

g Seminar July 22, 2014

Qiu Ying ca. 1494 - ca. 1552

"Peach Blossom Spring"

Boston Museum of Fine Art

Early
Confucianism
and Daoism:
Part 1 *The
Analects*



Historical context

- In world history, 800-200 BCE = “Axial Age” (Karl Jaspers):
 - Erosion of established social and political orders.
 - Perhaps anxiety + sense of new possibility → new ideas.
 - Includes pre-Socratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle; the Hebrew prophets, Upanishads and Buddha in India.

China: Zhou Dynasty 1122-221 BCE

In Confucius' lifetime (551-479 BCE), the authority of the Zhou kings deteriorated.

Powerful Chinese states conquered weaker ones. Lots of "kings" (*wang* 王).

Prompted the question, "What is the *dao* 道 (path, way) that China should take?" (frame suggested by A.C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*)

Confucius (Kongzi 孔子 -- Master Kong)

His *dao* involves moral transformation, especially in the character of leaders.

Through acquiring *de* 德 (virtue, excellence), they will earn their people's trust through able care for their welfare and modeling of relationships one ought to have.

The *Analects (Lun yu)*: most reliable record of what his teachings were, but controversy as to which parts are reliable.

Confucius" as a constructed persona of the tradition.



Approaching the *Analects* as philosophy

- No sustained argumentation.
- Short conversational exchanges or purported sayings of Confucius and/or his students.
- Questions often answered with questions or enigmatic assertions.
- Can discuss with students what philosophy is and the diverse range of activities and aims it may encompass.

The practical orientation of Confucius

All under *tian* ['heaven', the ordering force in the world] have long since lost their way (*dao*), and *tian* is going to use your Master as a wooden bell-clapper (Ames & Rosemont the source of all translations, with adaptation from me sometimes)

- Most oriented towards the “**what**” (what kind of person to become, what qualities and values to aim for) and the “**how**” (how to realize the ‘what?’), less explicitly oriented to the “**why**” (why this kind of person or quality or value rather than another kind?).
- Later in Mencius and Xunzi, more “why,” but attention to “what” and “how” continues to be distinctive of Confucianism.

What kind of person to become

- Most prominent ideal: the *junzi* 君子 (**exemplary person**, noble person, gentleman).
- Qualities and values of this person: **filial piety** (*xiao* 孝), “**righteousness**” or **acting on what is appropriate** to the situation (*yi* 義), **observing ritual propriety** (*li* 禮), and most of all (4.5), *ren* 仁 (AR: “authoritative conduct or personhood,” other translations: human-heartedness, humaneness, goodness, benevolence).
- Many of the most puzzling passages center on discussions of *ren*: What is it? Who has it?

Inquiring into *ren* 仁

- > Sometimes assertions are made about *ren*, e.g.,
 - It is the central trait of the exemplary person (4.5).
 - Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety one becomes *ren* (12.1).
 - It is loving others (12.22)
- > Certain admirable qualities are not sufficient for being *ren*, e.g. refraining from ill will and self-importance (14.1) or boldness (14.4).

Sometimes asked whether someone (one of Confucius' students or a minister known through the historical records) with certain admirable qualities is *ren*. C's reply: "I don't know."

Sometimes particular persons or their deeds are used as positive examples of *ren* or *de* (virtue) or the *junzi* (exemplary personhood), or certain aspects of ethical excellence: e.g., Duke of Zhou, Yan Hui, Confucius' favorite student; and Confucius himself as regarded by his students.

An interpretation I have found illuminating

- Amy Olberding (“Dreaming of the Duke of Zhou”), drawing from Zagzebski’s virtue epistemology, suggests that the *Analects* has an “exemplarist epistemology.”
- We encounter something in the world of great interest.
- But we cannot articulate clearly what it is or how to describe it. We may “point” to it with a word or description and try to find out more about it.

- > Olberding's suggestion: in the *Analects*, 'de' or 'ren' is used to point to what people admire and are attracted to and are trying to understand.
- > When Confucius and his students refer to the Duke of Zhou, they are in effect saying, "**de is like that.**"
- > **Exemplars** are the original source of knowledge of virtue.
- > Raises interesting comparative questions in the philosophy of language and epistemology.

The *Analects* as a record of people engaged in self-cultivation

- Not abstract theorizing about moral cultivation, but Confucius and his students engaged in self-cultivation and talking about how to do it, trying to become worthy of public office and advising rulers.
- Students come across as distinct individuals with different strengths and weaknesses, e.g.,
 - Yan Hui, Confucius' favorite, shares Confucius' love of learning (character friends in the Aristotelian sense).
 - Zilu, a good heart, impulsive and courageous.
 - Ranyou, a good administrator, hesitant to act on his independent judgment, something of a "yes" man.

11.22 shows Confucius giving Zilu and Ranyou opposite advice because they are different people.

His students observe him extremely closely, treat him as an exemplar of ethical excellence.

- 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.

The moral beauty of care and respect that have become second nature

2.4: From fifteen, my heart-and-mind was set upon learning; from thirty I took my stance; from forty I was no longer doubtful; from fifty I realized the propensities of *tian* (*tianming*); from sixty my ear was attuned; at seventy I could give my heart-and-mind free rein without overstepping the boundaries.

➤ The ideal is to be able to express appropriate care and respect with an effortless, spontaneous grace that seems to flow from who the agent most truly is.

A contrast between the way we begin in self-cultivation and the ideal

- Confucius emphasizes the lack of ethical motivation people have in their untutored state; and the possibility of attaining that motivation.
 - 4.6 I have yet to meet people who are truly fond of authoritative conduct (*ren*) and who truly abhor behavior contrary to it. . . . Are there people who, for the space of a single day, have given their full strength to authoritative conduct? 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.
 - 9.18 I have yet to meet the person who is fonder of excellence (*de*) than of physical beauty.
 - 7.30 How could authoritative conduct (*ren*) be at all remote? No sooner do I seek it than it has arrived.

Does the contrast make a paradox?

- Edward Slingerland (*Effortless Action*) has maintained that the ideal of effortless action (*wu wei* 無爲) pervades early Chinese philosophy, e.g., Confucius doing what he wants without overstepping the boundaries.
- S says there is a paradox: how can we get to this state of effortlessness since we aren't there already? It seems we must try, but how do we try not to try?

The alleged paradox as embodied in 2 metaphors of the *Analects*

➤ **Adornment:** moral cultivation is refining one's basic disposition:

- 3.8, Zixia, prompted by Confucius, implies that observing ritual propriety comes after in a way comparable to applying color comes after one has something plain to be adorned (see also 3.3-4).
- 6.18: 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.

> **Crafting**: the self must be disciplined and reshaped in major ways.

- 1.15: Self-cultivation portrayed through quotation from the *Book of Odes*: “Like bone carved and polished, / Like jade cut and ground.”
- 12.1: 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.
- Implies the basic substance is recalcitrant to moral cultivation. Slingerland holds that the 2 metaphors cannot be reconciled: **adornment** implies we already have what it take to be *ren*; **crafting** implies that we have to reshape ourselves to get it.



The alleged paradox as it pertains to the relation between ritual propriety and *ren*

- “Ritual” includes ceremonies and customary behaviors that signal the major passages of life (weddings, funerals, initiations of the young into the community of responsibility).
- Customs that structure daily life: ways of sharing meals with others; forms of greeting those one encounters by chance or in institutional settings structured by social roles.
- Observing ritual activity should not be mechanical or rote. Should express respect and concern for others.

To merely go through the motions is not to observe ritual propriety: 3.12 But the Master said, “If I myself do not participate in the sacrifice, it is as though I had not sacrificed at all.”

If spiritual and emotional presence is necessary for observing ritual propriety, then one must have some of the “right stuff,” the right emotional substance, to put into observing ritual propriety. Observing ritual propriety is “adorning” the right stuff we’ve already got.

But the crafting metaphor expressed by some passages implies that we get the right emotional stuff by practicing ritual propriety.

Why I think there is no paradox

- The “basic substance” of our nature is complex.
 1. Some of it might be the “right stuff,” such as a disposition to care for and respect others.
 2. Some of it might be the not-so-right stuff, such as an undue emphasis on the self.
- We adorn the “right stuff.” We craft or reshape the not-so-right stuff. Even the right stuff may need some developing or strengthening if it is weak or inconstant.
- The adorning and crafting metaphors are not contradictory if we take each as portraying complementary processes of self-cultivation.

This tension between the 2 metaphors reappears in Mencius and Xunzi

- Mencius is more influenced by the adornment metaphor, but often acknowledges that some major work needs to be done with the self: he emphasizes 1 (but also that the right stuff is initially weak and inconstant).
- Xunzi inherits the crafting metaphor and explains the need for major transformation of the self through vigorously advocating 2 (recalcitrant and undue emphasis on the self).
- But we see in the next session that both acknowledge, if only implicitly, both 1 and 2 in the end.

Confucius' views on the basic substance and how to work with it are not so clear in the *Analects*

- The “basic substance” or “stuff” we have to work with seems to be cognitive and emotional dispositions given by human nature.
- Of such a subject, Confucius said only one thing directly: 17.2 “Human beings are similar in their natural tendencies (xing 性), but vary greatly by virtue of their habits.”
- Both Mencius and Xunzi directly and extensively address human nature.

Some reasons why Confucian ethics seems so compelling today

- Current revival of interest in emotion as central to moral judgment and motivation (psychologists such as J. Haidt, J. Greene; philosophers A. Gibbard, S. Blackburn, J. Prinz).
- A crucial question: how much can reflection and deliberate self-training change emotional dispositions?
- The Confucians, especially Mencius and Xunzi, have much to contribute.

Another distinctive mark of Confucian philosophy—emphasis on filial piety

- 1.2: Exemplary persons (*junzi*) concentrate their efforts on the root, for the root having taken hold, the way (*dao*) will grow therefrom. As for filial and fraternal responsibility, it is, I suspect, the root of authoritative conduct (*ren*).
- Note: filial responsibility applies to adult children who must not only care for their parents' material needs but with respect (2.7) and the proper “countenance” (2.8)

- An opportunity to discuss cultural differences in value, how they involve both the familiar and unfamiliar.
- 17.21: When Zaiwo argues against the custom of a three-year mourning period for the death of a parent, the Master remarked, “Zaiwo is really perverse (*bu ren*)! It is only after being tended by his parents for three years that an infant can finally leave their bosom. The ritual of a three-year mourning period for one’s parents is practiced throughout the empire. Certainly Zaiwo received this three years of loving care from his parents!”

- One might readily accept
 - that family relationships strongly influence learning how to care and respect for others;
 - that gratitude for one's life and nurture is an intelligible reason for holding parents in special regard.
- But the intensity of Confucian filial piety and the strength of duties it confers on children is unusual.
- 4.18: Remonstrate gently with one's parents; do not act contrary.
- 13.18: On whether to turn in one's father for stealing a sheep, as "True Person" did. Confucius: **A father covers for his son, and a son covers for his father. And being true lies in this.**

- A more complex filial act is described by Mencius (7A35) in answer to the question of what sage-king Shun would have done if his father had murdered another man: let him be arrested, but then abdicate the throne and flee with his father.
- Xunzi (chap. 29, The Way of Sons): follow the Way not your lord; follow appropriateness (*yi*) and not your father. There are three conditions under which one should go against the wishes of one's father—when following his wishes would harm the family; when it would bring disgrace on one's family, and when it would cause one to act like a savage.

Some fertile textual juxtapositions and class discussion points

- Socrates' questioning of Euthyphro as to why he is prosecuting his father for killing a slave.
- The criticism of family loyalties in the *Republic*
- Students often think better and with more nuance when they can draw from their own experience, in this case, their own family experience and relationships with parents. Ask what they would do if a parent commits a crime.

Normative issues posed by Confucian position on filial piety

- Confucian ethics acknowledges duties to all in virtue of their humanity.
- It accords a high degree of priority to family loyalty, based on reasons such as gratitude for one's life and nurture to parents.
- It is reasonably interpreted as holding in plural basic sources of duty.
- The question of how to deal with conflicts between values becomes important for Confucians, which we will see most explicitly dealt with by Mencius and Xunzi.

The Mohist challenge based on the value of “impartial caring” *jian ai* 兼愛

- Mozi (Master Mo 墨子, ca. 470 BC – ca. 391 BCE) argued that partiality was the root problem: toward self, one’s family, one’s state. In the name of loyalty to one’s own, one exploits and takes from others (*Mozi* “Impartial Caring” chapter).
- The solution was to adopt an ethic of impartial caring: treating others as one’s own.
- However, Mozi’s text upholds the value of filial piety, and raises the question of how this value is to be reconciled with impartial caring.

Similarities to Western utilitarianism

- One possible avenue of reconciliation: to justify a degree of special treatment for one's own (e.g., one's family) because it is part of the most practical arrangement for taking care of everyone's needs.
- Similar to some utilitarian justifications of special duties to some.
- Further, Mozi emphasized the importance of evaluating ethical ideas according to the resulting benefits and/or harms of acting upon them.

- So construed, Mohism is not as starkly opposed to Confucianism as might at first appear.
- Both must deal in some way with possible conflicts between special duties to some and duties to all.
- But the structure of ethical justification is different, and so the two ethics might provide different prescriptions in concrete cases.
- A Mohist would probably not be that sympathetic to Mengzi's approval of sage-king Shun's hypothetical decision to flee with his murderer-father.