory because there had been too many changes at too great a pace and of too drastic a nature; moreover, they probably appeared to Confucius as unthinking or ill-considered changes, or even changes for no other reasons than personal whims, self-centered desires, arrogance, and ignorance. Against this background, his teachings emphasized appreciation and respect for the wisdom of the ancients, appropriately valuing the accomplishments of past generations and emulating their excellence. Such conservatism is guided by his pragmatic project of making the world a better place. One might consider it an exercise of creative and constructive pragmatic intelligence, what John Dewey calls “the power of using past experience to shape and transform future experience” (Dewey 1988: 346).

This chapter begins by pointing out the pragmatic concerns that guided Confucius’ recommendations that his students study the *Book of Odes*. More generally, Confucius’ approach to learning and knowledge is pragmatic. It is not book learning but the combination of learning and practice that brings delight (1.1). He explained knowledge to FAN Chi 樊遲 in terms of how to act: “to devote yourself to what is appropriate for the people, and to show respect for the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance” (6.22), and “to promote the true into positions above the crooked” (12.22). His judgments of whether someone has knowledge or understanding (*zhi* 知) of something, *li* for example, are based on their conduct (3.22; 4.7; 7.31). Knowledge for Confucius is “active” (6.23), for it is not purely intellectual, but a form of practice that enables one to make decisions (9.29; 14.28), solve problems, and thereby bring satisfaction. There is ample evidence in the *Analects* that Confucius’ central concern is pragmatic: one studies and thinks in order to make better decisions and act with better consequences; learning and teaching aim to transform people and the world they live in. A similar pragmatic concern, based on an understanding of the most crucial problems, that each of us faces individually and that all of us face together in our age, should guide the balance between the conservative and the innovative in teaching and learning from the *Analects*.

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