The Art of Chinese Philosophy

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Eight Classical Texts and How to Read Them

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Preface

In keeping with the purpose of this book, which is to offer new but rigorous interpretations of some of the most cherished texts in the Chinese tradition, I have aimed to sustain simultaneous and parallel discourses: the main exposition, which is intended to be accessible to all interested readers, and the notes, which are composed for specialists. Consequently I do not provide the same degree of contextual information for the many sources cited in the notes (such as *Guanzi*).

References are abbreviated, as full publication information for each title is found in the appropriate section of the bibliography: the first section, for pre-Tang Chinese texts, and the second section, for Chinese texts from the Tang and later, as well as works in all other languages.

All translations from Chinese sources are my own. Words and phrases that are implied in the original or necessary for clear understanding in English are inserted in brackets; relevant background information, such as the identities and dates of named personages, is inserted in parentheses.

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Thanks, finally, to all the students in "Introduction to Classical Chinese Thought," which I have taught at the University of Pennsylvania since 1997. The need to explain the material to them made me realize that first I needed to explain it to myself. And often *they* explained it to *me*.

Introduction

WHAT ARE WE READING?

This book presents interpretations of the eight most important classical Chinese philosophical texts: *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), *Mozi* 墨子, *Mencius* (*Mengzi* 孟子), *Laozi* 老子, *Zhuangzi* 莊子, *Sunzi* 孫子, *Xunzi* 荀子, and *Han Feizi* 韓非子. These eight have been chosen both because they continually respond to each other's arguments and because they have exerted outsize influence on subsequent generations. Except for the *Analects*, which purports to record conversations between Confucius (551–479 BC) and his disciples, each text is named after a supposed author, honored by the term Master (*zi* 子). (*Mencius* is merely *Mengzi*, Latinized by Jesuits.) The very titles have fostered considerable misunderstanding.

Although the positions taken in these texts are never identical—the diversity of Chinese philosophy rarely fails to impress—they do address a number of central questions: What obligations do human beings have toward one another, and why? How do we construct an ideal government? What is a life well lived? Hovering over all of these is a rationalist metaquestion that reflects the crisis of the waning of the Bronze Age: How do we answer such questions for ourselves, seeing that gods and spirits, despite our richest devotions, have failed to do so?[1] And with Bronze Age rituals and diplomatic conventions no longer being recognized, at unprecedented cost of human life, what measures can states take to secure their survival?[2] The anxiety of a collapsing society, and the awareness that it will have to be replaced, are palpable throughout. It is no coincidence that the historical period has long been called the Warring States (*Zhanguo* 戰國).[3] It ended with the unification of China under the First Emperor in 221 BC.

One traditional approach to this material has been to divide it into "schools" (*jia* 家): the Confucians said this; the Daoists said that; the Legalists said something else entirely.[4] Sometimes one encounters the

cliché "the contending voices of a hundred schools" (*baijia zhengming* 百家爭鳴).[5] This conception of Warring States philosophy as a landscape of warring philosophical factions has a long history in China, where the term *jia* has been used to group philosophers into a handful of categories, sometimes in a sincere attempt to understand the complex intellectual history, but all too often as a device to caricature opposing viewpoints. In fact, the latter seems to have been the original purpose.

The historical problem with this practice is that only two of these postulated schools, namely Confucians (*Ruzhe* 儒者) and Mohists (*Mozhe* 墨者), identified themselves (and each other) as such, and can be said to have established any institutions. All the others have been reconstructed purely on the basis of their supposed stances, raising a concomitant philosophical problem: the division of texts into "schools" has served to obscure important differences among their supposed members. As I have argued elsewhere,[6] "Legalism" is the most pernicious label of the bunch, but "Daoism" illustrates similar weaknesses: *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, the two most prominent "Daoist" sources, differ profoundly on the value of government and usefulness (see p. 151), while *dao* 道 is also one of the most important concepts in *Xunzi*, a Confucian text (see p. 182). Does this mean that Xunzi was a Daoist too? And if not, why not?

The sources are simply too rich, and the overall discourse exhibits too much intertextuality, for the "schools" approach to offer more than a crude sketch. At its worst, it tends toward reductionism. Hence I prefer to read each text *as a text*: not necessarily as the manifesto of a school, nor even necessarily as the work of a single brilliant mind. The modern world has developed some good methods of reading texts, and they can help with Chinese philosophy too.

• • •

One of the first questions that readers must ask themselves, regardless of their hermeneutic framework, is what they are reading. In Chinese philosophy, the question is not often raised, in part because of the long-standing but specious assumption that the eight classic philosophical texts were written by the great masters whose names they bear. This approach is congruent with a cardinal tenet of traditional Chinese aesthetics: works of art and literature are produced by talented human beings

as a way of channeling their responses to poignant events.[7] It follows that a great work must have been composed by a great author—and since the texts are undeniably great, each one must have been produced by a magnificently talented human being.

Far from denigrating Chinese philosophy, liberating it from these mythic suppositions only improves our understanding and appreciation of it. As we shall see, not one of the eight texts was written in its present form by the philosopher to whom it is attributed. In some cases, the attribution would not be helpful even if it were valid, since we know virtually nothing about the person who bore the name. This is clearest in the case of Laozi, the mysterious sage whose identity has been disputed since antiquity; but the supposed biography of Sunzi,[8] that is, the great military strategist Sun Wu 孫武, also contains so few credible elements that there remains little reason to assume that he was a real person—other than that traditionalists have long believed it.

More details will be presented in each chapter below; for now, the important point is that such claims do not impugn the stature of *Laozi* or *Sunzi* because it is untrue that great texts must be written by solitary geniuses. Widespread acceptance of the composite authorship of the Bible, for example, has not led anyone to doubt that it is one of the most important texts in Western civilization. By contrast, sustaining the fiction that each classical Chinese philosophical text is the product of a great mind comes with serious interpretive costs. Most patently, it encourages a presumption of philosophical coherence where there may be scant historical warrant for it.[9] More insidiously, it disregards the extent to which transmitters, redactors, and commentators shaped the text for their own audiences and purposes, whether by engineering new implications through new juxtapositions or by foregrounding the passages that appealed to them and mitigating—if not simply excising—those that did not. (Lest there be any doubt about the last possibility, consider that *Mencius* comes down to us in seven chapters because its redactor, Zhao Qi 趙岐 [d. AD 201], excised four others that he deemed unworthy.)[10] A modern reader of classical Chinese texts must strike a fundamental balance: paying due attention to the historical circumstances of each text's transmission without losing sight of its animating ideas—for the ideas are the reason why the texts were transmitted in the first place. It is all too easy for academic interpreters to veer too far in either direction.

Some of the most famous early passages attributing philosophical works to single authors come from the historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (145?–86? BC):[11]

> 昔，西伯拘羑里，演《周易》；孔子戹陳蔡，作《春秋》；屈原放逐，著《離騷》；左丘失明，厥有《國語》；孫子臏腳，而論《兵法》；不韋遷蜀，世傳《呂覽》；韓非囚秦，《說難》、《孤憤》；《詩》三百篇，大抵賢聖發憤之所為作也。此人皆意有所鬱結，不得通其道也，故述往事思來者。[12]

> In the past, when the Earl of the West (i.e., King Wen of Zhou 周文王, d. 1050 BC) was held captive at Youli, he elaborated on the *Changes of Zhou*; when Confucius was in distress between Chen and Cai, he composed the *Springs and Autumns*; when Qu Yuan was banished, he wrote *Encountering Sorrow*; only when Zuoqiu [Ming] lost his sight was there *Discourses of the States*; when Master Sun (i.e., Sun Bin 孫臏, d. 316 BC) had his legs amputated up to the kneecaps, he expounded on *Methods of War*; [Lü] Buwei (d. 235 BC) was exiled to Shu, and generations have transmitted *Lü's Readings*; when Han Fei (d. 233 BC) was imprisoned in Qin, [he produced] *The Difficulties of Persuasion* and *Solitary Outrage*; and most of the three hundred *Odes* were created when worthies and sages expressed their outrage. All these people had something trammeling their ambition; they were unable to propagate their Way and thus narrated past events, mindful of posterity.[13]

Today we know that this is not how most early Chinese texts were produced; in fact, Sima's own *Records of the Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) was one of the first to have been written by the kind of solitary and brooding author that he described so well. (Sima Qian inherited the grand project from his father, Sima Tan 司馬談 [d. ca. 110 BC], but then seems to have compiled most of the book single-handedly, though relying heavily on preexisting material.)[14] Perhaps the oldest surviving single-authored work is *New Discourses* (*Xinyu* 新語), by Lu Jia 陸賈 (ca. 228–ca. 140 BC), which looks like what it claims to be: a sequence of twelve moralistic essays written in response to a request by Emperor Gao of Han 漢高祖 (r. 202–195 BC).[15] Texts like *Records of the Historian* and *New Discourses* bespeak a sea change in cultural attitudes toward authorship, because no single-authored book is attested before the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD

220), but thereafter it was common for writers to compose in their own name.[16] Yang Xiong 揚雄 (53 BC–AD 18)[17] and Wang Chong 王充 (b. AD 27)[18] are two prominent examples.

Many modern critics have observed that, Sima Qian's lament notwithstanding, pre-Han texts are more typically the product of multiple authors.[19] As we have learned from bamboo and silk manuscripts excavated over the past forty-five years, textual units were originally quite small (sometimes as short as a single episode, maybe even a single artfully crafted sentence); the synthetic texts that come down to us were compiled by weaving together these shorter elements.[20] There are, to be sure, references to writings on bamboo as early as the Bronze Age, but they are rare and usually do not even connote what we would call books.[21]

The composite nature of such texts can explain certain features that would otherwise appear bizarre, such as the conspicuous lack of character development in the longest and most celebrated pre-imperial historical text, the *Zuo Commentary* (*Zuozhuan* 左傳)—a strong indication that the received text was not composed as a single opus, but was pieced together out of smaller exempla. In *Shiji*, much of the same material is recast so as to present believable character arcs,[22] whereas in the older *Zuozhuan*, there is sometimes scant coherence between different episodes, to the point that a character can exemplify the very same errors that, a hundred pages earlier, he or she wisely identified and avoided.[23]

Even more importantly, the role of redactors in the process of transmission is still inadequately appreciated.[24] Much of what we now know about textual formation and redaction was discerned by Yu Jiaxi 余嘉錫 (1884–1955) nearly a century ago;[25] manuscripts from sites like Guodian 郭店 (ca. 300 BC),[26] which he did not live to see, have only confirmed that his model was basically correct.[27]

The preface to a collection called *Springs and Autumns of Master Yan* (*Yanzi chunqiu* 晏子春秋), named after the statesman Yan Ying 晏嬰 (d. 500 BC), though philosophically unremarkable (and hence scarcely read),[28] reveals much about how such texts came into being. The imperial library, it turns out, was a crucial institution in the process, because its bibliographers produced many edited collections in their quest to impose order on the thousands of loose and uncategorized documents all around them. The most celebrated such bibliographer, Liu Xiang 劉向 (79–8 BC),[29] detailed his methods when he submitted his edition of *Springs and*

consistent;[41] and why some parts—but, again, not all—appear in very similar form in recently excavated manuscripts, notably from Yinqueshan 銀雀山.[42]

Liu Xiang was responsible for editing more classical texts than anyone else, and several of his prefaces to other works (including *Xunzi*) have survived as well. They relate essentially the same editorial process and permit some general inferences. The first is that the *stemma codicum* model, which aims to reconstruct a cladogram of manuscripts, is inapplicable to texts that were assembled as Liu Xiang described, and hence the very concept of an urtext is a chimera. This is not surprising, since stemmatology was pioneered by Karl Lachmann (1793–1851) and others for analyzing classical and medieval European literature,[43] but misapplications of the method to early Chinese texts have endured.[44]

Nor is a model of accretion any more helpful. This theory likens the text to a pearl that grows ever larger within a mollusk's mantle.[45] Accretion is plainly not the method by which *Springs and Autumns of Master Yan* was compiled. Moreover, even when it is possible to demonstrate that some parts are older than others—as is often the case with classical Chinese texts—this alone does not justify a hypothesis of accretion. The varying antiquity of the material might simply reflect the varying sources that lay at the redactor's disposal.

Thus when sections of a received text are found in excavated manuscripts, it is a mistake to use this discovery as "proof" that the entire text must be assigned a very early date. This fallacy has recently been rekindled by China's rich palaeographical inventory. A good case in point is the text called *School Sayings of Confucius* (*Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語). Most Western scholars—and, until this century, most Chinese scholars too—have considered it a forgery by a zealous teacher and commentator named Wang Su 王肅 (AD 195–256). Because no less than 96 percent of the received text has been shown to consist of passages with parallels in other documents,[46] the truth is not difficult to detect: Wang Su culled a few hundred passages from various sources and passed them off as a book with the pretentious title *School Sayings of Confucius*. (The remaining 4 percent of the text, presumably, was lifted from sources that are now lost.) In his preface to this pastiche,[47] Wang Su asserted that he had received the text from a descendant of Confucius himself, thereby suggesting that it contained authentic Confucian sayings that were never transmitted in

the *Analects*. Although the preface was undoubtedly intended to mislead, it is more charitable to think of Wang Su as an irresponsible redactor rather than as a forger, because he probably did not *invent* a single word. (Forgery requires some talent, after all.) Thus it is only to be expected that some sections of the *School Sayings* have been found in manuscripts since the 1970s. Of course, this does not mean that *School Sayings* is an authentic early text;[48] it means only that some of Wang Su's favorite stories were legitimately old. We know that others were not.

A final general inference to be gleaned from Liu Xiang's prefaces is that his compilations are not necessarily works by single authors (whether or not he himself thought they were).[49] But crucially, his prefaces do not preclude that possibility either. When he collected any and all snippets relating to Yan Ying, most of the resulting anthology was apocryphal at best, because nearly five centuries had elapsed since Yan Ying's death in 500. When he collected texts attributed to Xun Kuang 荀況 (d. after 238 BC),[50] however, he had a much better chance of locating authentic documents, because Xunzi was still one of the most influential philosophers in the Han dynasty, with many eminent students.[51] Two further considerations suggest that Liu Xiang's edition of *Xunzi* is of a fundamentally different type from *Springs and Autumns of Master Yan*. First, the percentage of duplicate bundles is noteworthy: 90 percent (290 out of 322) for *Xunzi* as compared to 73.3 percent (22 out of 30) for *Springs and Autumns of Master Yan*. Both the higher percentage of duplicates and the much higher number of reported bundles suggest that the works of Xunzi were more widely circulated and exhibited less variation.[52] Second, the culture and practice of writing had changed profoundly in the centuries between Yan Ying and Xunzi. Whereas the model of instruction in Yan Ying's time was still typically master-to-disciple, Xunzi lived in a much larger society (with a total population in the tens of millions) and consciously wrote for readers whom he would never meet.[53]

In *Xunzi*, therefore, I believe we have a collection of predominantly authentic essays, but once again taken from diverse sources, and certainly not organized in a manner that Xun Kuang himself had authorized.[54] The chapter divisions, in particular, seem unreliable:[55] whereas some chapters read like self-standing essays, others do not. In "Refutation of Physiognomy" ("Feixiang" 非相), for example, only the opening lines deal with physiognomy; the rest of the chapter seems to consist of stray passages

that Liu Xiang did not quite know where to insert. There are also some chapters with generic instructional material that seems to have been assembled, in John Knoblock's words, as "a proper curriculum,"[56] as well as poems and rhymed riddles that are rarely studied.[57] As we shall see in chapter 8, one of the consequences of this arrangement is that reconstructing Xunzi's arguments requires reading across chapter boundaries: taken as a whole, the book conveys a distinctive philosophical position, but individual chapters are inadequate, indeed sometimes incoherent, on their own.[58]

Han Feizi has a comparable structure and history. Unfortunately, there is no surviving preface to this text, and its redactor is unknown, but formally it looks like *Xunzi*: a posthumous assemblage of memorials, occasional writings, and fragments. It is much longer than *Xunzi*, and for this reason often suspected of including spurious sections, but its philosophical consistency, in addition to its stinging wit, have convinced most modern scholars that, with the exception of a small number of controversial chapters, it was penned by a single author.[59]

Still, we do not know which chapters (if any) were written by Xunzi or Han Feizi in the same way that we know Hume wrote *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* and Kant wrote *Critique of Pure Reason*. There is a difference. The works that we call *Xunzi* and *Han Feizi* cannot be interpreted as direct records of a certain philosopher's cogitation. Any claim of coherence has to emerge from the texts themselves and cannot be based on an appeal to their supposed authorship.

Despite their vast philosophical differences, *Springs and Autumns of Master Yan*, *Xunzi*, and *Han Feizi* have nearly identical textual histories: they were all synthesized out of smaller, heterogeneous units by palace librarians in the Han dynasty, whereafter they were preserved and transmitted, in essentially the same recension, down to the present day. Other cases are more complex because there is both direct and indirect evidence of *multiple* recensions. For example, the received text of *Zhuangzi* is attributed to Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. AD 312),[60] but there were several earlier redactions, including one by Liu Xiang. Though some of these survived for at least a couple of centuries after Guo Xiang, they were all eventually lost, their contents now largely a matter of conjecture.[61] As mentioned above, the received text of *Mencius* was produced by Zhao Qi, whose edition likewise supplanted all others.[62]

Laozi presents yet more ramifications, because no single redaction ever reigned supreme. Hence we speak today of the Wang Bi 王弼 (AD 226–49) edition, the Heshanggong 河上公 edition, the *Xiang'er* 想爾 edition, and so on,[63] not to mention the two manuscript editions from Mawangdui 馬王堆 and related smaller anthologies from Guodian. The differences among these versions—both textual and philosophical—are often substantial.[64]

The associated interpretive pitfalls are sometimes underestimated. A text like *Laozi*, by its nature, can hardly be read without "commentary" (*zhu* 注). Many commentaries were supplied by the earliest transmitters of a text, such as Zhao Qi and Guo Xiang. Far more of them existed in antiquity than are extant today, because the commentaries of a small number of transmitters were typically singled out by posterity as authoritative. Editions of the text would thenceforth be published only with the canonical commentaries; other commentaries would survive in fragments, if at all.[65] But ancient commentaries were not neutral. Commentators expressed their personal understanding of the text, which was often idiosyncratic and creative. The commentary could come to represent an entire tradition, with its own glosses and, not infrequently, its own version of the text itself, as one quickly discovers by perusing the spectrum of *Laozi* commentaries—among which *Xiang'er*, which was used by the Celestial Master sect (*tianshi dao* 天師道), is apt to strike modern readers as the most outlandish (p. 77).[66]

Furthermore, the mechanisms of manuscript transmission help explain why received texts were furnished with commentaries. Because early manuscripts were usually produced for audiences that were already familiar with the material and its characteristic formulas, they were written with economical and underdetermined graphs.[67] Insiders, who perhaps learned the texts under the guidance of an authoritative teacher, knew when their community read the graph *dui* 兌 as *shuo*/*shui* 說 and not, say, *tuo* 脫 (to cite a typical example of graphic underdetermination), but to outsiders, such codicological conventions naturally left the text open to a multiplicity of interpretations. Redactors did their best to eliminate this type of ambiguity by adding, regularizing, or modernizing semantic classifiers (such as 言 in the graph *shuo*/*shui* 說). In this manner, they made the text intelligible to a larger number of readers, but also inevitably narrowed the range of possible interpretations. As texts

circulated ever more widely among readers who, unlike the ancients, had no specialized knowledge or authoritative teacher to guide them orally, explanatory commentaries came to be regarded as indispensable.

Only by ignoring this gnarled background would one dare to distinguish confidently between "the text" of *Laozi* and its "commentaries." A related methodological misstep, when encountering a difficult passage, is to rummage through attested commentaries for a reading that happens to suit one's predilections. A traditional Chinese commentary is a network of interpretations undergirding a discrete worldview; extracted from its context, a commentarial opinion loses its very logic.[68] In the same vein, it makes little sense to speak of "the philosophy" of a constellation of texts like *Laozi* without specifying a particular perspective (or, less honestly, without stating which perspectives one is privileging—and why). *Laozi* has thrived for over two millennia precisely because generations of readers continued to find new meaning in its lapidary verses.

The purpose of highlighting such interpretive challenges is not to diminish the philosophical value of early Chinese texts or to deny that they can be read rigorously and profitably. By no means does a text require single and undisputed authorship to be meaningful: for a quotidian example, consider an ordinary Wikipedia article, but more venerated ones abound, such as the Constitution, the Old Testament,[69] the *Mahābhārata*,[70] or virtually any Mahāyāna sūtra.[71] Conflicting recensions often arise in Western literature as well, particularly in cases where the author died before securing publication.[72] Nor is historicism the only legitimate hermeneutic stance.[73] In the pages that follow, the emphasis will be on ideas, both because this puts the texts in their best light,[74] and because an interest in ideas is probably what prompted anyone to open this book. But philosophical readers accustomed to books unproblematically attributed to Hume or Kant need to be mindful that they are reading works from a different time and place, with radically different conceptions of authorship. *Laozi*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Sunzi* are texts, not people.[75]

The next chapter will take up a hallmark of Chinese philosophy that demands a Western reader's cognizance: its preference for nondeductive argumentation. Then comes the core of the book, eight chapters devoted to the eight philosophical texts; and lastly an explanation of the versatile concept of *qi* 氣, which can be confusing because of its wide range of connotations.

perplexities of life, as well as a reminder that the value of things cannot be gauged by their momentary appeal. At the same time, it is an assertion of the need for experience, and not just reason, in judgment: for if the character of pines and cypresses cannot be appreciated before the year has grown cold, then someone who has never experienced winter cannot possibly comprehend how they surpass the gaudy blooms of springtime. Thus it is not surprising that names bearing the word *song* 松, "pine," were favored by literati in traditional China, and the hardy pine—often shown gnarled and twisted in snowy landscapes—was a mainstay of Chinese nature painting.[13]

One observation is crucial: the statement begs to be taken metaphorically,[14] because no one would have bothered to record and preserve this line if it were really just a remark about pines and cypresses. (The *Analects* is not a manual of forestry.) And metaphors have no place in deductive reasoning. When we say that all elephants are mammals, we are not speaking metaphorically; we *cannot* be speaking metaphorically, or else the very inference would be called into question.[15] (Speakers of English sometimes refer to an obvious problem that no one wishes to address as "the elephant in the room," but that kind of elephant is not a mammal.) Thus Confucius's utterance, however we choose to interpret it, cannot be deductive.

Three general types of nondeductive argumentation in classical Chinese philosophy merit extended discussion: paradox, analogy, and appeal to example.[16]

PARADOX

Many of the paradoxes[17] of the so-called disputers (*bianzhe* 辯者)[18] can be made to seem veridical,[19] or at least veridical in spirit, if interpreted sympathetically. For example, among the ten paradoxes ascribed to Hui Shi 惠施 (fourth century BC), one finds: "The South has no limit but has a limit" 南方無窮而有窮.[20] We do not know how Hui Shi himself defended this paradox, but there are interpretations that would render it veridical: the quadrant called "South" contains an infinite number of points, but it does not include the entire world; it is distinct, naturally, from the quadrants called "North," "East," and "West." Thus it is both

limitless and limited at the same time.[21] Another (possible) example of veridical paradox is "Eggs have hair" 卵有毛:[22] if this is taken to mean "Inside an egg, there is hair"—that is, the hair of the unborn chick inside—then it is an unexpectedly true statement. (The Chinese word *mao* 毛 denotes body hair, such as the pelt of an animal, and could have been stretched to refer to the down of a chick.) One paradox that should have attracted more attention from modern linguists is "Dogs can be sheep" 犬可以為羊,[23] which is veridical if it means "Dogs may be called 'sheep' ": the word "dog" is arbitrary and has nothing to do with the nature of the dog itself.[24]

Many of the disputers' paradoxes rely on the technique of exploiting a vulnerable keyword, either by using it in a sense different from what the audience expects, or by using it in one sense in one part of the paradox, and in a different sense in another.[25] (This is similar to the fallacy of equivocation in Western philosophy.)[26] Thus "Tortoises are longer than snakes" 龜長於蛇 if one takes "long" in the sense of "long-lived."[27] Unexpected, but not untrue. The most famous paradox of all, "A white horse is not a horse" 白馬非馬,[28] can be identified as another example of this technique if "white horse" and "horse" are taken to refer not to horses, but to sets of horses: the set of objects fulfilling the requirements "white and horse" and the set of objects fulfilling the requirement "horse" are not identical.[29]

Later Mohist exercises in semiotics attest to an interest in analyzing how such paradoxes could be constructed. A typical example: "The fruit of the peach is the peach, but the fruit of the *ji*-tree is not the *ji*" 桃之實, 桃也; 棘之實, 非棘也,[30] which seems to be predicated on the oddity that the word *tao* 桃 (peach) refers to both the tree and the fruit that it bears (as in English), whereas the word *ji* 棘 refers only to the tree, because its fruit is called *zao* 棗 ("jujube" or "Chinese date" in English).[31] From here it would not be far to a hypothetical paradox like "Peaches are not fruit" (because they are trees).

Not everyone was convinced of the value of such adventures in language—Xunzi rejected them as useless for the enterprise of moral self-cultivation (see pp. 193–94)—but some of the most important statements in the *Laozi* rely on the same technique of using a keyword in two different senses (and therefore probably stem from the same intellectual environment). "The highest virtue is not virtuous; therefore, it

has virtue" 上德不德, 是以有德 (*Laozi* 38) is usually not treated as sophistry like "Tortoises are longer than snakes," but it relies on the same rhetorical device. For "The highest virtue is not virtuous" to have any intelligible meaning, the keyword *de* 德 (virtue, inner power) must be taken in two different ways. The first *de*, called *shangde* 上德, or the highest virtue, refers to *de* that is real and potent because it derives from the *dao* 道 itself, whereas the second *de*, merely *de*, refers to the great sham that human society, in its self-induced ignorance, wrongly identifies as *de*. Thus the highest virtue has real virtue precisely because it is not the false virtue that everyone has been trained to venerate. Usually such paradoxes are explained as part of a sustained rhetoric in *Laozi* whose purpose is to shake complacent readers and make them question their unnatural assumptions about the world,[32] like the aesthetic technique of defamiliarization.[33]

ANALOGY

Reasoning by analogy was a crucial mode of deliberation in traditional China.[34] It was one of the hallmarks of Chinese jurisprudence[35] and also figures prominently in early Chinese poetics, where it was identified by the critical terms *bi* 比 (comparison or juxtaposition) and *xing* 興 (arousal). (The precise meanings of *bi* and *xing* are notoriously difficult to unravel and indeed vary from one authority to another.)[36] In philosophy, one of the best-known examples appears in *Mencius*:

> 孟子曰：「魚，我所欲也。熊掌，亦我所欲也。二者不可得兼，舍魚而取熊掌者也。生，亦我所欲也。義，亦我所欲也。二者不可得兼，舍生而取義者也。生亦我所欲，所欲有甚於生者，故不為苟得也。死亦我所惡，所惡有甚於死者，故患有所不辟也。」(*Mencius* 6A.10)[37]

> Mencius said: "I like fish; I also like bear's paw. If I cannot have both, I shall forgo fish and choose bear's paw. I like life; I also like righteousness. If I cannot have both, I shall forgo life and choose righteousness. Although I like life, there are things that I like more than life, and thus I should not keep [my life] indecorously. Although I dislike death, there are things that I dislike more than death, and thus there are some perils that I should not avoid."

As moral philosophy, this passage conveys a certain mindset rather than formulating a definite argument (and as an argument it is obviously not deductive). Just as a gourmet is prepared to sacrifice fish for the sake of a delicacy like bear's paw, a moral connoisseur[38] is prepared to sacrifice his or her life for the sake of righteousness. Naturally, the analogy does not *prove* that righteousness is worth dying for; it merely illustrates Mencius's zeal.

Many such analogies refer to natural phenomena with the unstated supposition that patterns observable in nature cannot be wrong.[39] This conviction underlies arguments that are not always well received today. For example, early in the famed debate between Mencius and Gaozi 告子, the latter presents the view that human nature (*xing* 性) lacks any inherent moral orientation; like a torrent of water, it will rush in whichever direction is laid open for it. Mencius responds by assailing the analogy: water does have an inherent orientation after all, because it always flows downward. Thus human nature is inherently good in the same way that water naturally flows downward (*Mencius* 6A.2). This argument has been harshly criticized in modern times;[40] its power must have been greater in a culture like that of ancient China, where reasoning by analogy was deeply respected.[41]

It must also be acknowledged that appeals to natural phenomena were often used to keep women in their place. In "The Oath at Mu" ("Mushi" 牧誓), King Wu of Zhou 周武王 (r. 1046–1043 BC) justifies his decision to attack the King of Shang on the grounds that the latter listens to his wife:

> 王曰：「古人有言曰：『牝雞無晨；牝雞之晨，惟家之索。』今商王受惟婦言是用。」[42]
>
> The King said: "The ancients had a saying: 'The hen shall not announce the morning; when the hen announces the morning, it means that the family will wane.' Now King Shou of Shang implements only the words of his wife."

Hens should just keep quiet in the morning, because they threaten the survival of the family when they try to do the rooster's job.[43]

Not infrequently, Chinese authors saw meaningful patterns in nature that we would not recognize today; for example, *Comprehensive Discus-*

sions from the White Tiger Hall (*Baihu tong* 白虎通) explains that women should follow their husbands because *yang* sings the lead and *yin* harmonizes (*yang chang yin he* 陽倡陰和).[44] This is the problem with analogizing from nature: all observation of the natural world necessarily passes through one's personal interpretive filter, and therefore different people do not always apperceive the same pattern when they perceive the same set of objects.[45]

APPEAL TO EXAMPLE

Appeals to example are nearly ubiquitous in ancient Chinese philosophy (the most prominent text not to resort to them is *Laozi*), and it seems fruitful to divide the technique into a number of subtypes. Appeal to history has been regarded as so typical of Chinese philosophy that Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) derided it as the "Chinese argument."[46] Rarely did Chinese persuaders fail to refer to examples from the past that supposedly bolstered their case—nor did they always feel obliged to recount details accurately.[47]

A more specific category is appeal to the sages of yore and the canonical texts attributed to them, which prompted a backlash in texts such as *Han Feizi*.[48] Teaching people how to build nests in trees or drill flint in order to make fire were crucial advances in prehistoric times, but in later eras they would have been laughable:

> 今有搆木鑽燧於夏后氏之世者，必為鯀、禹笑矣。有決瀆於殷、周之世者，必為湯、武笑矣。然則今有美堯、舜、湯、武、禹之道於當今之世者，必為新聖笑矣。(*Han Feizi* 49)[49]

> If there were someone who built nests or drilled flint in the Xia dynasty, he would surely be ridiculed by Gun and Yu. If there were someone who cleared water channels in the age of Yin and Zhou dynasties, he would surely by ridiculed by Tang and Wu. Yet today there are those who praise the ways of Yao, Tang, Wu, and Yu as though they were appropriate for today's age; surely they are to be ridiculed by new sages.

What may have been laudable actions by sages of the past are not necessarily appropriate to the very different society of today.

Han Feizi does not worry about whether Guan Zhong *really* said what was attributed to him (what stenographer would have been present at his bedside, after all?); the point is that arguments about how to deal with self-interested ministers could be persuasively praised or criticized, depending on one's perspective. This is why so many appeals to historical events, as noted above, contain unconcealed factual errors. Their veracity was less of a concern than their illustrative power.

It would be unproductive, therefore, to distinguish rigidly between "anecdotes" like that of Guan Zhong's deathbed advice in *Han Feizi* and the unmistakably fictitious stories of *Zhuangzi*, which are more commonly characterized as "parables."[60] (None of these English terms, it should be noted, can be mapped neatly onto Chinese vocabulary.)[61] Consider the famous parable that draws the "Inner Chapters" (*neipian* 內篇) of *Zhuangzi* to a close:

> 南海之帝為儵，北海之帝為忽，中央之帝為渾沌。儵與忽時相與遇於渾沌之地，渾沌待之甚善。儵與忽謀報渾沌之德，曰：「人皆有七竅，以視聽食息，此獨無有，嘗試鑿之。」日鑿一竅，七日而渾沌死。(*Zhuangzi* 7)[62]

> The Emperor of the Southern Sea was named Zig; the Emperor of the Northern Sea was named Zag; the Emperor of the Center was named Blob. Zig and Zag often met each other in Blob's territory, and Blob received them very well. Zig and Zag planned to repay Blob for his kindness, saying: "All human beings have seven holes for seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing. [Blob] is the only one who does not have them. Let us try drilling them for him!" Each day they drilled another hole, and on the seventh day Blob died.

No rational reader would object to this anecdote/parable on the grounds that Zig, Zag, and Blob are not real people.[63] We are invited to ruminate on the story, knowing full well that it must be fictitious, for the philosophical insights that it obliquely conveys—an exercise that remains fruitful to this day, with our urgent new concern for maintaining the integrity of the environment.[64] Thus appeals to history, anecdotes, and parables lie on a continuum of historicity ranging from the generally unexceptionable historical examples offered by nearly every ancient persuader at court; to more questionable historical examples, such as Guan

Zhong's deathbed advice in *Han Feizi*; to parables with no pretense of factuality, such as the tale of Zig, Zag, and Blob in *Zhuangzi*. But fundamentally they are of the same species: devices that aim to clarify a philosophical problem by focusing on a cogent example.

• • •

The foregoing should not be misread as a denial that Chinese philosophers ever engaged in deductive reasoning. There are several important classical Chinese arguments that can be restated in terms of propositional logic[65]—for instance, the Mohist defense of impartial love (*jian'ai* 兼愛):

> 姑嘗本原若眾害之所自生，此胡自生？此自愛人利人生與？即必曰非然也；必曰從惡人賊人生。分名乎天下，惡人而賊人者，兼與？別與？即必曰別也。然即之交別者，果生天下之大害者與？是故別非也。(*Mozi* 16)[66]

> If one were to investigate whence these various harms arise, whence do these things arise?[67] Do these things arise from caring for others and benefiting others? One would have to say that this is not the case; one would have to say that they arise from hating others and despoiling others. If one were to categorize things in the world by means of names, would those who hate others and despoil others [be called] impartial or partial? One would have to say partial. Thus is it not the case that engaging [others] with partiality gives rise to the great harms in the world? For this reason, partiality is wrong.

I take this as an early attempt at a deductive argument (essentially a composite Barbara syllogism):

$p \rightarrow q$
(If one is partial, one hates and despoils others.)

$q \rightarrow r$
(If one hates and despoils others, one causes harm.)

$r \rightarrow s$
(If one causes harm, one is wrong.)

$\therefore p \rightarrow s$
(If one is partial, one is wrong.)

More complex deductive arguments can be found in later texts. Xunzi's elaborate argument against abdication, which he tries to rule out as a method of transferring sovereignty in all possible situations,[68] contains an example of disjunctive elimination.

曰：「死而擅之。」是又不然。. . . . . 聖王已沒，天下無聖，則固莫足以擅天下矣。天下有聖而在後[子][69]者，則天下不離，朝不易位，國不更制，天下厭然與鄉無以異也，以堯繼堯，夫又何變之有矣？聖不在後子而在三公，則天下如歸，猶復而振之矣，天下厭然與鄉無以異也，以堯繼堯，夫又何變之有矣？唯其徙朝改制為難。故天子生則天下一隆，致順而治，論德而定次；死則能任天下者必有之矣。夫禮義之分盡矣，擅讓惡用矣哉？(*Xunzi* 18.5c)[70]

It is said: "When [the King] is dying, he should cede to someone else." This is also not so. . . . If the sage kings have already fallen, and there is no sage in the world, then there is certainly no one adequate to cede the world to. If there is a sage king in the world, and he is among [the current King's] sons or descendants, the dynasty does not change; the state does not alter its regulations. The world will be satisfied with this; there will be no respect in which this differs from [the situation] prior. If a Yao succeeds a Yao, what change would there be? If the sage is not among his sons or descendants, but among the Three Chief Ministers, then the world will come home to him as though he were restoring and sustaining it. The world will be satisfied with this; there will be no respect in which this differs from [the situation] prior. If a Yao succeeds a Yao, again, what change would there be?

This too is deductive in structure:

$\sim p \vee (q \vee r)$
(Either there is no sage or there is a sage among the King's descendants or the Three Chief Ministers.)

$\sim p \rightarrow \sim s$
(If there is no sage, there is no reason for abdication.)

$q \rightarrow \sim s$
(If there is a sage among the King's descendants, there is no reason for abdication.)

r → ~s
(If there is a sage among the Three Chief Ministers, there is no reason for abdication.)

∴ ~s
(There is no reason for abdication.)

The opening premise is questionable, however: Xunzi does not seem to have envisioned a situation in which there is a sage in the world who is *neither* one of the King's descendants *nor* one of the Three Chief Ministers; nor is it entirely clear why succession by one of the Three Chief Ministers did not, in his mind, constitute the establishment of a new dynasty. (Consider the example of Yu, the sage who succeeded Shun, thereby initiating the dynasty known as Xia 夏.) But otherwise, the reasoning is sound.

Ancient Chinese audiences were so familiar with disjunctive elimination that even jokers could use it in texts intended more for entertainment than edification:

秦宣太后愛魏醜夫。太后病將死，出令曰：「為我葬，必以魏子為殉。」
魏子患之。庸芮為魏子說太后曰：「以死者為有知乎？」
太后曰：「無知也。」
曰：「若太后之神靈，明知死者之無知矣，何為空以生所愛，葬於無知之死人哉！若死者有知，先王積怒之日久矣，太后救過不贍，何暇乃私魏醜夫乎？」
太后曰：「善。」乃止。[71]

Queen Dowager Xuan of Qin [d. 265 BC] loved Wei Choufu.[72] When the Queen Dowager fell ill and was about to die, she issued an order, saying: "When I am buried, Master Wei must accompany me in death."

Master Wei was horrified by this. Yong Rui persuaded the Queen Dowager in Master Wei's behalf, saying: "Do you consider the dead to have consciousness?"

The Queen Dowager said: "They have no consciousness."

[Yong Rui] said: "If your Majesty's godlike numen is clearly aware that the dead have no consciousness, why would you vainly take the person you loved in life, and bury him with the dead, who lack consciousness? And if the dead do have consciousness, the former king has been accu-

mulating his wrath for many days. Your Majesty, you will scarcely have the means to make amends for your transgressions—how would you have leisure for assignations with Wei Choufu?"

Restated in propositional form, this yields:

$p \vee \sim p$
(Either the dead have consciousness or the dead do not have consciousness.)

$p \rightarrow r$
(If the dead have consciousness, having your lover buried with you is a waste.)

$\sim p \rightarrow r$
(If the dead do not have consciousness, having your lover buried with you is a waste.)

$\therefore r$
(Having your lover buried with you is a waste.)

And that is a valid inference.

These few but memorable examples leave no doubt that audiences were aware of principles of deduction and thus suggest that Chinese philosophers crafted nondeductive arguments as a deliberate choice. Arguments that rely wholly on deductive inference, like Xunzi's case against abdication, are not easy to find; one can only surmise that they were not preferred. Why? Two answers come to mind. First, there is a deep conviction in Chinese culture that persuasive speech must be artfully patterned, as in the famous saying attributed to Confucius: "If you do not speak, who will know your will? But if you speak it without *wen*, it will not go far" 不言誰知其志? 言之無文, 行而不遠.[73] The basic meaning of *wen* is "pattern," but—not surprisingly in view of such uses—it has attained many other connotations, including "literature" and "civilization."[74] Philosophers who subscribed to this idea would have been motivated to compose as elegantly as possible; sometimes, classical Chinese philosophy is expressed so beautifully that it verges on poetry. But many of the most prized literary devices in the Chinese tradition, such as meiosis and metaphor, are not readily compatible with the fulsome exposition characteristic of deductive argumentation.

PART I

Philosophy of Heaven

CHAPTER TWO

The *Analects* of Confucius

Confucius is the most influential thinker in Chinese civilization and the first whose philosophy can be reconstructed to any significant degree. In China, he has been known by many posthumous names and titles, the most revealing being *xianshi* 先師, which can be understood as both "the teacher from the past" and "the foremost teacher." Confucius was, as far as we can tell, the first teacher of his kind and the inaugurator of one of the most glorious philosophical ages of any ancient culture.

There were surely many ritual masters in the generations preceding Confucius. Museumgoers know that, in the bounteous Chinese Bronze Age, kings and elite lineages produced untold numbers of bronze vessels in various typical forms with precise ritual functions. It is clear from assemblages in burials that each type of vessel was necessary for the full concert of rituals, and archaic literature—including the many inscriptions cast on these bronze vessels—tells us that the correct performance of these rites was crucial to securing the blessing of the spirits. Deceased ancestors were thought to perdure after death as spirits who had to be properly cultivated with sacrifices and other ritual obsequies. As early as the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–ca. 1045 BC), for example, kings would divine about the source of their toothaches; for only after it was determined which ancestral spirit was responsible for the affliction could the appropriate steps be taken to placate him or her. (Ancestresses were no less terrifying in this respect than ancestors.) And the toothache was understood as a warning to rectify whatever wrongdoing or oversight had irked the spirit in question. Toothache today—flood or earthquake or some comparable catastrophe tomorrow.[1]

Doubtless, then, the ritual culture implied by the numerous surviving bronze artifacts required ritual masters who could explain to new generations how each vessel was to be used. And there are hints in ancient texts that some of these ritual masters began to incorporate moral principles

into their curriculum. Now it was not enough simply to carry out the appropriate sacrifice correctly; it was necessary also to live up to the right moral standard. What these high ancients really said, however, is for the most part beyond recovery, as there are only the scantest records of their utterances. Confucius was apparently the first to have his teachings documented by his disciples, and, not coincidentally, seems to have emphasized the moral aspect of correct ritual practice to an unprecedented degree. Thus he transformed the ancient role of ritual master, expert in the ways of cauldrons and platters, into something that we would call a moral philosopher.

The prime difficulty facing any reader today is that Confucius did not leave behind any written work. Tradition has ascribed to him the redaction of certain canonical texts, especially the *Springs and Autumns* (*Chunqiu* 春秋),[2] but the attributions are not fully convincing, and in any case no one suggests that he *composed* the texts—only that he arranged preexisting material in a morally revealing way. There are dozens of sources that record this or that saying as having been uttered by Confucius, the most authoritative of which is the so-called *Analects*, but these were all produced after his death.

There are two plausible reasons why Confucius never felt compelled to leave behind a treatise or similar written text. First, in his day, writing was not the most important means of communication. In our world, at least for the past several centuries, the surest way to publish one's ideas has been to put them in writing, and even as today's technology has created useful media besides the old-fashioned book, writing is unlikely to disappear soon—as ubiquitous texting and blogging attest. But Confucius's society was small enough that oral communication sufficed for many more purposes than we might assume. When a wise man advised a king, he would typically say, "Your servant has *heard* . . ." (*chen wen* 臣聞 or *chen wen zhi* 臣聞之), rather than "Your servant has *read* . . ." Any idea worth repeating would be transmitted from one mouth to the next. And as soon as people stopped repeating it, it died. To be sure, writing had already been known for a good millennium by Confucius's time, but its uses seem to have been mostly hieratic.[3] If you needed to communicate with ancestral spirits, you needed a scribe. But if you wished to discuss right conduct with your neighbor, you just started talking. Thus one reason why Confucius never wrote down his teachings is that he never imag-

ined it would be necessary to do so. His legacy would continue through his disciples, who would pass it on, orally, to disciples of their own.

Second, Confucius may have deemed writing incompatible with one of his most important ideas: that people need to think for themselves. To reprise the quote with which we ended the previous chapter: "I begin with one corner; if [a student] cannot return with the other three corners, I do not repeat myself" (*Analects* 7.8). A teacher can be expected to lay down the guidelines, but students must then fill out the rest of the picture on their own.[4] Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius is shown to be uneasy about affirming any universal principle; rightness and wrongness must be judged anew in every situation. Thus, in teaching, it is a mistake to deliver wooden lectures to audiences of students with disparate needs:

子路問：「聞斯行諸？」子曰：「有父兄在，如之何其聞斯行之？」冉有問：「聞斯行諸？」子曰：「聞斯行之。」公西華曰：「由也問聞斯行諸，子曰『有父兄在』；求也問聞斯行諸，子曰『聞斯行之』。赤也惑，敢問。」子曰：「求也退，故進之。由也兼人，故退之。」(*Analects* 11.22)[5]

Zilu (i.e., Zhong Yóu 仲由, 542–480 BC) asked: "Should one practice something after having heard it?"

The Master said: "You have a father and elder brother who are still alive; how would you practice something after having heard it?"

Ran Yǒu (b. 522 BC) asked: "Should one practice something after having heard it?"

The Master said: "One should practice something after having heard it."

Gongxi Hua (i.e., Gongxi Chi 公西赤, b. 539 BC) said: "When Yóu (i.e., Zilu) asked whether one should practice something after having heard it, you said: 'Your father and elder brother are still alive.' When Qiu (i.e., Ran Yǒu) asked whether one should practice something after having heard it, you said: 'One should practice something after having heard it.' I am confused, and venture to ask about this."

The Master said: "Qiu is withdrawn; thus I urged him forward. Yóu [has the eagerness] of two men; thus I held him back."

This exchange is included in the *Analects* for the insight that two different students should not necessarily be taught the same lesson.[6] But in a *written* document, to be read by strangers not in his presence (or indeed

Notice that Confucius does not go so far as to deny the potential value of prayer; he only questions it, then concludes with the unforgettable instruction that, if it has any value at all, prayer consists not of formulas repeated mechanically from predetermined liturgies, but in one's everyday words and deeds. Throughout the *Analects*, we see Confucius deconstructing received religion and enjoining his disciples to think through an entirely new moral system with *human interaction* as its base,[18] not veneration of ghosts and spirits:

> 樊遲問知。子曰：「務民之義，敬鬼神而遠之，可謂知矣。」(*Analects* 6.20)[19]
>
> Fan Chi (b. 515 BC) asked about wisdom. The Master said: "To take righteousness among the people as one's duty, and to revere the ghosts and spirits, but keep them at a distance, can be called wisdom."

Do what you think is right, not what you think the ghosts and spirits want you to do. For we can never know what the ghosts and spirits want anyway (at least not until we become ghosts and spirits ourselves).

Confucius is not an atheist—he concedes that there are ghosts and spirits,[20] and that it is advisable not to offend them—but he believes that pondering the afterlife and the supernatural will impede moral reasoning:

> 季路問事鬼神。子曰：「未能事人，焉能事鬼？」曰：「敢問死。」曰：「未知生，焉知死？」(*Analects* 11.11)[21]
>
> Jilu (i.e., Zilu) asked about the services for ghosts and spirits. The Master said: "You do not yet know how to serve people. How will you be able to serve ghosts?"
>
> "May I be so bold as to ask about death?"
>
> [Confucius] said: "You do not yet know life. How can you know death?"

One last passage in the same vein comes from chapter 17, in other words one of the spurious chapters, but is worth citing here because it anticipates a crucial theme in later Confucianism: we may not be able to read the will of the gods, but we can infer how nature works by observing it. Nature abides by regular and discernible patterns, which we can learn by intelligent observation and then apply to our own lives:

子曰：「予欲無言。」子貢曰：「子如不言，則小子何述焉？」子曰：「天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？」(*Analects* 17.19)[22]

The Master said: "I wish to be without speech."

Zigong (i.e., Duanmu Ci 端木賜, 520–456 BC) said: "If you do not speak, then what will we, your children, have to transmit from you?"

The Master said: "What does Heaven say? The four seasons progress by it; the many creatures are born by it. What does Heaven say?"

So much for traditional religion; while most other people in Confucius's day were trying to find moral bearings by worshiping gods and spirits, and attempting to ascertain their mysterious wishes through divination and other questionable ceremonies, Confucius told his students to set aside that credulous mode and focus instead on human relationships in the world of the living. And how do we treat other human beings? This is where the "one thing with which to string everything together" comes into play. First, the best-known passage, in which Confucius addresses his student, Zeng Cān 曾參 (505–436 BC?):[23]

子曰：「參乎！吾道一以貫之。」曾子曰：「唯。」子出，門人問曰：「何謂也？」曾子曰：「夫子之道，忠恕而已矣。」(*Analects* 4.15)[24]

The Master said: "Cān! In my Way, there is one thing with which to string [everything] together."

Master Zeng said: "Yes."

The Master went out, and the disciples asked: "What was he referring to?"

Master Zeng said: "The Way of the Master is nothing other than *zhong* and *shu*."

Zhong 忠 and *shu* 恕 are difficult terms that need to be unpacked by referring to other passages in the *Analects*, as they have acquired other distracting senses in ordinary Chinese. *Zhong*, for instance, is usually understood today as "loyalty," but that is not even close to what Confucius meant.

Shu is the more consequential of the two.[25] Remember that Confucius said there was *one thing* in his Way, and yet Master Zeng explained it to the other disciples as *zhong* and *shu*—two things. In two very similar

passages, but this time with Zigong as the interlocutor, Confucius implies that the one thing is not *zhong* and *shu*, but merely *shu*. At the same time, he gives a direct definition:

子曰：「賜也，女以予為多學而識之者與？」對曰：「然，非與？」曰：「非也，予一以貫之。」(*Analects* 15.2)[26]

Confucius said: "Ci, do you consider me one who knows things by having studied much?"

[Zigong] replied: "Yes. Is that not so?"

[Confucius] said: "It is not so. I have one thing with which to string everything together."

子貢問曰：「有一言而可以終身行之者乎？」子曰：「其恕乎！己所不欲，勿施於人。」(*Analects* 15.23)[27]

Zigong asked: "Is there one word that one can practice throughout one's life?"

That Master said: "Is it not *shu* (reciprocity)? What you yourself do not desire, do not do to others."

"What you yourself do not desire, do not do to others" is the cornerstone of Confucian ethics,[28] but an immediate qualification is necessary: in practice, *shu* has to be interpreted as doing unto others as you would have others do unto you *if you had the same social role as they*.[29] Otherwise, *shu* would require fathers to treat their sons in the same manner that their sons treat them—a practice that no Confucian has ever considered appropriate.

The detail that the calculus of *shu* requires us also to take the actors' social status into account may not be clear from the *Analects*, but is unmistakable in another famous statement attributed to Confucius and recorded in the *Application of Equilibrium* (*Zhongyong* 中庸):

忠恕違道不遠，施諸己而不愿，亦勿施於人。君子之道四，丘未能一焉：所求乎子以事父，未能也；所求乎臣以事君，未能也；所求乎弟以事兄，未能也；所求乎朋友先施之，未能也。(*Zhongyong* 13)[30]

Zhong and *shu* are not far from the Way. What you would not suffer others to do to you, do not do to them. There are four things in the Way of the

> Noble Man, none of which I have been able to do. I have not been able to serve my father as I demand of my son. I have not been able to serve my lord as I demand of my servant. I have not been able to serve my elder brother as I demand of my younger brother. I have not been able to do unto my friends first as I demand of them.

To revisit the example of a father and son: in order to apply *shu* correctly, the question for a son to consider is not how his father treats him, but how he would like his own son to treat him. *Shu* is a relation not between two individuated people, but between two social roles. How does one treat one's father? In the same way that one would want to be treated by one's son *if one were a father oneself*.[31]

There are well-known difficulties, not addressed by Confucius in the *Analects*, with ethical systems based on the notion of reciprocity. The most important is the objection that different people can sincerely wish to be treated in different ways, and, as a result, might treat other people in different ways too—without necessarily being wicked or hypocritical.[32] Confucius's silence on this problem is significant. Either he believes that people will always come to the same general conclusions about how they wish to be treated (if they practice *shu* without self-delusion), or he believes that such varying interpretations of the demands of *shu* are permissible as long as people's actions rest on a legitimate basis of moral reasoning. In the past I have leaned more toward the former interpretation (implicitly attributing to Confucius a somewhat rigid conception of human nature),[33] but now I favor the latter. Enslaving others under the pretext that it would be best for slaves to be enslaved would never be acceptable as *shu*. But if we observe a crime while it is being committed and can do something about it, is it better to call the police or intervene personally? Either option would be defensible if we truly believe that it is what would be most helpful. Only the person who does nothing at all would be open to condemnation.

Shu is crucial to Confucian ethics, as we shall see presently, but first we must ask what is meant by *zhong*. Confucius never defines *zhong* as straightforwardly as he defines *shu*, and some questionable modern interpretations are based on the Neo-Confucian understanding of *zhong* as "making the most of oneself" (*jinji* 盡己). Thus D. C. Lau, for example, has rendered *zhong* too diffusely as "doing one's best."[34] In my view, *zhong*

has an effective meaning of "being honest with oneself in dealing with others"[35] in the *Analects*, and the key passage is, not coincidentally, placed in the mouth of the same Master Zeng:

曾子曰：「吾日三省吾身：為人謀而不忠乎？與朋友交而不信乎？傳不習乎？」(*Analects* 1.4)[36]

Master Zeng said: "Every day I examine myself on three counts. In planning on behalf of others, have I failed to be *zhong*? In associating with friends, have I failed to be trustworthy? Have I transmitted anything that I do not practice habitually?"

What Master Zeng means by the first of his three tests is whether, in carrying out *shu*, he has done wrong by others by pretending that what is beneficial to *himself* is what *they* would want him to do. *Shu* is instantly perverted if it is applied dishonestly, but self-deception is not always easy to discover and root out if one does not vigilantly review one's own actions. For this reason, *zhong* is frequently paired with *xin* 信, "trustworthiness," in the *Analects*.

To return to *shu*: Confucius's identification of *shu* as "What you yourself do not desire, do not do to others" helps explain several other passages in the *Analects*. Confucius's disciples knew that although he spoke of several different virtues, the most important was called *ren* 仁, "humanity." (The word is homophonous with *ren* 人, "human being," and Confucians have been fond of taking advantage of this aural connection.)[37]

子曰：「知者樂水，仁者樂山。知者動，仁者靜。知者樂，仁者壽。」(*Analects* 6.21)[38]

The Master said: "The wise take joy in rivers; the humane take joy in mountains. The wise are active; the humane are still. The wise are joyous; the humane are long-lived."

Clearly both the wise and the humane are praised in this statement, but a listener attuned to Confucius's suggestive style will recognize that, in this formulation, humanity comes before wisdom in the same way that rivers flow down from mountains. Rivers always move; mountains remain stationary till the end of time. There can be mountains without rivers, but no rivers without mountains.

matters: if you do not know how to act, cleave to the *li*, and you will never be wrong. This might also have been the standard conception of *li* in Confucius's own day: a practicable code that ambitious young men hoped to learn from experienced ritual masters. The problem is that this understanding of *li* is inadequate for Confucius, because he explicitly *contrasts* the rites with anything like a predetermined code (and, to this extent, the very translation of *li* as "rite" or "ritual" can be misleading):

> 子曰：「道之以政，齊之以刑，民免而無恥。道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格。」(*Analects* 2.3)[44]
>
> The Master said: "If you guide them with legislation, and unify them with punishments, then the people will avoid [the punishments] but have no conscience. If you guide them with virtue, and unify them with ritual, then they will have a conscience; moreover, they will correct themselves."

Legislation and punishments are not ineffective; on the contrary, they are *highly* effective, because they make people do whatever is necessary to avoid being punished. But what laws and punishments cannot do is effect any moral transformation in the populace, and this (as will soon become clear) is the only legitimate purpose of government. Laws and punishments are like traffic lights at an intersection. Traffic lights are effective at preventing accidents because most people abide by them. And why do we abide by them? For two obvious reasons: we do not want to be fined for going through a red light, and we do not want to cause an accident by driving headlong into traffic. (The former would seem to be the overriding concern, as most motorists stop at red lights even in the middle of the night, when the intersection is empty.) Confucius's point would be that traffic lights do not make anyone a better person. One can be a perfectly wicked person and still stop unfailingly at every red light. Traffic lights simply mold our conduct, not our inner morality. And this, as far as Confucius is concerned, is not enough; what government really needs are not laws and punishments, but virtue and ritual. Only virtue and ritual can aid in moral self-cultivation.

Thus, as tempting as the interpretation may be, *li* cannot refer to a code of conduct, and, therefore, in order to understand *Analects* 12.1—"Do not look in opposition to the rites; do not listen in opposition to the rites;