



Confucius Ridens: Humor in The Analects

Christoph Harbsmeier

Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Jun., 1990), 131-161.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0073-0548%28199006%2950%3A1%3C131%3ACRHTA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G>

Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies is currently published by Harvard-Yenching Institute.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/hyi.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact jstor-info@umich.edu.

Confucius Ridens: Humor in the *Analects*

CHRISTOPH HARBSMEIER

University of Oslo

THE young Søren Kierkegaard started his career by writing about irony in Socrates. On a much smaller scale I want to talk about humor in Confucius. *Sic haec mihi nunc senilis est declamatio.*¹ For the *Analects*² 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. But I do like to think that *Confucius ridens*, the smiling Confucius, has always been privately and quietly appreciated by congenial readers and scholars, East and West.³

I am grateful to Nathan Sivin, Pierre Ryckmans, and Søren Egerod for helpful criticism of an early draft of this paper. I also owe a debt of gratitude to the Institute of East Asian Philosophies, Singapore, for their very generous support when I first planned this paper, while attached to that institution as a research fellow in 1985.

¹ "Such now is my subject appropriate to my advanced age." Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes*, ed. M. Pohlenz (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1965), p. 220.

² All unmarked references in this article are to the *Analects* according to the numbering in D. C. Lau, *Confucius, The Analects* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1984). The translations, though sometimes inspired by D. C. Lau's, are my own responsibility.

³ I have derived inspiration, sustenance, and solace from Erasmus of Rotterdam's masterpiece *Moriae Encomium Erasmi Roterodami Declamatio*, "The praise of folly" (1st ed. Strasbourg: Mathew Scheurer, 1511). More specifically I have profited from a small seminal article

Thinking through Confucius and analyzing his concepts is one thing. In the West, the relevant passages in the *Analects* have been rehearsed and reinterpreted profusely and profoundly ever since the first vogue (around 1688) of publications like *Confucius Sinarum philosophus, sive scientia sinensis latine exposita* by Prosper Intorcetta, Christian Herdtrich, Francisco Rougemont and Phillipp Couplet (Paris, 1687),⁴ L'Abbé Simon Foucher, *Lettre sur la morale de Confucius* (Paris, 1688), Jean de la Brune, *La morale de Confucius, philosophe de la Chine* (Amsterdam, 1688), and especially since Christian Wolff was expelled from the University of Halle for having delivered, in 1721, his ominously over-enthusiastic peroration to this series of books, the *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica* (English edition: *On the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese*; London, 1750), "in which he praised the purity of the moral precepts of Confucius, pointing to them as an evidence of the power of human reason to attain by its own efforts to moral truth."⁵ The rationalist Christian Wolff, naturally enough, recognizes the rationalist in the Confucius of the *Analects*. I shall have more to say on this "mirror effect," which causes us to see ourselves in books, towards the end of this paper. Other attempts to make Confucius relevant to current trends in Western philosophy have followed at intervals until the French Revolution and again during the twentieth century.

Thinking through Confucius, I say, is one thing. Living through Confucius and exploring his sensibilities is quite another. The *Analects* are a unique source for an individualized *histoire de la sen-*

pointed out to me by Lee Chin Seng, librarian of the Institute of East Asian Philosophies in Singapore: Lin Yutang 林語堂, "Lun Kongzi de youmo" 論孔子的幽默, in his book of the same title (Taipei: Jinlan Wenhua chubanshe, 1984), pp. 47-52. This article is absent from the extensive bibliographies of Benjamin I. Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), and from David Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (New York: SUNY Press, 1987).

⁴ Cf. also the translations *La morale de Confucius, philosophe de la Chine* (Amsterdam, 1688) and *The Morals of Confucius, A Chinese Philosopher* (London, 1688).

⁵ *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th ed.) 28:774. Cf. also C. Wolff, *Eigene Lebensbeschreibung*, ed. H. Wuttke (Berlin, 1841). Three years later Georgius Bernhardus Bülfingerus published his remarkably careful and balanced *Specimen doctrinae veterum Sinarum moralis et politicae; tanquam exemplum philosophiae gentium ad rempublicam applicatae: excerptum libelli Sinicae genti classicis Confucii sive dicta, sive facta complexis. Accedit de litteratura sinensi dissertatio extemporales* (Francofurti ad Moenum, apud J. P. Andreae & H. Hort, 1724) with its *Epilogus de comparatione doctrinae sinicae cum philosophia et theologia morali nostra* (pp. 272-88) as well as an *Index rerum praecipuorum*, which makes this work a singularly usable early survey of Confucian philosophy.

sibilité confucéenne. They provide intimate perspectives on an intriguing personality of an eminent Chinese who was, most certainly, not a Confucian—although he was, admittedly, Confucius. For example, the *Analects* portray the Master as joking. Consider the following little episode:

When Confucius (*zi* 子) went to Wucheng he heard the sound of stringed instruments and singing. The Master (*fu zi* 夫子) broke into a smile and said: “Surely you don’t need to use an ox-knife to kill a chicken!” (17.4)

Suppose I insist that in this instance the master is not only smiling, but that he is speaking in jest. I fear there may be those who object that this is an unacceptably subjective judgment of no consequence. In any case, the commentary attributed to Kong Anguo 孔安國 (second century B.C.) expounds this with the appropriate stiff Confucian seriousness: “Why should one use a powerful method (*da dao* 大道) to sort out a small matter?”⁶ Zhu Xi (1130–1200) echoes this judgment.⁷ Indeed, why should one? The Master has a point. Why assume a joke?

Even the disciple Ziyou, who surely should have known better than we, takes Confucius to be dead serious when he offers this somewhat cryptic objection:

I remember once hearing you say: “A gentleman who has studied the Way will be all the tenderer towards his fellow-men; a commoner who has studied the Way will be all the easier to employ.” (17.4)

The suggestion is that on another occasion Confucius had advocated that even the humble man should cultivate the (noble) Way, and that the people in Wucheng should not be laughed at and mocked when they played dignified string instruments in their admittedly incongruous environment.

The commentary ascribed to Kong Anguo, and the disciple Ziyou take Confucius seriously. Why should they all be wrong? Why should I as a modern reader be right? Well, as mindful readers of the *Analects* may remember, Confucius defended himself as follows: “[Oh,] I was joking about this a moment ago, that’s all (*xi*

⁶ *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義, ed. Liu Baonan 劉寶南 (Wanyou wenku ed., Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1933), 4:52.

⁷ Zhu Xi, *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注 (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1985), p. 212.

zhi er 戲之耳!)” (17.4).⁸ We might rejoice and conclude: *quod erat demonstrandum*. But the point is not at all demonstrated! Confucius may well not be serious here either! Saying “I was just joking” may have been a convenient ploy to escape from an embarrassing pietistic objection. So there we are.

One suspects a note of self-irony in this story that might be the key to a proper understanding of this passage. Let me explain. Confucius had highly ambitious moral ideals and highly elaborate ritual preoccupations. And yet, in spite of all these lofty aspirations, he found that he was an itinerant preacher without the kingly and aristocratic political audience for which his teaching was designed. He was unable to help noble and powerful men to put that preaching into practice. Instead, he found himself in humble company much of the time, and on the roads. In fact he felt rather like that incongruously decorous and dignified musician in Wucheng.

Miao Bo 繆播, a Jin dynasty scholar,⁹ comments most aptly: “[Confucius] regretted that he could not lead a state of one thousand chariots. [He felt] as if we were cutting a chicken with an ox-knife. He had no full scope for his talents.”¹⁰ The editor Liu Baonan 劉寶南 concurs: “This profoundly gets hold of Confucius’s idea.”¹¹ I am inclined to agree with Miao Bo, and I suggest that we have not only a little joke, but also a delightful piece of subtle (*wei* 微) self-satire.¹²

In any case: as long as saying “I was just joking a moment ago” was a viable strategy for Confucius when he was attacked by Ziyou, he might at least have been expected to be joking on this occasion. I conclude that very probably Confucius will have been joking on other occasions. We shall see.

⁸ For a report on an earlier joke by Cheng Wang of the Zhou dynasty see Sima Qian, *Shiji* 史記, ed. Takigawa Kametarō 瀧龜太郎 under the title of *Shiki kaichū kōshō* 史記會注考證 (Peking: Zhonghuashuju, 1956), 39.3.

⁹ For Miao Bo see Huang Kan 皇侃, *Lunyu yishu*, ed. Yan Lingfeng 嚴靈峯 (*Wuqiu beizhai Lunyu jicheng* ed., Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, n.d.) Huang Kan’s preface, p. 4b, and *Sanguozhi* 三國志 (Shanghai: Wuzhoutong shuju, 1903) 21.21a, commentary. The comment we are concerned with is in Huang Kan, *Lunyu yishu* 9.4b.

¹⁰ *Lunyu zhengyi*, 4:52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Zhu Xi’s collected sayings only has two lines of comment on this episode. See the *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 4:1179.

First, let us remember that one definitely does not conclude a successful joke with a retrospective performative declaration: “I’ve been joking.” Funnily enough, one says “I was joking” pretty precisely when one has failed to do so effectively in the particular social context.

In the following passage I believe Confucius is not being serious, as everyone present—except that inevitable glum and tight-lipped pietist who may have been sulking in the background—knew:

A man from a village in Daxiang said: “Great indeed is Confucius. He has wide learning but has not made a name for himself in any field.” [Compare this, incidentally, to the modern question: “What’s your field?”]

He [Confucius], on hearing of this, told his disciples: “Good question! What shall I take up? Charioteering? Archery? Charioteering it is!” (9.2)

Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 (127–200) notes in his commentary that Confucius “wished to become famous in the most base of the arts.”¹³ I submit that by all accounts we have of him he never seriously wished anything of the kind. He made a light-hearted remark surely not unconnected to the fact that he was constantly having to travel and unable to settle down anywhere. We shall see evidence below that he was indeed capable of self-irony. His light-heartedness was not always easy to absorb for serious Confucians or historians of philosophy who needed to build up Confucius as a serious thinker and an awe-inspiring sage.

When Confucius asks a string of disciples about their ambitions, they all come up with reasonably respectable and proper ones. Only a certain Dian falls out of line:

“In late spring, after the spring clothes have been newly made, I should like, together with five or six adults and six or seven boys, to go bathing in the River Yi and enjoy the breeze on the Rain Altar, and then to go home chanting poetry.”

The Master (*fu zi*) sighed and said: “I’m with Dian!” (11.26)

It seems to me that there is a sympathetic, knowing smile hidden in this sigh. Confucius is not seriously suggesting that his highest ambition is to go swimming? The old commentary has a almost exhilaratingly jejune interpretation: “Confucius approved of Dian as

¹³ *Lunyu zhengyi*, 2:81. Zhu Xi admires Confucius for receiving praise with humble grace: “He [Confucius] hears that someone else praises him, and he receives the praise with humility” (*Sishu jizhu*, p. 137).

knowing the seasons.”¹⁴ Is Confucius seriously concerned about the bathing season, or is he seriously admiring Dian’s uncanny sense for the joys of a fine spring day? This would have to be a joke if it wasn’t evidently meant seriously.¹⁵

Zhu Xi’s interpretative skills, for instance, are very much exercised about the case of Dian.¹⁶ He interprets Dian as a thinker who has realized that the Principle of Heaven (*tian li*) is present in all small things, and who takes a delight in the ordinary daily routines.¹⁷

Here is a related case:

“The Way is not being practised (*dao bu xing* 道不行). I’ll get on a raft and float on the seas. I wouldn’t be surprised if Yu [i.e., Zilu] would be the one to come along with me.” Zilu was delighted when he heard this.

“[You see,] Zilu is more courageous than me, but he’s got no judgment!” (5.7)

Confucius is first throwing out a mad idea and is then mocking the over-eager Zilu for taking it seriously. The old commentary shows no direct awareness of the madness of the idea, but it does give us the useful information that the particular raft Confucius here mentions is of a small variety. We might be excused for thinking that this variety was not exactly suitable for extended maritime group travel. In this case we can appeal to the redoubtable Zheng Xuan as a witness that “because Zilu did not understand his subtle language, Confucius is teasing him (*gu xi zhi er* 故戲之耳) and that is all.”¹⁸

Here at last Zheng Xuan gives us the crucial technical term: *wei yan* 微言, “subtle words.” Jocular remarks were one variety of subtle words. Liu Xie 劉勰 (465–522) comments: “In ancient times

¹⁴ *Lunyu zhengyi*, 3:50.

¹⁵ The Dunhuang Manuscript, Stein no. 610, entitled *Qiyuanlu* 啟顏錄, which was written down in 723 A.D., contains evidence that the Chinese continued to build jokes on this passage. A certain Shi Dongyong claims to know that thirty of Confucius’s seventy-two disciples were capped, and forty-two were not. The reason given is that surely the *Analects* speak first of *guan zhe wu liu ren* 冠者五六人 (literally: “adults five six men”), and five times six makes thirty; and then of *tong zi liu qi ren* 童子六七人 (literally: “boys six seven person”), and six times seven makes forty-two. Cf. Wang Liqi 王利器, *Lidai xiaohua ji* 历代笑話集 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1981), p. 11; Wang Liqi fails to identify the Dunhuang Manuscript number, which was kindly pointed out to me by Dorothee Kehren.

¹⁶ *Zhuzi yulei*, 3:1026–41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3:1026.

¹⁸ *Lunyu zhengyi*, 1:115. Cf. “These were all hypothetical words (*jie jia she zhi yan er* 皆假設之言耳), but Zilu took them literally (*yi wei shi ran* 以為實然)” (Zhu Xi, *Sishu jizhu*, p. 102).

Confucius talked subtly (*wei yan*) and his disciples noted this down.¹⁹ Subtle words were thought to be difficult to understand, easy to misunderstand. Like subtle little jokes.

He [Confucius] wanted to go and live among the Nine Barbarians.

Someone said: “Think of their uncouthness. What are you going to do about that?”

He [Confucius] said: “[You see,] once a gentleman lives among them, what uncouthness is there?” (9:14)

Traditional commentaries assume that the Master is really and seriously considering emigration as a possibility. He is going to live among the Nine Barbarians.²⁰ We are told that things in fact hang together: the raft was to be used for travel to Korea.²¹ But are we really to imagine with Zhu Xi that Confucius considered emigrating on a notoriously small raft to a country which is reachable by land? One seriously wonders if this was not rather just one of those mad ideas the Master was in the habit of throwing out in his despondent moods, like that bout of sympathy with Dian. But Joseph Needham seems to take the plan seriously to the point of relating Confucius’s maritime strategies to Chinese navigational history.²² No doubt Joseph Needham may turn out to be right.

One clearly can take the search for humor in the *Analects* too far and wonder whether even the following might not be something of a subtle joke:

When he [Confucius] was under siege in Kuang, [his disciple] Yan Yuan fell behind. He [Confucius] said: “I thought you were dead!”

“While you are alive, how would I dare to die?” (11.23)

This, for some reason, does not strike me as an historically convinc-

¹⁹ *Wenxin diaolong zhushi* 文心雕龍注釋, ed. Zhou Zhenfu 周振甫 (Peking: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 1981), 18.200. Cf. the statement by Ban Gu 班固: *Xi Zhongni mo er wei yan jue* 昔仲尼沒而微言絕, “In ancient times, when Confucius died, subtle words discontinued” in his *Han shu* 漢書 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1962), 30.1701.

²⁰ Cf. in this connection *Zuo zhuan*, Duke Zhao 18 in S. Couvreur, ed., *La chronique de la principauté de Lou* (Paris: Cathasia, 1951), 3:276.

²¹ See the beginning of the *zhengyi* subcommentary (*Lunyu zhengyi*, 2:97). Cf. also Zhu Xi, *Sishu jizhu*, p. 141, and Arthur Waley, tr., *The Analects of Confucius* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1938), p. 108.

²² Cf. the long note in the spirited new translation by Pierre Ryckmans, *Les Entretiens de Confucius* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), pp. 130–32, and Joseph R. Needham, *Science and Civilization in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 4.3:396.

ing example of humor.²³ It seems in any case uncongenial to quarrel about humor: The all-important question remains: Is seriousness axiomatic in the treatment of Confucius's *Analects*? Does an interpretation have to take the text to be serious for us to take the interpretation seriously?

In any case, I am grateful that Carl Van Doren, in conversation with Lin Yutang, admitted to taking exquisite pleasure in the following exchange:

Ji Wenzi always thought three times before taking action. When he [Confucius] was told of this, he commented: "Twice is enough!" (5.20)

The old commentary takes a different line and tells us in all seriousness: "One does not have to go so far as to think three times."²⁴ Cheng Mingdao 程明道 (1032–85) knows why: "When you have gone so far as (thinking) twice, things are already clear; if you [think] thrice, then private thoughts arise, and on the contrary one gets confused."²⁵ But does Confucius himself seriously and literally imagine it matters whether you think twice or thrice? Do we have to bury in our hearts the sort of sublime pleasure that Carl Van Doren took in what must look to us like a beautiful touch of jocularly on the old Master's part? We shall see that Confucius certainly does not speak the language of a pedant.

Even the very ritualism that is so central to Confucius's concerns becomes the subject of a mild form of satire. When Zigong is impertinent enough to ask about himself, Confucius puts him in his place:

"You are [just] a tool!"

"Well, what kind of a tool?"

"A precious sacrificial *hu lian* 瑚璉 vessel [I should say]." (5.4)

The old commentary recounts the history and gives the various names of this *hu lian* vessel (or are they several vessels?). What it

²³ Compare, though, this Greek joke of the fifth century:

An academic met a friend and said: "I thought you were dead!"

"But you can see that I'm alive!"

"Ah, but the person who told me you were dead is much more trustworthy than you, you see!" (*Philogelós*, ed. A. Thierfelder [München: Heimeran Verlag, 1968], joke no. 22. The English translation is my own.

²⁴ *Lunyu zhengyi*, 1:134.

²⁵ *Sishu jizhu*, p. 106.

does not tell us is why Zigong should be such a vessel. Considering that “the gentleman will not act as a tool (*bu qi* 不器)” (2.12), this is a rather subtle line of attack for Confucius to take. We must make one thing pedantically clear: Zigong is a man. He is not a sacrificial *hu lian* vessel. It is not anachronistic to assume that Confucius knew this. We have caught out Confucius making what is simply a somewhat flippant, sympathetically teasing remark.

No wonder we have stories like the following about the Master:

Confucius was reading a book when Laozi paid him a visit and asked: “What book is this?”

“It’s about ritual. You see, even a sage will read that sort of book.”

Laozi replied: “Fair enough! A sage will read it. But why are you reading it?”²⁶

The Master is recorded as having smiled in one instance (17.24), and he laughs in another (17.3). Moreover, Confucius asks about a certain Gongshu Wenzhi, whether it was true that among other virtues he had that of never laughing. When told that the man laughs only when pleased, with the result that others never tire of his laughter, Confucius reacts with his characteristic vacillation: “So he is like this [is he]! But how could he be like this?” (14.13). Ma Rong 馬融 (79–166) comments: “He [Confucius] praises the fact that he [Gongshu Wenzhi] had achieved the Way. He suspects that he cannot have done so completely.”²⁷

Another element in our picture of a less formal, less serious Confucius is reflected in the very informal language of the *Analects*, as has long been recognized. In fact, linguists agree that this is precisely what makes it so difficult. I shall make here some simple grammatical observations that have a bearing on our subject. But I shall begin with a significant point of semantics and style.

There is a puzzle concerning the interpretation of *zi* 子 as in *zi yue* 子曰. We are generally brought up to translate this as “the Master.”²⁸ I have insisted on the much clumsier and therefore ir-

²⁶ *Taiping yulan* 太平御覽 (SBCK edition) 616.6a.

²⁷ *Lunyu zhengyi*, 3:116.

²⁸ Huang Kan, *Lunyu yishu* 論語義疏, ed. Yan Lingfeng 嚴靈峯 (*Wuqiu beizhai Lunyu jicheng* ed., Taipei: Yiwen yinshuguan, n.d.) 1:1.1a. Huang Kan expounds on Ma Rong’s statement to the effect that *zi* is a general term for a male person, as follows: “Generally, those who possess virtue may be called *zi*. Therefore [Ma Rong] says ‘it is a general term’ ” (Ibid., 1:1.2a).

irritating “He [Confucius].” Certainly there is only one person referred to in the third person as *zi* in the *Analects*, and that is the Master himself, Confucius. We are definitely entitled to call him the Master, but according to Ma Rong, Confucius’s disciples mostly called him something like “the man” according to the *Analects*.²⁹ The point bears reflection. The argument that “the Master” often makes smoother English and that “he [Confucius]” is irritating in the long run, is inconsequential for our purposes.

At any rate, Ezra Pound, whose translation is the most beautiful one I have read, translates *zi* as “he.”³⁰ Ancient Chinese paraphrases and modern Chinese translators tend to translate *zi* by the proper name “Confucius.” They do not generally gloss *zi* as *fu zi*, “the Master.”³¹

However translated, *zi* in the *Analects* must surely be distinguished from *fu zi*, “the Master,” and from the proper name *Kongzi*. When, for example, Zilu falls behind and asks a stranger, “Have you seen my master (*zi jian fu zi* 子見夫子)?” he gets a rather rude reply: “You neither toil with your body nor can you tell the five kinds of grain from each other. I wonder what master that would be (*shu wei fu zi* 孰為夫子?)” (18.7). In my translations I interpret *zi* as a general term or a person: “the man, he [i.e. Con-

²⁹ Ma Rong defines *zi* as “a general term for a male person referring to Confucius” (*Lunyu zhengyi*, 1:2). The *Baihu tong* 白虎通 (first or second cent. A.D.) states: “*zi* is a general term for a man” [*Byakkotsū sakuin* 白虎通索引 edition, Hakodate: Tōhō shoten, 1980], 2.3, p. 5.) Liu Baonan concurs: “This means that one may call both the noble and the base *zi*” (*Lunyu zhengyi*, 1:2).

³⁰ Cf. *Confucian Analects*, tr. and introduced by Ezra Pound (London: Peter Owen Limited, 1956). The first complete (and very careful) English translation, J. Marshman, *The Works of Confucius; containing the original text with a translation, to which is prefixed a dissertation on the Chinese Language and Character* (Serampore, India: The Mission Press, 1809), observes a distinction between *zi* which he simply transcribes, and *fu zi*, which he translates as “the Master.” Cf. also V. M. Alekseev, *Kitajskaja literatura* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo Nauka, 1978), p. 429ff, where he renders *zi* by the Russian *on* or “he.” One might note in support of Alekseev’s position that a non-anaphoric *zhi* 之 (him) in the object position in the first clause of *Analects* 6.5 clearly refers to Confucius.

³¹ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻 translates *zi* as “Confucius,”³¹ introducing a proper name into his translation where there is none in ancient Chinese. He does not find a meaning of “teacher, master” for *zi* in the *Analects*. Cf. his *Lunyu shizhu* 論語譯注 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1965), particularly p. 234. Yang Bojun finds that *zi* is used as a term of address twelve times as a neutral term for “you,” and twenty-three times as a polite and respectful term of address in the *Analects*.

fucius],” in spite of the inelegance of the resulting translations, if only to try to bring out the contrast with *fu zi*, “the Master,” *xiao zi* 小子, “the little ones,”³² and Kongzi, “Confucius.”

Let me now turn to some direct evidence for unstilted and non-elevated colloquialisms in the *Analects*. The colloquial rhetorical question pattern *bu yi X hu* 不亦 X 乎 (“isn’t that X?”) occurs eleven times in the *Analects*. (Only *bu yi yi hu* 不亦宜乎 is used in the much longer *Mencius*.) The rhetorical sentence-final *fu* 夫 (“isn’t that so?”) occurs thirteen times in the *Analects*. (*Mencius*: three times.) The rhetorical *hu zai* 乎哉 (“should that be so?”) occurs eight times in the *Analects*. (*Mencius*: three times.) The emphatic colloquial modal *yi* 已 (“definitely!”) occurs twenty-five times in the *Analects*. (*Mencius*: six times.) The emphatic colloquial combinations *ye yu zai* 也與哉, *ye zai* 也哉, *ye yu* 也與, *ye yi* 也已, *ye fu* 也夫, *yi yi* 已矣, *yi zai* 已哉, and *yi fu* 已夫 are also characteristic of the language of the *Analects*.

Adding to the informal tone, expletive particles were very manifestly not deleted from the *Analects*. Or if they were, Confucius was using them in truly extraordinary profusion. The use of expletive formulae such as *yi yi* 已矣 (“I’m damned!” or “I’ve had it!”) in the *Analects* is striking:

I’m damned (*yi yi hu* 已矣乎): I have never seen the man who, on seeing his own errors, is able to take himself to task inwardly. (5.27)

I’m damned (*yi yi hu*): I have never seen the man who loves moral virtue as he does female beauty. (15.13)

The Phoenix does not appear nor does the River offer up its Chart. I’ve had it, haven’t I (*yi yi fu* 已矣夫)! (9.8)

The precise force of Confucius’s oaths is hard to fathom today, but that the Master was given to inordinately emphatic forms of speech, which we much more rarely find in later Confucian literature, is beyond doubt:

He visited [the notoriously immoral woman] Nanzi, and Zilu was less than pleased.

He said: “Heaven confound me (*tian yan zhi* 天厭之) if I did anything wrong! Heaven confound me!” (6.28)

³² Compare *er san zi* 二三子 “my little ones, my followers,” a phrase which Confucius was fond of using (*Analects* 3.24, 7.24, 9.12, 11.11 and 17.3).

When Yan Yuan died, Confucius is reported to have been inordinately depressed: “Alas (*yi* 噫)! Heaven has forsaken me! Heaven has forsaken me!” (11.9)³³ Note that in the section of the *Liji* 禮記 called *Nei ze* 內則 (“Rules for Conduct Inside”), *yi* is forbidden, along with spitting and various other forms of misdemeanor.³⁴ But here *yi* seems to refer to belching whereas in the *Analects* it must mean something like “alas.” In any event, this expletive does not occur in the *Mencius*.

When Confucius is told that a ritually inappropriate sacrifice is to be made to Mount Tai, he compares the mountain’s judgment in ritual matters with the judgment of a minor Lu citizen by the name of Lin Fang, who at least seems to have shown a passing interest in ritual questions: “Alack and alas (*wu hu* 嗚呼)! Who would ever have imagined that Mount Tai was inferior to Lin Fang?” (3.6). The important point here is that even on a very serious matter of ritual, Confucius’s reaction is impulsive. One is even tempted to perceive it as sarcastic. The comparison of the most sacred mountain in all of China with one of the least significant personalities in the *Analects* is remarkable for its irreverence.

Confucius’s style is often lively and witty, and however we understand the following passage, it must involve linguistic playfulness: “The goblet that’s not a goblet! What a goblet (*zai* 哉)! What a goblet (*zai*)!” (6.25). Emphatic particles express impulsiveness. Often we hear exclamations like this: “Am I a bitter-gourd (*ye zai*)? How can I be hung up and not be eaten?” (17.7). At other times we have more elaborate outbursts like this:

³³ Note that *Kongzi* in the *Analects* is not necessarily analyzable as “Master Kong.” The legendary beauty *Xizi* 西子 (*Mencius* 4B25) was not a master. And if *Mozi* already meant “Master Mo,” how could it ever be acceptable for his disciples to call him, respectfully, *Zi Mozi* 子墨子? (No Confucian would use this respectful appellation for the philosopher *Mozi*.) I propose that *Zi Mozi* works like “Master Jack-son.” The semantics of the *zi* suffix and the *zi* prefix in early archaic Chinese texts remain to be investigated. Cf. Wolfgang Bauer, *Der chinesische Personennamen. Die Bildungsgesetze und hauptsächlichsten Bedeutungsinhalte von Ming, Tzu und Hsiao-Ming* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1959) and Xiao Yaotian 蕭遙天, *Zhongguo renming de yanjiu* 中國人名的研究 (Penang: Educational Publication House, 1970).

³⁴ Cf. *Li Ki, ou Mémoires sur les bienséances et les cérémonies. Texte chinois avec une double traduction en français et en latin*, ed. S. Couvreur (2d ed., Ho Kien Fou: Imprimerie de la Mission Catholique, 1913), 1:628.

“How on earth can one work with a vulgar fellow and serve [the same] master (*ye yu zai*)? Before he gets what he wants he worries that he might not get it. After he has got what he wants, he worries that he might lose it. And when that happens he won't stop at anything.” (17.15)

Here Confucius manages to channel his resentment into a consecutive train of thought. One might even read this as a piece of cold-blooded analysis. Indeed, the *Xunzi* 荀子 parallel transforms this passage into just such a general statement by changing the insulting *bi fu* 陋夫 (“vulgar fellow”) into the innocuous and much more theoretical *xiao ren* 小人.³⁵

Confucius strikes an unceremoniously and “unphilosophically” emotional pose even when Westerners might (and will!) construe him as addressing such philosophical issues as destiny and fatalism:

Bo Niu was ill and Confucius (*zi*) visited him. He held his hand through the window and said: “We are going to lose him. It must be Destiny mustn't it (*yi fu*)! For such a man (*ye*) to have such a disease! For such a man (*ye*) to have such a disease!” (6.10)

Note the rhetorical repetition which is so characteristic of the style of the *Analects* and which does not exactly indicate a detached philosophical mood.

That Confucius was given to rambling and impulsive repetition is not in itself surprising. What is remarkable is that the *Analects* preserve this feature of his speech to such an extent. Or should we take this to be a spuriously concocted pseudo-colloquialism? I doubt that Confucius's disciples would have gone in for a conspiracy of this kind to fool posterity.

Given the tone of many of Confucius's sayings that we have tried to bring out, we are now entitled to try to read other parts of the *Analects* in a new mood. Let us look at just one single much-discussed exchange:

Ji Lu asked how the spirits of the dead and the gods should be served. He [i.e. Confucius] said: “[Look here!] You are not yet able even to serve man. How can you serve the spirits?”

“May I ask about death?”

“[Look here!] You don't yet understand even life. How can you understand death?” (11.12)

³⁵ *Harvard-Yenching Sinological Index Series*, 29:32.

One has become used to seeing and hearing this passage quoted repeatedly as evidence for a philosophical position of *epoché* (“suspension of judgment”) in reference to the supernatural sphere. I would take it rather as a straightforward witticism and an expression of irritation. Such gut reactions, of course, can be philosophically very profound.

In other cases we have a poetic reaction to which later tradition has attached philosophical significance. In the following passage Confucius is struck by the sight of running water: “When standing by a river he said: ‘Passing away is like this, isn’t it. Day and night it never stops’ ” (9.17). His mood is not that of the man who said *panta rhei* (“everything flows”), or who mused that you never enter the same river twice. The mood and the intellectual mode are instead poetic and impulsive.³⁶

Consider this remarkable self-characterization by Confucius:

The Governor of She asked Zilu about Confucius, but Zilu made no reply. The master said: “Why didn’t you say: He’s got the sort of personality that he would forget to eat when he is in a rage and that he would forget his worries when he is pleased, so that he doesn’t even notice that old age is catching up with him?” (7.19)³⁷

Confucius transposes this personal impulsiveness and sensibility into a more philosophical pronouncement when he says: “Knowing something is inferior to loving it. Loving something is inferior to enjoying it” (6.20). He was not only unceremoniously impulsive; he knew that he was. His tendency to observe himself is also evident in the following fragment of intellectual autobiography:

“In the beginning, in my attitude to others, when I heard their words I had trust in their acts. Now, in my attitude towards others, when I hear their words I observe their acts.” (5.10)³⁸

In addition, Confucius had his suspicions about persons who were cocksure and unchanging: “So his pronouncements are solidly

³⁶ Cheng Mingdao 程明道, having explained what he takes to be Confucius’s philosophical point about the flux of things, continues, “Therefore the superior man will take it [water] as his model; he will strengthen himself without stopping” (*Sishu jizhu*, p. 141).

³⁷ Zhu Xi hastens to explain that the Master’s rage is because he has not understood a point, and that the joy is when he has got the point (*Sishu jizhu*, p. 125).

³⁸ Confucius changed his attitude on this point because he found Zai Yu in bed (and not studying) during the daytime.

right? But is he a gentleman or is he merely putting on a dignified face, I wonder?" (11.21). There is a fresh touch to this. The observation is open-ended, as so often in the *Analects*. This open-endedness is characteristic of the Confucius of the *Analects*. It is also characteristic of the humorous frame of mind and of the atmosphere of informality that pervades much of the book.³⁹

Confucius was in principle opposed to excessive displays of emotion (*tong* 慟). But when he himself is caught showing such excessive emotion on the occasion of Yan Yuan's death he comments: "So I'm showing excessive emotion?! But if I'm not to show excessive emotion for this person, whom should I show it for?" (11.10). This is not a philosophical statement but rather a personal, spontaneous reaction. It is almost like saying "To hell with restraint! Hang up philosophy! I've just lost my best friend." It is as if we have run into the Master in a less than philosophical frame of mind. And in surveying the *Analects*, one may be excused for getting the impression that the Master quite frequently was in that sort of frame of mind.⁴⁰ In the *Tangong* 檀弓 section of the *Liji* we have similar indications.⁴¹

Informality is grammatically manifest in many cases, some of which we have noted above. In other cases, informality may well be present but not grammatically manifest, as when Confucius vents his dissatisfaction with his disciples in the following dictum, which I quote in full: "Chai is a simpleton, Shen is an imbecile, Shi is pompous, and You is a boor!" (11.18). These are grossly insulting epithets, and apart from, perhaps, the case of *yu* 愚 ("stupid"), they

³⁹ Zhu Xi explains that one cannot judge a person on the basis of verbal appearances (*Sishu jizhu*, p. 158). This is indeed what *we* might say. Our point is that it is not what Confucius said, but that his mode was entirely different.

⁴⁰ As I write these lines I find that Georgius Bernhardus Bülfingerus (Georg Bernhard Bilfinger) complains in his *Doctrina Sinarum moralis* that Confucius sets a less perfect moral example than that of Jesus Christ: *atque a discipulis quoque suis de errore pratico, (nimia ex morte discipuli tristitia) admonitus, eundem agnovit & correxerit; ut omnino constet nec Sinarum iudicio exemplum ipsius undequaque purum esse*; "but when he is advised of a practical error by his disciples (i.e., his excessive sadness at the death of a disciple) he did acknowledge and correct this. Thus it is patent that even in the judgment of the Chinese the example set by Confucius was not pure" (p. 284).

⁴¹ Compare the splendid story of Confucius insisting to give away one of his horses to a mourner he hardly knew at all, to the dismay of the indomitable Zigong who is scandalized by the excessiveness of Confucius's reaction (*Li Ki*, ed. S. Couvreur, 1:141; cf. also *ibid.*, 1:149).

are not taken from the vocabulary of dignified disapproval. Moreover, they are applied to men like Zengzi 曾子, who was by no means a minor disciple, and who indeed may well have been important for the compilation of the *Analects*.⁴²

The Master could have gone on to say that Zai Yu was a slug-gard. In any case, when he catches Zai Yu in bed during the daytime he erupts: “You can’t make a sculpture of rotten wood, and you can’t whitewash a dung wall. Why even punish him?” (5.10). The Master seems unceremoniously short-tempered. But like many short-tempered persons, Confucius would appear also to have had a mercifully short memory: Zai Yu figures reasonably respectably in two passages (3.21 and 6.26). Moreover, he is among the nine disciples singled out, apparently, for special talents (11.3). His talents had to do with his rhetorical ability. But elsewhere he is described behind his back as unfeeling (17.21).⁴³

At times Confucius is abusive. At other times he strikes an equally undignified note of informal friendship with a disciple. When he is told that his beloved disciple Hui understands ten things when he hears one thing, he tells Zigong: “Yes, you’re not as good as he [i.e. Hui]. You and I, we’re not as good as he [Hui]” (5.9). Do we sense a light touch of conspiratorial irony here? One feels one’s intuition in this case must be anachronistic. In any case, the informal camaraderie between teacher and disciple is clear, as is Confucius’s light-hearted criticism when he comments on that same Hui: “Hui is not the sort of person who’ll be of help to me. He cheerfully agrees with everything I say” (11.4). This sounds like a teasing remark directed at the yes-men among his disciples.⁴⁴ It is at the expense of Confucius’s favorite disciple. The psychological subtlety of the

⁴² Cheng Mingdao explains how Zengzi’s unintellectual, solid stance, uncorrupted by sophistry (*bian* 辯) was exactly what led him to get the important point (*Sishu jizhu*, p. 147).

⁴³ The complaint about the poor quality of students is an old one also in China. When travelling in Chen the Master complained: “Oh, shouldn’t one go home? Shouldn’t one [really] go home? The young men at home are enthusiastic and brash, and they do have accomplishments for all to see. But they’ve got no idea about how to properly constrain themselves” (5.22).

⁴⁴ Zhu Xi felt obliged simply to explain this one away: “He [Confucius] formulates himself as if he is annoyed, but in fact he is profoundly pleased by this” (*Sishu jizhu*, p. 152). Zhu Xi reads his own attitude towards spiritual leadership into the situation even in the face of very explicit textual evidence to the contrary.

teacher-student relation comes out in another passage about Hui. In 2.5, Confucius has explained filial piety (*xiao* 孝) by a characteristically brief injunction: “Don’t be recalcitrant (*wu wei* 無違!)” But then he goes on to say: “When I talk to Hui he’ll never be recalcitrant all day long. Like a stupid fellow! But when I look closely at his private conduct after he’s left, he still has it in him to develop [my thoughts]. Hui is not stupid [after all]!” (2.9). The master sees the absence of recalcitrance or rebelliousness (*wei* 違) as a *prima facie* sign of stupidity! He certainly does not invite or expect his disciples to show reverence for their Master. He expects recalcitrance from an intelligent disciple. And he certainly gets it from the formidable Zilu, for one, and from Zigong.

Weisheng Mou 微生畝, admittedly not a disciple, is even recorded as addressing Confucius by his personal name Qiu 丘. This form of scandalously rude address is found again in the *Zhuangzi*, where the infamous Robber Zhi launches into a sizzling and totally outrageous personal attack on the Master. Professor Göran Malmqvist has maintained *ex cathedra* that this form of address is wrong to the point of ungrammaticality, so that *Qiu* can only be used by Confucius to refer to himself. Ungrammatical it may be, unceremonious it certainly is, but the stubborn fact is that Weisheng Mou used it:

Weisheng Mou said to Confucius: “Oh, Qiu, why do you keep on perching here and perching there? Isn’t that practicing ‘artful talk’ [which you oppose]?”

“I wouldn’t dare to practice artful talk. The thing is that I detest inflexibility!” (14.32)

Confucius seems uncertain, even, whether he agrees with himself. He goes so far as to say that he does not know what to do with someone who is not as confused and puzzled as he so often is: “There simply is nothing I can do with a man who is not constantly saying: ‘What am I to do? What am I to do?’ ” (15.16). Confucius is not thinking of the person who asks the philosophical question: “What should one do?” Such a theoretical and philosophical question is not the sort of thing that is naturally repeated in this emphatic way. Confucius needs students who have the proper sense of personal moral urgency.

The *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 tells an entertaining story about

Confucius meeting a physiognomist who describes Confucius's appearance in detail and concludes: "Looked at from afar he looks uneasy like a homeless dog (*sang jia zhi gou* 喪家之狗)."⁴⁵ Confucius misconstrues the perfectly standard phrase *sang jia zhi gou* to mean "a dog in a house of mourning" and offers a curious remark: "I wouldn't lay claim to such distinction." He then dwells on the sad condition of "a dog in a house of mourning" in the following passage translated by J. R. Hightower:

"Ci, have you never seen the dog in a house of mourning? After the body is put into the coffin, and that put into the outer coffin, vessels are set out for the sacrifice. Everywhere the dog looks, no one is about, and he has the idea of wanting to let himself go. Above there is no enlightened king and below no sage overseers of provinces. The Kingly Way is declining, government and teaching are lost. The strong oppress the weak and the many are cruel to the few. The people give rein to their desires and no one can regulate them. That man certainly took me as one who wishes to play that part. How could I lay claim to such distinction?"⁴⁶

Hightower's interpretation of *sang jia zhi gou* in Confucius's answer in the present text is certainly correct. But is it plausible to attribute to Confucius such a total ignorance of canine psychology? Are we not, in so doing, attributing an almost asinine insensitivity to Confucius, and are we not ourselves interpreting this text with an almost elephantine insensibility?

Compare now a related tale from *Kongzi jiayu* 孔子家語:

When Confucius went to Zheng he lost sight of his disciples and stood alone outside the Eastern Walls Gate. Somebody told Zigong: "There's a man outside the Eastern Gate. He's nine foot eight inches tall, has eyes like a river and a high forehead. His head is like that of Yao, his neck is like that of Ao Yao. His shoulders are like those of Zichan. But from the waist down he does not reach up to [the Sage Emperor] Yu by three inches. He's all confused like a homeless dog." Confucius laughed with delight and sighed [mark the smiling sigh!]: "Appearances are unimportant, but the bit about being like a homeless dog, how true that is! How true that is!"⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳, ed. Xu Weiyu 許維通 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), 9.18, p. 324. Cf. *sang jia zhi gou* in *Ciyuan* 辭源 (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1979), 1:532.

⁴⁶ I follow the translation (though not the transcription) of James R. Hightower, *Han Shih Wai Chuan* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 307. Both Hightower and Lai Yanyuan 賴炎元 fail to recognize a joke here and take the entire exchange entirely seriously. See Lai, *Hanshi waizhuan jinzhuzhu jinyi* 韓詩外傳今註今譯 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1972), p. 386.

⁴⁷ *Kongzi jiayu shuzheng* 孔子家語疏證, (Wanyou wenku ed., Shanghai: Commercial Press,

Cui Shu 崔休 (1740–1816), commenting on such characterizations of Confucius’s physiology, emphasizes that the physiological descriptions are less than historically plausible.⁴⁸ But if one views the rhetorical mode of the text as I do, the physiological bits function naturally and importantly in the narrative context. They build up this farcically composite picture of the Sage who has lost his way.

We have seen that Confucius could be explicitly insulting (cf. 11.18). But we also find other, almost playful forms of rudeness:

Ru Bei wanted to visit Confucius. Confucius declined to see him on the grounds of illness. As soon as the man conveying the message had stepped out of the door, Confucius took his lute and sang, making sure that Ru Bei heard him. (17.20)

This is pretty rude, I should say, by any ancient Chinese or modern standards. It shows Confucius telling a lie, but none of the commentators seem to take exception to this.

Confucius does not hide the insultingly dim view he takes of contemporary politicians:

“What about the men who are in public life in the present day?”

He [Confucius] said: “Oh, these little rice-baskets! How should they count?” (13.20)

This is an abusive outburst, not a philosophical comment.

Curiously, we are also told how others poked fun at Confucius in the Analects in the following pair of well-known passages:

Chang Ju and Jie Ni were ploughing together as a team. Confucius went past them and sent Zilu to ask them where the ford was. Chang Ju said: “Who’s that man driving the carriage?”⁴⁹

“It’s Kong Qiu.”

“Kong Qiu of Lu?”

“That’s right.”

“[Being so darn clever,] that sort of man knows where the ford is!” (18.6)

We have a most natural case of irritation at what is perceived as in-

1938), 5.153. It seems that the ancient Chinese themselves were rather fond of this passage, since it is found in *Lunheng* 論衡 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1979), Guxiang pian, p. 173, and again in *Baihu tong* (Byakkotsū sakuin ed.), 31.2, where Confucius is said to *kui ran er xiao* 喟然而笑 “burst out into laughter.” Throughout, *sang jia zhi gou* clearly means “a homeless dog.”

⁴⁸ Cf. Cui Shu, *Zhusikao xinlu* 洙泗考信錄, in *Cui Dongbi yishu* 崔東壁遺書, ed. Gu Jiegang 顧頡剛 (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1983), 1.266.

⁴⁹ Note the fine detail that the Master is seen playing the humble part of the charioteer after Zilu has left the carriage.

tellectual pomposity on the part of Confucius. Chang Ju's response can be paraphrased like this: "Who does he think he is? If he's so bloody clever he can find his own ford! Tell him to get lost!"

Chang Ju is simply dismissive and cannot be bothered to take Confucius seriously. Jie Ni, on the other hand, assumes a more pontificating attitude and decides to read Confucius a little lesson. The contrast between these two forms of opposition is entertaining:

Zilu asked Jie Ni [where the ford was]. Jie Ni said: "Who are you?"

"I'm Zhong Yu."

"Ah, a disciple of Kong Qiu of Lu?"

He answered: "That's right."

"Under Heaven all are swept along by the same flood. Whom do you want to replace them with? As for you, instead of following one who flees from this man and that, you would do better to follow one who shuns this whole generation of men."

He went on ploughing [as he spoke]. (18.6)

This concise piece of proselytizing by a dropout brings out a very real psychological alternative to Confucius's moral outrage at and moralistic concern for the sorry state of the world around him.

You might expect that when faced with this sort of response a moralist might try to give reasons why it is important and fitting not to drop out, why one should not be content to cultivate a private bucolic existence, laughing at the world. But observe now Confucius's response:

Zilu went and told him [Confucius], and the Master (*fu zi*) said ruefully: "You can't very well herd with birds and beasts, can you? If I do not associate with the likes of him, whom do I have to associate with? If the Way prevailed in the world I would not engage with it and change things." (18.6)

The response is subtle. Being unemployed, Confucius is a kind of itinerant dropout himself. With that characteristic ironic touch, which is so notoriously absent among the later pre-Han Confucians, he contemplates the (absurd) possibility of herding with the birds and beasts: you can't very well do that, can you? Then Confucius moves to the extraordinary recognition that indeed the likes of Chang Ju and Jie Ni, sedentary intellectual dropouts, are fated to be his associates. With whom else is one to associate: animals, ordinary thoughtless farmers? So there he is, recognizing that he is really one of them. They may be mocking him, but that is precisely

because he belongs to their group. But there is a difference: the sedentary dropouts have given up on the world and look upon it with despondent sarcasm; Confucius in this passage has not given up in that way but nourishes the fervent hope that the Way may prevail.

The old commentary, which some editions at this point attribute to Kong Anguo, gives an interesting alternative interpretation of the last sentence, which leaves more room for the greatness of the founder of Confucianism: “This means that he does not want to change places with all those who have the Way, because he himself is great and they are less great (*xiao* 小).”⁵⁰ The *Analects* bear witness that the greatness of Confucius was not as obvious to his contemporaries as it was to his later adherents:

Zilu put up for the night at the Stone Gate. The gatekeeper said: “Whom do you come from?”

“From the Kong family.”

“Is that the Kong who keeps working towards a goal the realization of which he knows to be hopeless?” (14.38)

Closely connected with the social informality, with the impulsive intellectual style and the insulting behavior is what one might call the down-to-earth touch of the Confucius of the *Analects*. Here again is an interesting parallel with Socrates, about whom Cicero tells us: *Socrates autem primus philosophiam devocavit e caelo et in urbibus conlocavit et in domus etiam introduxit et coegit de vita et moribus rebusque bonis et malis quaerere.*⁵¹

Even regarding a subject as lofty as that of *xue* 學 (“learning”), Confucius shows this peculiar down-to-earthness: “It’s not easy to find a man who can study for three years without thinking about earning a salary” (8.12). Of course, in what I call his “down-to-earth” way, Confucius expresses moral indignation. He even goes

⁵⁰ *Lunyu zhengyi*, 4:83. Other authorities are quoted arguing the same point. On one essential point of semantics, incidentally, I think Kong Anguo (if indeed the commentary is his) is right: *yi* 易 should probably not be taken to mean “change (the world)” as many desperate translators have maintained.

⁵¹ “Socrates, on the other hand, was the first to call down philosophy down from the skies and to place her in the cities. He even introduced her to the private homes and forced her to deal with life and manners as well as with good and evil action.” Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* 5.10, ed. Max Pohlenz, p. 409: The English translation is my own.

so far as to poke fun at the practice of *xue* among his disciples, if we are to believe the *Tan gong* section of the *Liji*, which is grammatically close to the *Analects*:

Confucius was standing together with his associates, and he held his right hand placed above his left hand. His followers [lit. “two or three *zi*”] similarly all placed their right hands above their left hands. Confucius said: “How you love to imitate (*xue*)! The reason [why I keep my hands like this] is that I am mourning for my elder sister.” The disciples all placed their left hands above their right hands.⁵²

Stupid imitation of Confucius or Confucians was a popular subject in ancient Chinese jest books.⁵³

Confucius enjoys putting the sage and the simpleton in the same category: “It’s only the most intelligent and the most stupid who are not susceptible to change” (17.3). The simpleton and the sage are surely very strange bedfellows, but Confucius freely associates them in the *Analects*, just as Socrates enjoys associating the gods and the fools:

“You must understand that none of the gods are seekers after truth. They do not long for wisdom, because they are wise—and why should the wise be seeking the wisdom that is already theirs? Nor, for that matter, do the ignorant seek the truth or crave to be made wise. And indeed, what makes their case so hopeless is that having neither beauty, nor goodness, nor intelligence, they are satisfied with what they are, and do not long for the virtues they have never missed.”⁵⁴

Confucius speaks about sex (or “female beauty” if you prefer a more discreet and dignified circumlocution) with unusual freedom: “If someone appreciates talent instead of female beauty . . . I am bound to call him learned” (1.7). The old commentary ascribed to Kong Anguo explains that Confucius approves of persons who appreciate talent as intensely as one appreciates female beauty or sex (*se*).

The following related saying was included twice in the *Analects*, once with the expletive “I am damned” as quoted above, and once without. We allow ourselves the same luxury: “I have yet to meet the man who is as fond of moral power as he is of sex” (9.16). Note the excessiveness of the generalization: the early commentary rightly notes that Confucius here vents his outrage. Suppose somebody

⁵² *Li Ki*, ed. S. Couvreur, 1:143.

⁵³ Cf. Wang Liqi, *Lidai xiaohua ji* (Shanghai: Guji chubanshe, 1981).

⁵⁴ Plato, *Symposium* 204a, quoted according to Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds., *Plato's Dialogues* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 556.

bursts out: “Plumbers are thugs! Each and every one of them!” We take this sort of statement to be a part of the pathology of a specific situation.

Confucius even makes a rather down-to-earth, pithy remark about the otherwise required and morally highly commendable refusal of gifts:

On becoming his [Confucius’s] steward, Yuan Si was given nine hundred measures of grain which he declined.

He [Confucius] said: “Can you not find a use for it in helping the people in your neighborhood?” (6.5)

This remark has a moralistic slant. At the same time it has that down-to-earth perspective. One might even imagine a faint smile on the face of the Master

Similarly, Confucius comments on an amusing *contradictio in actu*: “Who said Weisheng Gao was straight? Once when someone begged him for vinegar he went and begged it off a neighbor to give it to him” (5.24). Poor Weisheng Gao felt obliged to be devious in his “straightness.” I sense a characteristic down-to-earth sensibility in the last two observations, which is notoriously absent in the Confucian literature on ritual.

Note this almost playful use of *de* (“moral power, virtue”) in the following passage: “In a thoroughbred we praise not the physical strength but the moral power” (14.33). Are we really to suppose that a horse has moral power? I think not. Confucius wants us to understand this in a derived generalized sense or perhaps in an entirely pre-moral sense of that term. Is this a touch of irony?

We have no particular reason to think that Confucius was given to games like *bo* 博 and *yi* 奕, but in a playful mood he says: “Fancy people spending all their time eating and not using their minds! Don’t we have games such as *bo* and *yi*? If they cultivate these, that’ll still be an improvement” (17.22). Are we to suppose that Confucius is seriously recommending these particular games? I think not. Here we have a case of irony, albeit again not of the Socratic kind.

Sarcasm is not unknown in ancient Chinese literature,⁵⁵ and sometimes, Confucius’ irony verges towards the sarcastic:

⁵⁵ Cf., for example, the following passage from the *Zuo zhuan* concerning the population of Wei, which was asked to join their inordinately crane-loving ruler on a military campaign:

Zigong was given to grading other people.

He [Confucius] said: “What an amazing man of talent, that man Si (*hu zai*)! I for my part haven’t got the time [for this sort of evaluating].” (14.29)

Zheng Xuan explains that “Confucius did not have the time to grade others.”⁵⁶ Other commentators have found this implausible and have suggested that this concerned not grading but maligning (*bang* 謗).⁵⁷ Are we to think seriously that grading or maligning others is time-consuming? Surely not!

The following somber reflection by Confucius may well have been intended to apply to the his own predicament: “There are shoots that fail to produce blossoms, and blossoms that fail to produce fruits, aren’t there?” (9.22). I hear the Master really say: “Don’t take yourself so seriously! Look at at the cherry trees! It is only natural for things that look promising to come to nothing, isn’t it? So what are we unemployed scribes complaining about? We are just a few of the many promising but abortive creatures in this world.”

Confucius did see the absurdity of his own predicament more clearly than his traditional interpreters have allowed for:

“I, knowledgeable? I have no knowledge. If an ordinary fellow asks me about something, I feel all empty. I try to get an angle on his questions from both ends, but I’m out of my depth.” (9.8)⁵⁸

This reads like a fresh, lively (almost anachronistically modern!)

“They all said, ‘Employ the cranes! It is the cranes who hold the salaries and the positions of honour!’” (Duke Min 2 [660 B.C.], ed. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, [Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1983], p. 265). An entertaining variant can be found in the *Lushi chunqiu* 呂氏春秋: “Your honour should employ the eunuchs and the cranes. How should we be able to fight?” (ed. Chen Qiyou 陳奇猷 [Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe, 1984], 11.3, p. 588). The story became popular. Versions of it will be found, e.g., in *Hanshi waizhuan*, ed. Xu Weiyu, 7.11, p. 252; and *Xin xu* 新序 (Taipei: Commercial Press, 1975), 8.12, p. 279. This form of sarcasm is found again in *Yanzi chunqiu* 晏子春秋, ed. Wu Zeyu 吳則虞 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1982), 1.25, p. 90f., and *Shuo yuan* 說苑, ed. Xiang Zonglu 向宗魯 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 9.16, p. 224, as well as *Yanzi chunqiu*, ed. Wu Zeyu, 7.13, p. 464, and *Hanshi waizhuan* (ed. Xu Weiyu), 9.10, p. 314.

⁵⁶ *Lunyu zhengyi*, 3:131.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Compare Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* 5.8, ed. Max Pohlenz, p. 407, where the Pythagorean Leon declares that he *artem quidem se scire nullam, sed esse philosophum*, “did not know any of the arts, but was a philosopher.” In the West, this way of thinking goes back at least to Plato.

observation. It is expressed in so colloquial a manner that one cannot be confident of the exact interpretation, although the general drift and the colloquialisms are clear enough. The Master is observing himself in a fumbling state.

Of course, the traditional way of taking all this is entirely different and as usual is brought out with admirable precision in Couvreur's Latin version: *At si sit humilis homo qui interroget me, licet sit omnino rudis, ego excutio rei duo extrema, id est, rem explicio ab initio ad finem et exhaurio, i.e. nihil omitto.*⁵⁹ We are given to understand that the Master first declares his ignorance and then immediately proceeds to an account of how it is that he exhaustively, without omitting anything, answers any questions from a commoner. The interpretation scarcely hangs together. No wonder D. C. Lau feels obliged to add a footnote to his (traditional) translation of this passage: "The whole section is exceedingly obscure and the translation is tentative."⁶⁰ It seems to me that the section will remain inextricably obscure until we seriously consider a light-hearted interpretation. When we do, it no longer poses unsurmountable obstacles.

Confucius does occasionally indulge in mild self-satire. When Zigong asks him what he would do if he had a beautiful piece of jade, whether he would put it in a box or try to sell it for a good price: "Sell it off, indeed (emphatic *zai*)! Sell if off indeed (*zai*)! I'm the sort of fellow who is waiting for the right price [you see]" (9.13). Confucius is not, I think, really a merchant of morality. He despises the mercenary mentality and is not at all considering the career of a mercenary moralist or scholar. His own word-mongering (or academic salesmanship) was something of which he could speak with a touch of remorseful irony:

He [Confucius] said: "I wish I didn't use words."

Zigong objected: "Master, if you don't use words, what is there for us, your disciples, to transmit?"

He replied: "[Well, let me ask you:] What does Heaven say? And still the Four Seasons follow their path and the creatures of the world live their lives. [I ask you:] What does Heaven say?" (17.19)

One could take this to be a sign of almost blasphemous megalomania.

⁵⁹ S. Couvreur, *Les quatre livres* (Paris: Cathasia, 1951), p. 164.

⁶⁰ D. C. Lau, *The Analects*, p. 79.

mania: the Master is talking of himself and of Heaven in one breath—in which case he is approaching the later ideal of speechless teaching (*wu yan zhi jiao* 無言之教). Naturally enough, Wang Bi 王弼 (226–49), the remarkable commentator on the *Laozi*, elaborates this mystical interpretation with subtlety and enthusiasm.⁶¹ Wang Bi may be right. But in the light of this paper I am inclined to consider a much less heavily ideological interpretation of this exchange, as the following discussion will show.

Confucius begins with one of his outbursts: “Oh, I wish I didn’t talk so much! Henceforth I’m just going to shut up! It’s not words but thoughts and actions that matter!” As we have come to expect, he is caught out by the trusty Zigong: “Come now, what about your admirers and disciples? There will be no tradition to transmit if you simply shut up. And you who talk so much about the importance of transmitting tradition!” As in the exchange on the ox-knife and the chicken, Confucius then finds himself in a fix. As a teacher, he should never have said this sort of thing. But this time he counters with a rather audacious *plaisanterie*: “Heaven doesn’t talk either, does it?” Having driven home his point, he is so pleased that he indulges in his customary penchant for repetition by ending thus: “Heaven doesn’t talk either, does it?” No, it certainly doesn’t. Confucius has a philosophical point. But surely this plain point is not very naturally made by twice repeating the rhetorical question “What does Heaven say?” (*tian he yan zai* 天何言哉 with the emphatic particle *zai* retained to make the question rhetorical).⁶²

We are not suspecting Confucius of poking fun at Heaven (Heaven forbid!). We are observing him in action as a conversationalist and a *plaisanteur*—as well as a thinker.⁶³ The *Tan gong* sec-

⁶¹ Cf. Lou Yulie 樓宇烈 ed., *Wang Bi ji jiaoshi* 王弼集校釋 (Peking: Zhonghua shuju, 1980), p. 631f.

⁶² I am extremely suspicious of discussions of hypothetical Classical Chinese sentences. But I feel impelled to submit that the Master could easily have said something like *tian bu yan (gu) wu yi bu yan* 天不言故吾亦不言, “Heaven does not speak, therefore I do not speak either.” He says nothing of the kind. His discourse is entirely different.

⁶³ And let us not forget that after all, Socrates was no less of a serious moral philosopher for having been a notorious *plaisanteur*. The young playwright (and logocentric) Plato was only one of Socrates’ disciples. Among Socrates’ followers there was also Antisthenes, and later Diogenes in his tub, both of whom cultivated non-argumentative conversationalism in what they thought was a more honest way of addressing just those moral concerns that Plato addressed through the medium of the theatre of argumentative and demonstrative debate.

tion of the *Liji*, which is grammatically close to the *Analects*⁶⁴ has preserved for us this episode:

In Lu there was man who performed the *xiang* 祥 sacrifice in the morning and sang in the evening. Zilu laughed at this man, but the Master (*fu zi*) said: "Oh You, you are forever blaming people, aren't you? Three years' mourning, you know, that's surely a long time, isn't it?"

When Zilu had left, the Master (*fu zi*) said: "Was there so much time to go? After the turn of the new month it would have been perfectly all right!"⁶⁵

The *xiang* sacrifice was held during the twenty-fifth and last month of mourning. I can well believe that: "Confucius, after having performed the *xiang* sacrifice, would play the lute for five days with a subdued sound. After ten days he would play the mouth organ and sing."⁶⁶ Confucius will have followed and will have advocated a practice different from that of the impatient man of Lu. But he reacts very sensitively and emotionally to Zilu's self-righteously scornful sneer. Even when it comes to the all-important matter of the three-year period of mourning, Confucius is far from humorlessly rigid. Having told off the intrepid Zilu, he turns to his other disciples with a remark, which is uncharacteristic of a pious, *li* 禮-abiding Confucian and ends in that pregnant suspended ambiguity of meaning so typical of Confucius's intellectual style. For me, nothing illustrates better than this passage the mild humor and humanism of Confucius himself, as against the emerging rigid moralism of later Confucians—and of Confucius's interpreters from the Far West, Jesuit and heathen alike!⁶⁷

I have focused on humor and informality in the *Analects*. But humor and informality are only symptoms of the atmosphere of intellectual friendship that pervades the work. It is not irrelevant that the *Analects* begin with the observation, "Is it not wonderful when friends come from distant parts?" (1.1). Whatever humor there is in the *Analects* is the result of this atmosphere of friendship, which

⁶⁴ Cf. Ōta Tatsuo 大田辰夫, *Koten Chūgokugo bunpō* 古典中国語文法 (Kyoto: Kyūkoshoin, 1984), pp. 169–89.

⁶⁵ *Li Ki*, ed. S. Couvreur, 1:123.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1:129.

⁶⁷ Cf. J.K. Shryock, *The Origins and Development of the State Cult of Confucius* (1932; rpt. New York: Paragon, 1966); Paul A. Rule, *K'ung-tzu or Confucius: The Jesuit Interpretation of Confucianism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1986); and David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius*.

created room for teasing mutual criticism as well as admiration for the Master. And I do imagine that this amicability provided the psychological environment in which the remarkable humane sensibility of Confucius's moral thinking could grow and flourish. One can go further: perhaps the personal authority of Confucius was essentially connected with his unmediated, and in some ways unrestrained, humorous sensibilities.

In any case, we must not treat as intellectually authoritative a source like the *Analects*, which shows every sign of not having been conceived as authoritative. The *Analects* surely took shape before it could be foreseen that this compilation might ever become a standard reference for a political and intellectual establishment or for anything like a system of Confucian thought. Nor should one think that there then was such a thing as Taoism either.

Of course, one could declare the material I have quoted as late and unreliable precisely because it involves humor. In any case, Cui Shu, who is justly famous for his perceptive and persistent efforts to determine the different textual strata within the *Analects*,⁶⁸ has amply demonstrated that the *Analects* are not a unified source. I read Cui's work with profound admiration.

Arthur Waley summarizes some of the results of Cui Shu and his successors:

I should hazard the guess that Books III-IX represent the oldest stratum. Books X and XX (first part) certainly have no intrinsic connexion with the rest. . . . Book XIX consists entirely of sayings by disciples. The contents of XVIII and parts of XIV and XVII are not Confucian in their origin, but have filtered into the book from the outside world, and from a world hostile to Confucius. Book XVI is generally and rightly regarded as late.⁶⁹

D. C. Lau even introduces the notion that some parts of the *Analects* are apocryphal:

In the account of Confucius's life, we pointed out that apocryphal stories existed from the earliest times. Some of these, in fact, found their way into the Lun yü. First, there are the stories of encounters with recluses with a strong Taoist flavour. . . .

⁶⁸ Cf. for examples *Lunyu yu shuo* 論語餘說 in *Cui Dongbi yi shu*, ed. Gu Jiegang, p. 609ff. The introduction of this work contains a singularly useful survey of the history of Chinese critical discussion of the authorship and "genuineness" of books by Gu Jiegang (pp. 1-72).

⁶⁹ *The Analects of Confucius*, p. 21.

Belonging to another category are the apocryphal stories which seek to discredit Confucius morally. Two such stories which concern Confucius being tempted to go to rebels who had summoned him are found in Book XVII.⁷⁰

Properly speaking, the word “apocryphal” only makes proper sense in relation to a “canonical” corpus. But the point is that the passages D. C. Lau calls “apocryphal” are very much part of each and every canonical edition of the *Analects* (including his own) and have never been set apart as a separate body of apocrypha.⁷¹

We need to contemplate and investigate the possibility that what is late and epigonal (though not apocryphal) in the Confucian tradition is not the humor in the *Analects* but perhaps rather the pervasive seriousness and the dogmatism of the *Mencius* and the *Xunzi* and the ritualistic monomania that pervades much of the *Liji* as well as certain chapters of the *Analects*.

Tsuda Sōkichi 津田左右吉 finds that the *Analects* are so heterogeneous that they are unusable as a source on Confucius’s thought.⁷² But what if the social environment around Confucius and his disciples was itself very heterogeneous and “un-Confucian”? What if Confucius and his entourage were not as “Confucian” as early ritualists and Confucians later construed them to have been? What if Confucius’s thought and the ways of thinking among his early disciples and other associates were really rather heterogeneous and spotty? What if Confucius had moods like everyone else, and these were recorded before a proper standard, *constantia*, of intellectual sagehood was established or even envisioned? And what if Confucius’s disciples wanted him to be more of a sage than he actually was? Then the *Analects* would be a faithful record, not of how Confucius thought, but of how those in the multifarious circles around him, and particularly around Zengzi, remembered and reacted to him. This diverse social environment will have included those who

⁷⁰ D. C. Lau, *The Analects*, p. 267.

⁷¹ The introduction of the notion “apocryphal” strikes me as a logocentric slip on the part of D. C. Lau. But D. C. Lau has, of course, a very serious historical point—that the sorts of stories about recluses found in the *Analects* are well-known to us from later sources, which we have come to think of as “Taoist.” The question then is whether the bits in the *Analects* are really late Taoist cant that got into the (earlier) *Analects* or whether they are early reflexes of an intellectual trend that became so common as to be trite in later Taoist literature.

⁷² *Rongo to kōshi no shishō* 論語と孔子の思想 (Iwanami, 1946).

thought little of the master and made fun of him. (One can all too easily see why they should!)⁷³

The more un-Confucian and unsagely the humorous passages we discover in the *Analects* are, the more likely they are to be faithful to the man and his personal history, and the more likely we are to hear the Master's Voice, the Master's *ipsissima vox*. Or so at least I have come to imagine at this stage in my life. Adopting a phrase from Tertullian's *De carne Christi* (Chapter 5), I am inclined to say "*prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est* (moreover, it is credible because it is inept)."⁷⁴ But I am not proposing to launch into a detailed discussion of the authorship, composition and textual history of the *Analects* at this late stage.

In any case, the smile is all over the place in the *Analects*, and it is notoriously absent—almost clinically absent—in such works as the *Mencius*, where every comic detail all too laboriously serves an explicit didactic purpose.⁷⁵ By the time one gets to the *Xunzi*, one finds it hard to remember that unpremeditated wit and humane sensibility were once the hallmark of the best sources we have on Confucian thinking. A profound and absolute change in sensibilities and in the type of "Confucian" discourse has occurred. The smile on Confucius's face will not go away just because the passages where it emerges are politely disregarded, pedantically reinterpreted, or philologically expurgated for a few centuries—or millennia.

Christoph Lichtenberg (1742–99), the mathematician from Göttingen, observed: "A book is a mirror. If a monkey looks into it, no apostle can look out of it."⁷⁶ Orthodox Confucians, I submit, did have their problem. I, in any case, do seem to have mine.⁷⁷ I certain-

⁷³ How would full-fledged Confucians have suffered such passages to be included in their authoritative text? Are we to assume that these early Confucians, unlike their modern interpreters, overlooked the "anti-Confucian," hostile nature of some comments in the book? The suggestion seems ludicrous.

⁷⁴ Tertullian never said *credo quia absurdum est*, "I believe it because it is absurd." I would have quoted him for this if he had. I find nothing absurd in the *Analects*.

⁷⁵ David Nivison once pointed out to me—in passing—a passage which he thought might show a touch of humor; but I have never found any trace of light-heartedness in Mencius.

⁷⁶ *Ein Buch ist ein Spiegel, wenn ein Affe hineinsieht, so kann kein Apostel heraus gucken*. See Christoph Lichtenberg, *Gedankenbücher*, ed. F. Mauthner (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Verlag, 1963), p. 104.

⁷⁷ Perhaps one is, at times, laughing not *with* Confucius, but *at* him.

ly sense in Confucius a person who has and articulates what in Danish (but not, unfortunately, in current Norwegian usage) we call *lune*: a mild, subtle and very communicative form of humor which is certainly not inconsistent with mild irony, or with deep moral conviction.