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Philosophy East and West, Volume 57, Number 3, July 2007, pp. 357-374 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2007.0037>



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THE EDUCATIVE FUNCTION OF PERSONAL STYLE IN THE *ANALECTS*

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Confucius remarks that one distinguishing feature of the *junzi* is his capacity to elicit the best from others.¹ This capacity to influence and improve, Confucius suggests, is not merely a matter of what the *junzi* says or does, but is a function of *who he is*. Confucius himself is perhaps the clearest measure we have for understanding the rather subtle species of influence operative here. While Confucius is quick to disown any prideful estimations of his own skill and is modest, if not self-deprecating, in his self-descriptions,² in the *Analects* he is assigned a moral charisma and skill akin to the sun and moon (*An.* 19.24). Indeed, much of the *Analects* reads as a paean to Confucius, an attempt to capture the profound influence he exercised over his students, and can by extension, it is implied, still influence those who apprehend his character and appropriate it as a model for emulation in their own lives.

One recourse his students have for capturing and conveying this influence consists in relating the explicit instruction that Confucius offered, and thus the *Analects* records Confucius' philosophical claims and moral prescriptions. However, there is, the text suggests, something incomplete in this approach. For while its authors take care to relate Confucius' ideas, they likewise attend to Confucius' behavior and comportment, depicting in often rich detail his customary habits of interaction with others and his manner of inhabiting his own skin. They target for notice even apparently trivial features of the master, such as his posture and eating habits. With these details we begin to approach who Confucius is as a human being and, more significantly, who he is as a companion and model to others. We learn something of Confucius' personal style, the figure he cut in the world. While Confucius may be as the sun and moon, he is brought to earth and made flesh in these details. Enlivened with a distinctive demeanor and personality, he assumes a human presence in the text.

That the *Analects'* portrait of Confucius is finely rendered serves a number of immediate purposes. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the credence his behaviors lend to his moral prescriptions. Confucius is shown to exhibit in his own actions the moral sensibility he recommends to others, and thus his counsel assumes the authority and authenticity of experience. Details about Confucius' behaviors and demeanor likewise serve to sustain the efficacy of the moral model he offers. At a very basic level, such details allow us to conceive Confucius as a person with a humanity sufficiently like our own that we may entertain him as a living possibility for our own appropriation. That is, moral models stand to aid the learner in her attempts to wed understanding to action, and, where these models are also enlivened with rich detail, the student may better conceive the role of value in the fullness and com-

plexity of her own experience. Moreover, while the enlivening of moral models is in general useful to any ethics that makes use of such figures, it is particularly apt given the nature of Confucius' counsel. Confucius urges his students to develop moral competency through the study of their cultural legacy and its literary representations. However, acquiring an intellectual command of the tradition is but a beginning; the learner must discover how to turn her learning to account.³ It must be made to shape the learner's character, enabling her to *perform* the insights and values she acquires through study. A finely drawn moral model such as Confucius serves as a resource in this endeavor by capably demonstrating, in a variety of contexts and circumstances, what a character refined through learning looks like. While each of these purposes is well served by the depiction of Confucius offered in the *Analects* and while I shall assume them in what follows, what I wish to examine here is a somewhat more subtle purpose served by the portrait of Confucius: the lesson it offers about the company we keep and the role of personal style in the development of moral sensibility.

The *Analects* suggests that Confucius, like the *junzi*, is just the sort of companion who can summon the best in others. Yet when we try to locate Confucius' moral charisma in the text's depiction of his behavior and demeanor, we are faced with a puzzle. Confucius clearly inspires an unmatched awe in those around him, but we find little in the figure of Confucius that immediately recommends this response. Indeed, if we identify moral exemplars as such owing to their moral exploits—their uncommonly bold or heroically virtuous management of difficult circumstances—we must concede that Confucius offers few, if any, such “exploits.” Instead, Confucius appears as a rather undramatic figure, a man with an unusual command of the quieter skills required to manage well the ordinary and undramatic events of daily life. What is significant in the model of Confucius is not apparently *what* he does, but *how* he does it, the personal style he demonstrates in the performance of rather banal activities. The nature of the model offered by Confucius, I argue, thus finds its potency not in the dramatic or heroic as typically conceived, but in the reflection on personal style that it generates, the way in which it obligates us to count style a matter of moral significance. I here wish to assay this model and assess what it uniquely contributes to moral education. Of what benefit is it to a moral learner to be in the presence of a personage such as Confucius, an individual who not only acts morally but who cuts a certain figure in the world? More broadly, in what way is a morally worthy personal style beneficial to those who experience it? What, if anything, do moral actions that are consistently well styled provide that cannot readily or as easily be accomplished by poorly or inconsistently styled actions?

Personal Style

I wish here to make some distinction between style as it belongs to particular actions and personal style. If style is defined as the manner in which an action is performed, then we must concede that all actions are performed “with style.” That is, all actions are done in *some way*. They may be done well or poorly, with flair or mechanically,

but even the apparent absence of style may be characterized as a style. This, however, is a rather trivial point. What makes the style of our actions of ethical interest are our assessments regarding what sorts of style are appropriate given what we value and what we wish our actions to communicate about our values.⁴ Confucius makes this point on several occasions in the *Analects*, insisting, for example, that the management of one's demeanor is required for genuinely filial actions (*An.* 2.8) and that when observing the forms of mourning one must do so with sincere grief (*An.* 3.4, 3.26). In such cases, style is a mechanism for manifesting virtue.

As Confucius' claims regarding filiality and mourning indicate, our performances of moral actions may only irregularly display the manner appropriate to them. Well-styled moral actions require a demeanor that communicates a willing accession to the demands of virtue, and, while we may on occasion accomplish such a union of act and attitude, doing so with constancy is another order of difficulty. Thus, Confucius lauds his student Yan Hui for maintaining virtuous attitudes and feelings for months, noting that such attitudes and feelings are for most only rarely or sporadically evident (*An.* 6.7). What Confucius praises in Yan Hui is an unusual constancy of disposition. Such constancy is an element of what I wish to describe as personal style.

Personal style denotes an individual's characteristic manner of performing actions or, more broadly, her distinctive way of inhabiting the world. Personal style need not, of course, be moral. Indeed, Confucius expresses concern that style may be a mechanism through which one may simulate virtue, effectively creating a counterfeit image of moral character. Such a falsified character seems to prompt Confucius' aversion to village worthies (*An.* 17.13). What distinguishes personal style from the styling of a particular action consists in its reliable, non-episodic character. It is far from evident that all persons have a style in this narrower sense. We are more likely to display rather inconstant features, adopting and shedding a variety of demeanors according to our circumstances and immediate inclinations. Personal style is thus an achievement. The achievement of a personal style that is morally worthy requires the development of a disposition that reliably communicates a harmony between action and manner, between what is done and how it is done. It requires that one's demeanor give implicit and affirmative testament to the values ostensibly supported by one's actions.

While it is generally correct that Confucius is concerned with the development of moral character, it is important to acknowledge the way in which personal style informs his portrayal of such character. For character has as its principal feature something like the constancy described above: a person of high moral character *reliably* performs virtuous actions. However, the moral framework in which Confucius operates notably includes an aesthetic dimension not generally present in accounts of character. The performance of moral actions, Confucius suggests, should be pleasing to behold, eliciting an appreciation rooted in aesthetic, and not just moral, sensibility. Confucius claims, "Knowing it is not as good as loving it; loving it is not as good as taking joy in it" (*An.* 6.20). A person of high moral character may act morally but do so in a way that, for example, communicates reluctance.

While we may yet laud such an individual for overcoming whatever psychic or dispositional obstacles gave rise to her reluctance, from the standpoint of style such a performance strikes a discordant note. There is no ease or joy in it. In contrast, the model Confucius endorses is evident in another observation that he makes about Yan Hui. Yan Hui, Confucius observes, lives in rather mean material circumstances, having only a small gourd of rice to eat and a dirty hovel in which to live. Nonetheless, Yan Hui abides in an uncompromised joy (*An.* 6.11). To do what is difficult requires character; to do what is difficult and make it a part of one's joy requires both character and style. The former may elicit our admiration but it does so in no small measure by calling our attention to its difficulty. The latter presents itself as a harmony in which no single note claims our attention.

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to give an exhaustive account of Confucius' personal style, there are two features of his style that are particularly relevant to capturing the moral sensibility he recommends and the influence he exercises. The first of these concerns what I wish to call "everyday style" and consists in Confucius' manner of conducting himself in rather ordinary circumstances and interactions. The second concerns what I term "deviant style" and consists in Confucius' occasional apparent departures from perceived norms of behavior and manners.

Everyday Style

Largely concentrated in book 10 of the *Analects*, the passages concerning Confucius' everyday style are perhaps some of the most puzzling in the text. We learn, for example, that even when dining on simple fare, Confucius solemnly made an offering (*An.* 10.11). This seems a rather simple observation that nonetheless communicates something of Confucius' character. From it we may infer that Confucius makes his offerings with a commendable sincerity and regularity. He does not reserve gratitude and appreciation for those occasions when the meal is fine or the company notable. We are thus assured both that Confucius has a capacity to find satisfaction and presumably joy in even modest circumstances and that his practice of appropriate ritual is not a façade adopted to impress and please others. The passage thus conveys with a spare eloquence a great deal about Confucius' manner and character. However, while this is a credible and appealing reading, the passage nonetheless assumes an opacity when we consider it in the context of the text's adulation of Confucius. Confucius' influence is profound and unmatched, yet *this* is the most we can say of him? Although the qualities of constancy and sincerity ascribed here to Confucius are certainly not easy to achieve, neither are they the species of the goodness likely to produce the apparent enchantment that he appears to inspire in others.

The mystery only deepens when we consider a passage such as this as but one element of a larger portrait and broaden our focus to encompass related passages that describe Confucius' demeanor. We are told, for example, that Confucius would wait for the elderly to depart before taking his own leave of village functions (*An.* 10.13); that he did not converse while dining or after retiring at night (*An.* 10.10);

that upon encountering mourners he would adopt a grave expression (*An.* 10.25) and offer physical gestures indicating respect (*An.* 9.10); and that he abstained from singing on days when he had wept (*An.* 7.10). We are given details regarding the physical posture Confucius would adopt in a variety of circumstances (e.g., *An.* 10.24, 10.25, 10.26), his eating preferences (*An.* 10.8), and his manner of accepting gifts (e.g., *An.* 10.18, 10.23). Each of these observations regarding Confucius' demeanor may be parsed to yield some admirable and worthy element of his character and style, but they neither individually nor collectively provide ready access to what is awe-inspiring about Confucius. We can, that is, readily imagine an individual who shares just these traits with Confucius but who nonetheless appears to be merely conventionally polite and dignified, and thus fails to elicit the intense admiration that Confucius does.

One can perhaps be forgiven for seeing an almost Borgesian character in some of these passages. In his "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," Borges compares the *Quixote* written by Cervantes with the same text authored by one Pierre Menard, a twentieth-century novelist. Though their versions of the *Quixote* are literally identical, Cervantes' and Menard's work do not merit equal praise. For though the results are ostensibly the same, the identity of the author, Borges suggests, renders one effort rather conventionally pleasing and the other a dramatic literary innovation. A passage authored by Cervantes reads as a "mere rhetorical praise of history," while the same turn of phrase, when employed by Menard, is "astounding" and "brazenly pragmatic" (Borges 1962, p. 43). To locate a Borgesian sensibility in the *Analects*' depiction of Confucius is to concede that it is not really the behaviors displayed in these passages that command our attention but, first and foremost, the fact that these activities issue from Confucius, that Confucius' behavior is noteworthy not because of any independently compelling quality but because of some feature of his identity that resides outside these accounts of his activities. What in the case of a lesser personage would be merely admirable becomes in the case of Confucius evidence of special insight and skill precisely because he *is* Confucius.

While I believe that something like Borges' insight can be profitably applied to the *Analects*' rendering of Confucius, and I shall discuss this shortly, there is in the case of Confucius' everyday style a manner of reading these passages that preserves the significance of Confucius' behavior on its own merits and accounts for the influence he exercises. What distinguishes Confucius' behavior from that of the merely conventionally polite consists in the underlying conviction about what is good and worthy in life that informs it. Confucius, that is, articulates values that render his personal style in everyday activities richly suggestive indications of a broader moral sensibility. Moreover, that Confucius' behavior and style are relatively uncomplicated and accessible is indicative of the species of virtue he recommends.

Confucius claims that humanity (*ren*) is not remote; if one but seeks it, it is already present (*An.* 7.30). He suggests here that there is no need to reach, that closing the perceived distance between one's immediate experience and what is worthy and good is but a matter of grasping what experience freely affords. Confucius' personal style in everyday affairs communicates a consciousness of the nearness and ready

accessibility of profound value. I shall take his practice of making an offering before simple meals as an exemplary case.

Insofar as it is a ritual practice informed by religious sensibility, making an offering before a meal may be counted a moral matter. However, certain of its features, such as its preordained form and repeatability, may suggest that in a calculus of moral significance this is a decidedly low-stakes moral matter. The meal of simple fare, unlike a sumptuous feast, rarely commands our attention. By itself, it offers little incitement to reflection and is where the act of dining is most easily reduced to the satisfaction of physical appetite. Where we are habituated to perform ritual observances prior to meals, it is where our meals are simple that we are most likely to forego such niceties or conduct them in perfunctory or cursory ways. Confucius, however, not only makes an offering before dining on simple fare; he does so with solemnity. While this practice elicits the notice of his companions, there is no suggestion that Confucius is obtrusively mannerly. Indeed, Confucius' personal style seems to be just the sort that only becomes apparent over long acquaintance and careful observation. Like the modest circumstances in which it originates, it resists an obvious profundity in favor of a quiet constancy. In the case of the simple meal, Confucius seizes upon a modest event as an occasion that triggers gratitude. He tacitly acknowledges the fragility of even the most basic elements of our well-being and thus locates in their ready availability a summons to express appreciation and pleasure.

That Confucius is consistently dignified and gracious in his performances of everyday activities and courtesies demonstrates what I wish to describe as an ethical intimacy,⁵ an achieved union between ordinary activity and the encompassing values that sustain an individual across the span of a life. Ethical intimacy, as Confucius' demeanor demonstrates, is a skill, a facility for drawing into close association elements of experience that may initially appear quite distant. For while Confucius denies that the good is difficult to reach, his claim also implicitly recognizes that it may appear so. Where our notions of what is good and worthy in our lives are only dimly realized or rarely examined, where we are inattentive to our immediate circumstances (and our more commonplace experiences in particular), we are left without the means to establish a fruitful relationship between them. Where I fail to appreciate my good health or trace its origins in the plain food before me, my simple meal is reduced to an event disconnected from any larger narrative, and my response to it is unmoored from who I am or wish to be. It is, simply and only, a *meal*. The achievement of Confucius' personal style thus consists in his ability to be simultaneously at home in profound value and in prosaic experience, conceiving them as what Joel Kupperman describes as a "seamless web" (Kupperman 2002, p. 42).

As this analysis suggests, our ordinary activities put our larger values into play in a fashion that more dramatic moral moments do not. In the *Analects'* depiction of him, Confucius is seen to demonstrate, *in situ*, the moral sensibility he advocates, and the species of circumstance in which his displays of this sensibility are generated—the ordinary, the banal, the prosaic—are not incidental but integral to

the overall vision of morality that Confucius offers. François Jullien has observed that Confucius “protested the all-too-easy cult of the extraordinary” and rejects any morality that privileges the dramatic and unusual (Jullien 2004, p. 51). The efficacy and influence of Confucius’ personal style must be understood in the context of this rejection.

The deliberate and insistent banality of Confucius’ personal style argues against what I would term, to borrow a phrase from Henry James, a “beast in the jungle” ethics. Such an ethics is marked by a pervasive sense that both our profound challenges and joy lurk “out there” beyond the horizon of our immediate prosaic experience. They are not the stuff of daily life but reside in those uncommon moments when profoundly transformative experience springs upon us, obliging us, with an insistence and force not otherwise present in mundane daily affairs, to react and respond.

A precondition of the ethical intimacy that Confucius displays in his personal style is the rejection of any morality that privileges the dramatic and unusual, or the moral *problem*, as the locus of our moral efforts and energies. The dramatic moral moment—when we find ourselves caught, suspended between alternatives by a confusion about what we must do—is where we often have our most obvious opportunities to manifest our moral sensibilities. While these moments are those that most catch our attention precisely because they are so perplexing and put much at stake, they are also in some way too easy. We are on “moral alert,” so to speak, because our circumstances announce their moral significance in a way that compels our attention. That we must carefully weigh our actions, test their accord with our notions of the good, is merely what the circumstance demands. The obviousness of such moments requires no acuity of attention. The beast springs; we are obliged to respond.

Morality here operates according to a dynamic of challenge and resistance. The application of moral judgment required in moments of perplexity and confusion is predicated on the need to make experience yield to our notions of what is good and worthy. We must, that is, achieve an *enforced coincidence* between broader values and our immediate actions. Moral action is produced in *agon*, be it a struggle to implement what we judge to be good or to discover what is the right thing to do given our circumstances. There is no ease in such a posture, and moral experience is by definition a source of discomfort. This is evident in how we treat “success” in such circumstances. The individual who well manages such moments is lauded as heroic precisely because she *overcomes* obstacles, discerning among a range of available possibilities what she needs to do and implementing her judgment despite whatever pain or unpleasantness it may cost her.

In Confucius’ idiom, what is perhaps most troubling about this manner of framing morality is where it leaves the rest of experience. As Kupperman observes, if we identify morality as principally concerned with the resolution of difficult moral problems, then when our circumstances pose no such problems, we occupy an “ethical free-play zone, in which one can do whatever one likes” (Kupperman 2002, p. 40). Moral activity here occurs in isolation from the rest of experience, with life divided into those moments that are endowed with moral significance and those that are

morally neutral or empty. An immediate difficulty that we encounter with this manner of framing morality consists in demarcating these two arenas. We require some reliable procedure for distinguishing between them. There are, of course, a number of ways we might proceed with such a project, and, depending on our approach, moral experience may be tightly confined and relatively rare or expansive and a fairly usual feature of life. However, even the more expansive versions of this species of morality fail to contest substantially the isolation of moral experience from the rest of life. Instead they tend merely to enlarge the domain of moral struggle. They multiply the number of beasts lurking in the jungle, amplifying anxiety and tension, rather than undermine this basic framework.⁶ Whether we construe morality broadly or narrowly, we consign the rest of experience to a troubling irrelevance. It is, on the one hand, a respite from the demands of morality and, on the other, wanting in just the sort of stimulation that makes transformations of character and personal cultivation possible. We are free from the disquieting challenges and resistance that moral experience offers, but with this freedom comes an erosion of meaning in which the moral personality can find no purchase for cultivation or expression of value.

Confucius seems to appreciate that privileging the dramatic and unusual in moral experience produces a sensitivity to the life- and character-defining features of our response to profound moral challenges. His objection to this consists in the recognition that promoting such a sensitivity often functions to conceal the more subtle, though no less real or significant, alterations of character produced by our manner of conducting prosaic activities. Indeed, where we parcel experience into portions, we must recognize that the far larger share of our lives consists in the mundane and prosaic, and that the cumulative effect of our conduct in these activities profoundly shapes the sort of people we become. In Henry James' idiom, where we await the dramatic defining moment, the beast in the jungle, to mark us out, we court the horror that arrives when we belatedly recognize that "the wait is itself [our] portion" (James 1944, p. 798). And while we wait for the beast to spring, what is right before us is filched away because we are insensible to what it offers. We anticipate a crashing through the trees, ignoring the whispers of sound all around us. Thus, what initially appears as a sensitivity to the profound and transformative power of moral experience here reads as a disabling moral paralysis.

The risk that we depreciate ordinary experience and waste opportunities to cultivate ourselves and enrich our lives is not, Confucius makes clear, confined to moral experience. Confucius' rejection of the dramatic moral moment is informed by a more global rejection of any mode of life that endorses, either explicitly or implicitly, the notion that we experience value as a visitation, as something alien and external to the rhythm and routine of daily life. When we adopt this posture we reduce our capacity to experience joy. Thus, the model that Confucius offers notably includes not just the rectitude and dignity of one who engages the moral possibilities of the banal, but a receptive capacity for pleasure that likewise originates in ethical intimacy. Because value operates for Confucius as a location one inhabits rather than a site one visits when uncommon circumstances arise, he possesses a facility for locating joy in the subtle flow of ordinary experience.

The *Analects* notably opens with Confucius expressing joy: “To study and in due time practice what you learn—is this not indeed pleasing? To have friends come from afar—is this not indeed joy? When people do not know you yet you are not indignant—is this not indeed the attitude of a *junzi*?” (*An.* 1.1). What is striking about this passage is just how unassuming it is. Confucius avers pleasure in what he counts as some of our most noble and worthy pursuits,⁷ yet absent are any too ambitious or grandiose claims about wisdom or any suggestion that these pursuits transport us to the sublime outer reaches of human endeavor. Instead, Confucius highlights a joy located firmly in the everyday experiences of the learner: the gradual development of skill in applying one’s insights, the companionship of one’s fellows, and the dawning contentment that frees one from petty ambitions for recognition. Quite apart from any culmination in profound wisdom, the *process* of self-cultivation is itself a source of joy. What need is there, Confucius suggests, to reach beyond this? This sensibility is eloquently confirmed when Confucius is ill and seems near death. One of his students, Zilu, arranges to have several of Confucius’ students pose as retainers in the hope of impressing upon any visitors what he judges to be Confucius’ considerable stature. Confucius affectionately rebukes Zilu and articulates a preference for dying “in the arms of [his] students” rather than “in the arms of some retainers” (*An.* 9.12). While Confucius’ rejection of a public stature rooted in deception is significant, more remarkable is his judging it not only sufficient but plentiful to die among friends. Even in considering his own death—an occasion that, perhaps more than any other, seems likely to promote a sense of profound moment—Confucius resists drama or marking out its significance as a thing apart, separate, and distinct from the narrative of his life. That which sustains him in life, the company of friends, will sustain him in death as well.

Confucius’ attunement to the close association between life-governing values and everyday circumstances, his manner of displaying this intimacy in his actions, argues against beast-in-the-jungle ethics. Instead, Confucius appears as a figure for whom a life lived well is akin to a musical performance wherein robust value sounds as *sostenuto*. It does not announce or impose itself but rather operates as a sustained feature of experience, subtly informing an abiding harmony. The contours of a life lived in this fashion are those of “straightening one’s mat” (*An.* 10.12) as a matter of thoughtful habit and taking it as one’s aspiration to spend a late spring day swimming with friends and children, reveling in the cool air, and singing on the way home in the evening (*An.* 11.26).

Putting straight one’s mat and reveling in a spring day may initially appear to emerge from somewhat contradictory impulses. The first may suggest an overweening formality and fussy attention to trivial detail at odds with the apparently carefree and relaxed pleasure of the second. However, both mark Confucius’ distinctive personal style. He is at once dignified and careful and capable of lighthearted joy. Moreover, there is little to suggest any tension between these features of his style and personality. Instead, they are wedded by their common emergence from the ethical intimacy that Confucius achieves. The good is near to hand and this entails the recognition that banal life affords us a rich variety of circumstances that rightly

occasion a diversity of responses. When I straighten my mat or exhibit what we might consider ordinary courtesies, and do so consistently with a demeanor of care, what may initially appear to be “merely” good manners operates as an affirmation of the value I locate in those with whom my daily life is shared. Similarly, when I take the joy that my circumstances and companions offer, I declare their sufficiency and abundance. In both cases, I establish in my interactions the immediacy of what I count good and worthy, and maintain a posture open to what they may offer. I do not wait for a crisis or challenge, a prompt to care or enjoy, to demand a display of my regard but render it an abiding feature of who I am and who I am with others.

While the benefits to the agent who achieves ethical intimacy of the sort that Confucius displays are, I think, obvious—such an individual leads a life both more morally worthy and more satisfying than the norm—I wish to turn now to the benefit that accrues to the moral learner who has such an individual as a companion and model. What, that is, does being in the company of a figure such as Confucius add to the education and development of the moral learner?

Perhaps the most obvious benefit of Confucius’ personal style derives from the clear parallel between the substance of the lesson it implicitly offers and the fashion in which it is delivered. The skills that the learner must utilize in order to grasp the lesson are the self-same skills needed to apply it. What Confucius wishes to teach, I suggest, may be considered analogous to the skills requisite for a happy, long-lived marriage. Where my aim is to be well married, I stand to learn more from watching how my grandparents, happily married for some sixty-five years, pass the salt to each other at supper than I would glean from attending a dozen or more romantic weddings or anniversary celebrations. That I have never heard my grandparents explicitly and verbally avow any love for each other makes them more, not less, potent as models. For this obliges me to entertain the complexity of their experience, and the skills demonstrated therein, without recourse to any too easy or obvious interpretation. Confucius’ instruction is similarly indirect, and the moral learner who looks to Confucius must likewise become an able reader of the laconic. Confucius does not opine. He does not announce in profound fashion the significance of the everyday. Instead, as Jullien observes, the lesson is inconspicuous, “based on the principle of the Master’s minimal intervention” (Jullien 2000, p. 199). It operates at a level of understatement that conditions the species of attention and interpretation that we can bestow upon it. Confucius, if the *Analects*’ depiction of him is any indication, inspires admiration in his companions yet does so in a way that belies any attempt to pin down just what in his behavior demands such a response. Indeed, that it does not *demand* it is part of its attraction. That Confucius does not protest in dramatic voice the good he pursues obliges us to trace its indications just as we must, if we seek a similar good, trace its presence in our own banal and prosaic experiences.

Confucius’ personal style also serves the moral learner by fostering a destabilization of her perception of ordinary experience. The occasions that prompt Confucius’ displays of ethical intimacy are familiar and banal, yet his responses, with their apparent increase of care and attention, serve to render the familiar unfamiliar, to expose the latent subtleties in the obvious. Where we identify morality as broadly

concerned with our banal everyday activities, we must recognize that morality is often, quite simply, not about discerning what is the right thing to do. Where I encounter an elderly woman struggling with her packages, I need not perform an elaborate moral inquiry to discover that I ought to assist her. Such is merely the obvious moral demand of the circumstance. Many of the behaviors Confucius is depicted performing in the passages that directly display his comportment have this character. They appear to be the stuff of moral habit, the sorts of behaviors that can largely be performed by rote and without substantive ethical reflection. While we clearly profit from dwelling in an environment in which such behaviors are the prevailing norm, in emphasizing style Confucius implicitly challenges the apparent simplicity of such circumstances. When we witness an individual earnestly perform what we otherwise count as unexceptional and largely rote behaviors, our complacency about such matters is unseated.

Confucius suggests that the experience of self-cultivation is akin to music (*An.* 3.23). Music begins, he says, in a confusion of sound, each note discretely imposing itself on the ear. In its unfolding, however, the interplay of harmony and tension reconcile and resolve into a pleasing totality. Like the skilled musician, Confucius draws together apparently disparate elements of experience to yield an unfractured, seamless whole. The learner, like the listener, finds her disorientation assuming a quality of wonder and discovery as each unexceptional part settles into a brilliant whole.

Deviant Style

The passages that convey what I describe as Confucius' everyday style recommend his manner as worthy of emulation. We would do well, that is, to appropriate for ourselves the sensibility that informs Confucius' practice of making an offering before even a simple meal or of speaking with restraint among our elders. However, not all of the depictions of Confucius' style contained in the *Analects* can readily be interpreted in this fashion. That is, not all of them depict behaviors that lend themselves to emulation, and indeed it would seem decidedly wrongheaded to emulate the behaviors and manner ascribed to Confucius in some of these accounts. Perhaps the best illustration of this is Confucius' encounter with a fellow named Yuanrang, believed to be an old acquaintance of Confucius.⁸ When Confucius sees Yuanrang sitting at ease, in a posture altogether too casual and disrespectful for receiving guests, he raps the man about the shins, suggesting that Yuanrang is among those who fail to develop their promise when young and then lack even the grace to die when old (*An.* 14.43). To imagine that one should follow Confucius' example in this case and adopt a practice of chiding the useless elderly is simply unsupported by anything else in the text.

This passage and others like it display what I wish to call the "deviant" aspect of Confucius' personal style. While it is generally true that Confucius operates within certain recognizable norms of behavior,⁹ he is on occasion seen to defy such norms, and, significantly, he seems to do so without any aim to establish some new and presumably superior standard of his own devising. He appears, that is, to exhibit behav-

iors that simply seem unaccountable and that fit ill with values he elsewhere attests. While it is not generally the case that he appears to be behaving in ways that rise to the level of being *wrong*, his behavior and manner are nonetheless puzzling and without clear foundation.

In some cases, Confucius appears to deviate from his more typical dignified reserve in order to offer pointed critique or even insult. When told that Ru Bei has sent a messenger to request an audience with him, Confucius declines by claiming illness and, in what can only be counted a deliberate display of rudeness, pointedly begins playing the zither and singing before the messenger takes his leave (*An.* 17.20). Upon hearing what is apparently a too grand and elaborate musical performance in the provinces, Confucius likens the music to “using an ox cleaver to kill a chicken,” an ungenerous remark that prompts his student Ziyou to criticize him (*An.* 17.4). Though Confucius typically displays patience and affection with his students, he is also not above deploying what Christoph Harbsmeier describes as “grossly insulting epithets” (Harbsmeier 1990, p. 146). Catching one student, Zaiwo, in bed late in the day, Confucius compares him to both rotted wood and a wall of dung, materials that, he suggests, no artistry or skill can make other than what they, fundamentally and disappointingly, are (*An.* 5.10). One passage appears to be nothing more than a catalogue of Confucius’ rather cutting evaluations of some of his students: “Zigao is stupid; Zeng is dull-witted; Zizhang is extreme; Zilu is wild” (*An.* 11.18).

It seems likely, as Harbsmeier has argued, that at least some of these passages flesh out Confucius as an individual possessed of a rich sense of humor, able to entertain and impulsively comment on human foibles. This interpretation is supported by additional passages that I wish to classify as deviant and that Harbsmeier links as sharing a common structure. In these passages Confucius playfully endorses a “mad idea” in a spirit of self-mockery (Harbsmeier 1990, pp. 135–137). When a villager observes that Confucius is widely reputed to have broad learning but has not distinguished himself in any particular area, Confucius rehearses a brief list of possible skills and settles on taking up charioteering (*An.* 9.2). On at least two occasions he expresses frustration with his failure to find a virtuous ruler whom he might serve as a minister and proposes what appear to be wild, unserious desires to simply abandon his homeland. He proposes instead to live among the “barbarians” and implies that his presence would render them less vulgar and crude (*An.* 9.14). In a similar vein, he suggests simply setting out to sea on a raft and imagines that Zilu, a student known for a boldness rarely mediated by good judgment, would be a suitable companion (*An.* 5.7). Indeed, the passage I cite above regarding Confucius’ aspiration to swim and sing on a fine spring day features an element of the “mad idea.” In each of these passages Confucius’ otherwise dignified and stoic acceptance of his failure to achieve meaningful employment and recognition gives way to regret humorously tempered with a touch of self-satirization.

The Confucius depicted in these passages appears at least initially to fit ill with the sort of aspiration that Confucius associates with virtuous character and, we would imagine, holds for himself as well. He claims that one ought to be slow to speak (*An.* 4.24) and that restraint will rarely lead one astray (*An.* 4.23), yet in his

more cutting remarks he appears neither cautious nor restrained in his speech. He likewise claims that a hallmark of the *junzi* is an indifference to public stature and acknowledgment (e.g., *An.* 4.14 and 15.19), yet expresses, albeit playfully, his own disappointment on this score. There are multiple examples in the *Analects'* portrayal of Confucius' personal behavior that exhibit a similar tension. When asked to give an account of filiality, Confucius says, "Do not be rebellious" (*An.* 2.5). However, when his student Yan Hui shows no rebelliousness, Confucius' first assumption is that he is stupid, as though "the absence of recalcitrance or rebelliousness [is] a *prima facie* sign of stupidity" (Harbsmeier 1990, p. 147). Only after carefully observing Yan Hui does Confucius let go this assumption and conclude that the young man is in fact quite gifted. That there are such occasional discontinuities between Confucius' recommendations and his own behavior is demonstrated by his students' sometimes puzzled responses to him. When Yan Hui dies, Confucius goes so far as to blame *tian* for "destroying him" (*An.* 11.9). His loss of self-command and abandonment to grief is so extreme that his students challenge him about it, even, apparently, while he still weeps (*An.* 11.10).

There are, of course, many strategies, evident in the literature, for leveraging from these passages a Confucius who maintains his rectitude and, even in these cases, proffers a worthy lesson for others. In some cases, such a reading seems quite plausible. When Confucius justifies his markedly unusual habit of asking questions in the Grand Ancestral Temple by claiming that asking questions is appropriate ritual (*An.* 3.15), his behavior is not only explicable, it contributes substantial insight into his understanding of ritual. However, in other cases, this approach to reading Confucius' deviations from the norms he elsewhere endorses strains credulity. For example, Confucius' apparently rude dismissal of Ru Bei's messenger is attributed to Ru Bei's own flawed character or some error in his manner of approaching Confucius. Thus, "[c]ommentators generally see the purpose of this insult to be to inspire Ru Bei to reflect deeply on his own behavior and reform himself" (Slingerland 2003, p. 209). While the inference that Ru Bei, in Confucius' judgment, has caused some offense seems incontestable, to conclude that Confucius' stinging insult emerges only from a noble and charitable impulse significantly elides the nature of the insult. Confucius here not only engages in deception, he gratuitously *flaunts* it. Even if we can accommodate the fact of Confucius' lie in our explanation, he employs a tactic that generally seems unlikely to provoke earnest soul-searching in its target. If this is indeed his aim, it appears to presuppose an exceptional receptivity to instruction on the part of Ru Bei, a superior quality of character that renders the original insult more, rather than less, puzzling. If Ru Bei is possessed of a character that enables him to suffer insult and consequently turn inward to discover its justice, why would Confucius need to insult him in the first place?

This species of interpretation seems again to bestow moral worth on an activity not because the activity itself warrants it but because it issues from Confucius. It likewise renders Confucius consistent only at the cost of eliding the richness of his personality and leaves him looking like quite the pedant, a figure whose every inflection and gesture, no matter how apparently peculiar or mystifying, contains a little lesson

for living. Moreover, Confucius is here an *inefficient* pedant, for his lessons are deeply hidden and require elaborate interpretive strategies for their retrieval.

A more plausible reading is available if we take seriously Confucius' insistence that he keeps nothing hidden from his students, that the person he is is always on display (*An.* 7.24). To adopt such a reading is to allow that Confucius behaved at times in ways inconsistent with the image of Confucius often promulgated by the tradition of scholarship that bears his name. Perhaps, as Harbsmeier has argued, "the more un-Confucian and unsagely" depictions of Confucius bring us closer "to the man and his personal history, and the more likely we are to hear the Master's Voice" (Harbsmeier 1990, p. 147). In Harbsmeier's interpretation, Confucius' apparent deviations flesh out Confucius as a human being, allowing access to the man rather than the historical image. It is also possible that Confucius' deviations from norms simply demonstrate what Aristotle would term *akrasia*, a failure by the agent to apply completely and consistently ethical judgments he otherwise recognizes as worthy and valuable. While I would not rule this out entirely and insist that this is never the case, a more robust reading is possible if we extend the analogy offered earlier and consider the ways in which virtue, for Confucius, is akin to musical performance. Hall and Ames have argued that the Confucian sage is a "virtuoso" and that Confucius conceives music "as an activity that provides enhanced possibilities for disclosing personal style, spirit, and consequence" (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 276). Confucius' appreciation of music offers a mechanism through which the contribution of his "deviant style" to virtue may be assayed. I shall take piano performance as an exemplary case.

The skilled pianist must master a number of clear and easily characterized skills. She must practice regularly; become an able and competent reader of music; develop manual dexterity; regulate the body, breath, and posture; assess and correct her weaknesses; attune her ear such that she can apprehend a note's correctness or incorrectness; understand the mechanical operations of her instrument and the possibilities for sound that it offers; and enforce a self-discipline that will sustain her through the more plodding aspects of learning her art well. The nature of musical performance, however, is such that even if the pianist masters all of these, she may yet not achieve virtuosity. For while the best pianists have mastered all of these skills, this is not all that they do. The best pianists are just those who, at some point and in some way, leap into idiosyncrasy. They lend something of themselves to the scores that they play, and thus while two virtuosos may play the same score, the resulting effects that they achieve are distinctive and defy replication. While a complete study of this phenomenon is unnecessary here, what I wish to emphasize is what it means to take such individuals as models.

As Julia Annas has argued, if one wants to play like Alfred Brendel, one must in some sense give up playing like Alfred Brendel (Annas 2004, p. 73). Moreover, in some cases, if one wishes to emulate a virtuoso, one must decidedly *avoid* playing like him. Perhaps the most notable and obvious example of this is Glenn Gould, a pianist renowned for his interpretations of Bach. While Gould's idiosyncrasies are many, the most unaccountable of these is that he hums while he plays. Indeed, he

not only hums, he hums *tunelessly* and in a manner apparently entirely disconnected from the piece he performs. What is difficult in analyzing the skill of Gould is his adoption of a habit we would in no way recommend to the learner, yet neither is this habit dispensable to Gould's art: part of what it means to hear Gould is to hear *that hum*. It is not what makes his performances *good* performances, but neither can we separate it out from the performances themselves. Were we to edit it out, we would not enhance the music but instead lose something important and valuable about its genesis and thus sacrifice something that elementally belongs to it. Confucius' deviations are just such a hum. They constitute a leap into idiosyncrasy.

It is in the idiosyncratic that I locate something of a Borgesian sensibility in Confucius' personal style. When Pierre Menard sets out to write the *Quixote*, a sure technique immediately presents itself: "Know Spanish well, recover the Catholic faith, fight against the Moors or the Turk, forget the history of Europe between the years 1602 and 1918, *be* Miguel Cervantes." Menard, however, quickly dismisses this approach to his project, recognizing that "of all the impossible ways of carrying it out, this was the least interesting" (Borges 1962, p. 40). The patent absurdity of this of course rests in its simultaneous impossibility and ease. There is only one Cervantes, and Menard cannot be him, yet to write the *Quixote* as Cervantes is merely to do what has been done before. To write the *Quixote* as Cervantes would be to construct a counterfeit entirely wanting in boldness and originality. To write the *Quixote* as oneself, on the other hand, is to embark upon a wholly novel and original course, and the resultant effect is not really the *Quixote*. There is no *Quixote*, no binding inevitability of the text, either for Menard or Cervantes. The texts they produce confess their origins in the novelty of their circumstances and the personalities of their authors. Borges' tale illustrates that even in the production of an ostensibly identical text, novelty is inescapable. The point here is not that the same act can be perceived in various ways, but that acts cannot be replicated.

In Confucius' deviant style we have a potent challenge to any intimations that virtue can be replicated. Confucius' own personal style functions to make a mockery of any "virtue book," a text that will helpfully constrain and regulate actions by obviating the need for bringing oneself into play. The moral learner thus has in the figure of Confucius a model to emulate that openly defies imitation. Indeed, Confucius' disquiet at Yan Hui's lack of obstinacy, his implicit praise of Zihua's unorthodox aspiration over those of his more conventionally minded students, and his habitual modesty all suggest that Confucius is uneasy with his own behavior and demeanor being received as authoritative in any final sense. The peril here, of course, is that the more lionized the model, the greater our tendency to leverage his behaviors into a rule-like construction of morality, to conceive the work of charting a path for virtue complete. We straighten our mats, make offerings before our simple meals, and defer to the elderly, treating the behaviors of the model as a *program*. Where we posit a figure such as Confucius as authoritative and his manifestation of virtue final, like Menard we render our target both impossible and too easy. Confucius' virtue here suffers a reduction, his activities divorced from their larger context, the

sensibility that informs them, and the personality from which they issue. While Confucius' goodness cannot be understood apart from these activities, neither can it be captured in them. We may mimic him and thereby achieve a superficial sameness, yet absent is the consolidating presence that can resolve a diversity of elements into pleasing accord.

To adopt this manner of reading Confucius' personal style requires that we tolerate an incompleteness in our understanding. It requires, that is, that we entertain the possibility that at least some of what we learn of Confucius in the *Analects* simply does not permit a linear explanation wherein we can discover the sorts of behavior that virtue requires by merely observing what Confucius does. Indeed, where Confucius deviates from norms, his behaviors function instead to stimulate a productive disorientation. In these deviations, Confucius hums, he denies us our *Quixote*, indirectly indicating just how elusive virtuosity is. Ethical intimacy is achieved in maintaining one's good near to hand, but there is nonetheless a pervasive sense that virtue is richly underdetermined. What one individual achieves operates as an "indication,"¹⁰ but the virtue offered by the sage is, and must remain, inconclusive and open. It "evidences constancy while sponsoring a friendly chaos" (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 278).

Confucius' student Yan Hui eloquently gives voice to the disorienting effect of this "chaos" on the moral learner: "The more I look up at it, the higher it appears; the more I probe into it, the harder it becomes. I see it in front of me and it is suddenly behind me" (*An.* 9.11). Yan Hui, who is elsewhere noted for his agility in grasping what Confucius offers, here appears adrift. This dislocation, however, is not the result of failure on the part of an otherwise exceptional student, but is instead an additional marker of his skill. He is, by his own account, guided "step by step" by Confucius, yet here he appreciates that the path established by Confucius abruptly ends, and forward movement is his own to make. Confucius' unaccountable behaviors, his "deviant style," are not virtue. To look for this in them, as though divesting Confucius of his sometimes puzzling character will yield a further stretch of path, is but to postpone its inevitable termination. It is to deny the rich and *necessary* incompleteness of the model and elide the need for idiosyncratic personal expression. Confucius is not a model of virtue; he is a model of a man who is virtuous. If I wish to be like Confucius, I cannot be like him.

Conclusion

The *Analects'* portrayal of Confucius' personal style leaves the moral learner with an apparent tension. Confucius' probity and pleasure in the conduct of banal activities offers an incitement to careful attention, encouraging the learner to direct her efforts at discovering the value subtly manifest in the merest gesture and expression. Confucius' deviant style functions to frustrate this impulse, eluding the learner's attempts to capture Confucius' virtuosity. What both share, however, is a common origin in ethical intimacy. In Confucius' everyday style, the learner apprehends the need to draw life-governing values and prosaic experience into close association. In Confu-

cius' deviant style, the presence of Confucius, *qua* individual with a distinctive and idiosyncratic style, alerts her to the need to achieve her own distinctive and unifying presence. Confucius demonstrates that the transformations of self required by cultivation are not wholly other. They do not spring upon us but are available in the richly familiar features of ordinary experience. They do not suppress or quiet personality, but make use of it.

The moral learner, perhaps by definition, has high ambitions. At a minimum, she aspires to goodness. Maximally, she aspires to virtuosity. Confucius' personal style suggests that not only is profound value near to hand, but its realization must find its genesis in the agent and her experiences. Ambition must be checked, or, rather, recalibrated, to incorporate these apparently modest, though no less difficult, elements of virtue.

Notes

I am indebted to Garret Olberding for his reading and comments on several drafts of this essay. His remarks on both Confucius and piano performance have been helpful to me, but any errors regarding either are mine.

- 1 – *Analects* 12.16. All references to the *Analects* (*Lunyu*) give chapter and passage number as they appear in the Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series No. 16, *A Concordance to the Analects*. The translations are mine. Hereafter all citations are given in the text and designated by the abbreviation “*An.*”
- 2 – See, for example, *An.* 7.20, 7.33, 9.8.
- 3 – See, for example, Confucius' son's account of his father's instruction that he learn the *Odes* in order to develop the ability to speak well and that he learn ritual in order to be able to “take his stand” (*An.* 16.13).
- 4 – Joel Kupperman provides a brief but illuminating discussion of the role of style in offering testimony about attitudes and dispositions, in his essay “Naturalness Revisited.” See Kupperman 2002, pp. 47–49.
- 5 – I am indebted to Janet McCracken's work on “phenomenological intimacy” for this terminology. While I have modified, and taken liberties with, her conceptual schema to suit Confucius, her study of the domestic is an instructive account of the role of taste in moral development. See McCracken 2001, especially chapter 1.
- 6 – Peter Singer's utilitarianism is a good example of this phenomenon. What aspires to make us aware of the moral import of our daily choices does so by significantly heightening our sense of guilt and escalating the tension between what we desire for ourselves and what we owe others.
- 7 – I here take the activities Confucius describes to be addressing broadly the process of learning.

- 8 – The inference that Yuanrang is an old acquaintance of Confucius is based on a story contained in the *Liji*. The story relates that Confucius assisted with the funeral of Yuanrang's mother. When Yuanrang, in a marked display of impropriety, climbs onto the coffin and begins to sing, Confucius pretends not to hear and departs. Asked later to explain his apparent reluctance to stop Yuanrang, Confucius cites their long friendship. See Legge 1967, pp. 198–199.
- 9 – The norms under which Confucius operates are not uniform, however. He does appear at times to endorse and practice those behaviors considered conventionally appropriate in his day, yet at other times he appears to challenge these practices in favor of other, competing, norms, most notably those of prior ages.
- 10 – Jullien provides an extensive discussion of Confucius' use of "indication" in place of explicit propositions. See Jullien 2000, especially chapter 9.

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