



‘Man can enlarge the Way. It is not the Way that enlarges man’ .. (柯蔼蓝)
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‘ Man can enlarge the Way. It is not the Way that enlarges man’ ; Poetics in the Analects of Confucius and their fate in modern times

As happy as I am to be here, coming from where I come - a place where one daily witnesses the miseries of protracted strife, a place where politics cannot be ignored - I would like today to relate a particular theme in my study of the Analects of Confucius to an evil perhaps less obvious than are the actual atrocities which are taking place, but concomitant to them; I want to talk about the corruption of language.

I will take here the opportunity to continue the talk I gave at the last Symposium [of 1999], when I dealt with what I called: ‘ Worrying about words in the Confucian Analects’ [and also in later Chinese writing]. My claim was that this concern, which is normally associated with the Daoist school of thought, also appears prominently in the Analects. I tried then to argue that the whole book shows a continuous concern with its own medium - words, wording, language, and that this reveals itself in its specific form and its structural features.

The special form of the Analects seen from an aesthetic viewpoint, made up of the lively and personal conversations of the Master and his disciples at a variety of levels of abstraction and concretization, going through different moods and varying linguistic modes, gives it its very particular character. Its special structural form reflects the great difficulties of binding together words, thought and reality, the difficulties of connecting a verbal ethical system with its referents, which are the particulars of morality as conceived, internalized and practised by man. The unceasing and varied observations of human beings and their circumstances and

the Master’ s stubborn reluctance to define terms and qualities or to determine the man of virtue, [the rounded moral man,] emphasize a special attitude to words and wording as the warp of the book’ s fabric.

The basic suspicion of words expressed in the book is twofold: firstly, words are weak in that they do not adequately express things - whatever they denote or describe (whether people, events or ideas) is always too complex to be contained within fixed formulations. Secondly, [and perhaps the other side of their weakness,] words can tamper with truth: they can be misused and manipulated. Consequently, we find a direct demand for caution with words. They must proceed slowly and must be made to follow and not to precede actual deeds. Thus, being eloquent or clever with words is not a necessary condition for the man of virtue (indeed to be so is in a sense incompatible with it). Being trustworthy (xin ´H), is not just a matter of sticking by one s word or fulfilling promises, but the inner recognition of what

is involved in them. This is the basis of true (moral) learning and knowledge and that which follows knowledge - right conduct.

Still, we only have words, and as the Master sighingly says: ' We cannot associate with birds and beasts' . What we have to do is to take best care of our words so that they convey their meaning, or reach their goal . To that end, the Master formulates and reformulates things, providing new meanings for names, thereby carrying out a creative rectification of names. Such rectification is not only an endless search for appropriate wording, but also implies a more theoretical stance (one could say condition, almost imperative), namely, that the way we use words should leave open the possibility of unfolding and expanding them, variously applying them, and avoiding the fixing of them. Inflexibility in usage necessarily distorts what they express and undermines an approximate relation to their referents.

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