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MOMENTS OF RETICENCE IN THE *ANALECTS* AND WITTGENSTEIN



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For perhaps obvious reasons, reticence is not likely to recommend itself as a category with which to perform cross-cultural studies in philosophy. Again, to risk stating the obvious, the theme of reticence would in this context concern what philosophical arguments and texts *leave* unsaid as well as explicitly *advise* an audience to leave unsaid. By fixing our attention to gaps, silences, and times where the subject is changed as well as when any of the advice above is explicitly recommended (moments of reticence), new insights on how philosophical clarification and ethical cultivation are performed will come into view. That, at least, is the ambition of the present article on the *Analects* and Wittgenstein. The objective is to discover some of the different forms of reticence in philosophical and ethical discourses in order to show that which is valued despite being at the border of what can or should be expressed. This study of reticence shows how silences, quietudes, and redirections of inquiry—whether they are explicit or implicit—can be communicatively and perhaps even philosophically rich moments of clarification. In so doing, this preliminary study will bring into view some indirect modes of teaching within and across traditions, a dynamic that may be useful for the future cross-cultural study of philosophical, religious, and/or ethical traditions.

I. Considering Reticence

In his recent comparative study of Wittgenstein and Confucius *Whose Tradition? Which Dao?* James Peterman investigates how the Confucian moral tradition of self-cultivation is made manifest in the master-novice relationship in the *Analects* (Peterman 2015, p. 7). This relationship, as well as the “parent-child” (father-son) relationship, is “the means by which norms, which are embodied, are transmitted and understood.” Peterman seeks to defend an *Analects*-based tradition of moral inquiry against criticism leveled by critics like MacIntyre that Confucianism is not a bona fide moral tradition, lacking the unity of the virtues achieved in Aristotle’s virtue ethics. Peterman draws on Wittgenstein, especially on *Philosophical Investigations* and *On Certainty*, and commentators (e.g., Cora Diamond 1995) to elaborate on how an immanent practical grounding for an ethical tradition is metaphysical grounding enough. In drawing attention to pedagogical encounters present in the *Analects*, Peterman also has laid the groundwork

for a comparative study of Wittgenstein and Confucianism that goes beyond Peterman's own approach, such as is conducted in the present article.

Much of Peterman's Wittgensteinian defense of Confucian moral learning relies on what is said, what is implicated, and what is made explicit in master-novice relationships. For example, Peterman brings to bear Wittgenstein's distinction between "bedrock practices" and "ostensive definition" in characterizing a Confucian master's instruction of a novice. Both stages of instruction (setting the ground and then expanding knowledge of a language-game) involve showing and saying what can be, alternately, shown and said. While forms of reticence may be salient features of these communicative moments, that reticence would depend on broader contexts of direct communication. Unlike Peterman's project, the task of this article is not to ground an ethical point of view; instead, the goal is to identify a related collection of phenomena across philosophical traditions—what I am calling "moments of reticence"—and to explore how differences in implementation reflect differences in methods and ends in these philosophical traditions or approaches. The hope is that this will lay the groundwork for future investigation of additional philosophical traditions.

A basic understanding of what reticence is will help frame this study. A description of the ordinary-language meaning of the term "reticence" may be seen in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "Reluctance to speak about something or to express personal thoughts and feeling freely; maintenance of silence; the state or quality of being taciturn or reserved in speech" (OED 2017). From even just this entry, we can see that the word "reticence" does not refer to one thing, but several distinct (even if related) things.¹ In the texts that this article examines, reticence may appear in silences as well as in declarations about the limits or borders of what can or should be expressed. An attitude of reticence may be *explicit*—as in a declarative specification of the limits of expression or propriety—or *implicit*—as in a refusal to speak. Reticence can manifest in prudential advice against expressing an attitude regarding what can be expressed but may not be well thought-out or understood. Arguably, reticence could even include declarations about the ineffability of some matter, about the topic going beyond what language or concepts can grasp. What makes this reticence is that declarations of ineffability often have to do with topics that people do speak about. There is silence, and there is simply not answering a question. There is cleaving close to what is sensical, and there is being silenced by powerful others. Despite their myriad differences, both Wittgenstein's writings and the *Analects* have an appreciation for uses of various forms of reticence, and the analysis of this dynamic in these texts has enormous potential for cross-cultural study of philosophical, religious, and ethical instruction.

One form of reticence is silence, a topic that has received considerable philosophical attention (Bindeman 2017, Tanesini 2018). In his recent book, *Silence in Philosophy, Literature, and Art*, Steven Bindeman explores silence

as a form of “indirect discourse” (Bindeman 2017, p. 3). Bindeman observes a variety of ways in which silence may enter implicitly into philosophical discourse. While reticence before sublime ineffability is one form silence may take, it also can indicate a refusal to attempt to speak nonsense. Furthermore, the dual nature of silence—both defiance of expectation and rule-governed moment of quiet—are registered by Bindeman and others (Bindeman 2017; Ephratt 2008, 2012; Tanesini 2018). Considering some forms of silence to be performatives (i.e., speech acts) depends on this idea that silence happens within the dynamics of pragmatics (Ephratt 2008, 2012; Knepper 2009; Tanesini 2018). In connection with Wittgenstein’s views on sense and nonsense, Bindeman writes: “We recognize that it [silence] reveals itself only at the limits of language. We cannot know silence, however, because we cannot describe what it is. But we can describe the effects of silence. Silence has meaning because it affects our lives” (Bindeman 2017, p. 91). Wittgenstein does not develop an analysis of silence, but Bindeman envisions thinking of silences as occurring within discourses. In considering the “effects of silence,” an approach to understanding meaning that draws on speech-act theory may be helpful (e.g., illocutionary or perlocutionary effects). The same can be done in the investigation of different forms of reticence.

Timothy Knepper’s studies of religious and philosophical discourses in late antiquity and the medieval period have explored the bearing of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* as well as speech act theory on the performative aspects of references to ineffability. In venturing an application of Wittgenstein’s philosophy to the study of the use of ineffability in religious and philosophical discourses, Knepper writes: “On the first hand, ineffability discourses are governed by socially established rules—rules that, ironically, make it possible to speak about what cannot be spoken about. On the second hand, however, such rules do not straightjacket authors of ineffability discourses such that they are unable to ‘go against them’” (Knepper 2009, p. 68). As with Bindeman on silence, Knepper observes the dual nature of ineffability discourses:

Here, Wittgenstein, despite his apparent belief that religion is a hopeless running “against the boundaries of language” [Wittgenstein 1993, p. 44], gives us a model of sorts for an analysis of rule codification and resistance in his investigations of the linguistic phenomena of “going against rules” and “making up and altering rules as we go along.” (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 83, §201; Knepper 2009, p. 74)

Knepper’s project is to uncover the rules of discourse used and broken in religious and philosophical thought aimed at contemplating that which is (or apparently is) ineffable.² The idea that silences (Bindeman, Ephratt, Tanesini) or declarations of ineffability (Knepper) may be acts within discourse will be helpful later, when considering the pragmatic effects of moments of reticence.

Use-centered or speech-act approaches to understanding forms of silence are highlighted in a series of articles by linguist Michael Ephratt (Ephratt 2008, 2012) and philosopher Alessandra Tanesini (Tanesini 2018). In particular, Ephratt explores the category of “eloquent silence,” drawing on H. P. Grice’s concept of “conversational implicature” (Grice 1989). The idea is that the meaning of an utterance can go beyond the propositional content of the utterance; it can extend to what is implied or otherwise conveyed by a speech act (i.e., what is implicated by the utterance). An example would be one party saying to another at lunch, “We should really do this again sometime,” which implies—among other things—that the lunch is now over. In a similar way, Ephratt stresses that some silent moments³ may imply something to an audience (i.e., have a performative effect); the idea is that some silences are not just absences of sound but are instead communicatively rich moments.

Tanesini develops the notion of eloquent silence, especially in connection with expressing dissent. While acknowledging numerous forms of silence within discourse, from pauses to take breaths to solemn silences in ritual contexts, Tanesini focuses on particular instances of silence that may be interpreted as speech acts: “Such silences are usually instances of elicited illocutions or example[s] of resisting elicitation. Silences can enact many different illocutions. Prominent among these are refusals to be drawn into some conversations and announcements that one is opting out of an existing one” (Tanesini 2018, p. 112). Tanesini focuses on silences that are communicative, for example the silence of a student opting out of a classroom discussion. Importantly, on Tanesini’s analysis, communicative silences typically constitute a form of resistance involving “intending to make publicly discernible [a] commitment to some content such as ‘I need more time’, ‘you are not in charge’, or ‘I am still mad’ under the force of a request, a challenge, or an assertion” (Tanesini 2018, p. 115).

Taking some inspiration from Bindeman, Knepper, Ephratt, and Tanesini, I would like to proceed in identifying some of the forms of reticence as well as the philosophical ends their use can advance or otherwise indicate. In the studies of the *Analects* and Wittgenstein that follow, I argue that at least five forms of reticence are detectable: (1) eloquent silence, (2) admonition about careless language, (3) circumspection about sharing ideas, (4) declaration of inexpressibility, and (5) recognition of incompatibility of role responsibilities with expression of views. Some of these forms of reticence are explicit (declarations) while others are implicit (silences or redirections of discourse).

II. Reticence in the *Analects*

Reticence is both explicitly discussed and implicitly performed within the *Analects*. Ethical concern for what should and should not be said is a prevalent, recurring theme in the text, appearing at least sixty times, if one

counts admonitions to show care in speech (1.14), correspondence between right words and action (4.22, 4.24), and criticisms of mere cleverness or glibness (*ning* 佞) (12.3, 13.27). Reticence is also evident in encounters between master and student as presented in the *Analects*.⁴ Importantly, most of these moments concern expressible ideas. These are moments of teaching about or exemplifying virtuous restraint in speaking. Implicit in the *Analects* is the idea that its teachings are not stated as context-free doctrines; instead, its teaching is episodic, contextual, and embedded within relationships. Indeed, the moral exemplarism Amy Olberding identifies in the *Analects* also points to the authoritative role that explicit and implicit expressions may have in discourse (Olberding 2012, pp. 97–99).⁵

Given how much of human social life is made possible by means of language, it should not be surprising that care for speech appears repeatedly in the *Analects*. This care is evident in the *Analects*' moral suspicion toward cleverness in language (Slingerland 2003, p. 238). In an essay titled "Language and Ethics in the *Analects*," Hui Chieh Loy shows how language use (as well as refraining from its use) is a part of the moral cultivation modeled and advised in the early Confucian text (Loy 2013). This explicit form of reticence highlights the moral dangers of careless expressions. Consider the following passages:

[1.3] The Master said, "A clever tongue and fine appearance are rarely signs of Goodness."⁶

[5.5] Someone said, "Zhonggong is Good but not eloquent (*ning* 佞)." The Master said, "Of what use is "eloquence?" If you go about responding to everyone with a clever tongue you will often incur resentment. I do not know whether or not Zhonggong is Good, but of what use is eloquence?"

In remark 1.3 the Master says that "Goodness" (*ren* 仁) does not typically accompany clever speech. It is not that it is impossible for the two to appear at the same time, but the warning here is clear: do not confuse mere eloquence with goodness. The interlocutor in 5.5 observes that Zhonggong is *ren* but not fully cultivated. The master replies, as in remark 1.3, by disaggregating *ren* and eloquence. Loy observes that it is not just that ethics and language use are essentially connected; the *Analects* puts forward the view repeatedly that "being clever or skillful in speech is somehow incompatible with moral virtue" (Loy 2013, p. 138).

For this reason Confucius "commands a carefulness or even slowness in speech" (ibid.). This slowness can be seen in several remarks in the *Analects*. When asked by Meng Wubo if Zilu is good (5.8), Confucius replies that he does not know. This reluctance to commit himself can be read as an implied rebuke, but perhaps also it can be seen as evidence of Confucius' own reticence concerning the application of goodness to persons and his own eloquent silence.⁷

Returning to Loy, this attitude can be seen in an encounter between Confucius and Sima Niu:

[12.3] Sima Niu asked about Goodness. The Master said, “The Good person is hesitant to speak.” [Sima Niu:] “Hesitant to speak—is that all there is to Goodness?” [Confucius:] “When being Good is so difficult, how can one not be hesitant to speak about it?”

In passage 12.3, the ability to clarify *ren* is dependent on, among other things, one’s ability to be *ren*. One gets the sense here that reticence may be related to Peterman’s Wittgensteinian emphasis on bedrock practices, insofar as reticence about careless speech is a practice that makes room for additional learning from a teacher or a tradition.

Loy is keen to emphasize that the *Analects*, while suspicious of eloquence in expression, is not suspicious of language use being efficacious. Loy writes, “As far as Confucius’s actual pedagogical practices go, he seems to grant that specific verbal instructions—whether practical injunctions as in 11.22, maxim-like formulations as in 15.24, rebukes as in 13.14, character reviews as in 5.9, and so on—could well be efficacious for guiding specific disciples in specific circumstances” (Loy 2013, pp. 154–155). This coincides with Peterman’s account, where the constructive, explicit use of language is a morally inflected feature of human social life in the *Analects*. Because speech acts would always be performed with a particular audience in mind (i.e., within a particular relationship), they will likewise always invoke such relationships, speak to them, be moments within these relationships.

Gilbert Ryle’s distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that may help in appreciating the moral salience of actions—speech acts in particular (Ryle 1946)—and this may in turn be relevant to a comparative philosophy that draws on analyses of speech acts (cf. Hetherington and Lai 2012). In his famous lecture on the topic, Ryle first contrasts his view with a view he suggests perhaps derives from Plato, a view that Ryle terms the “intellectualist view” (Ryle 1946, p. 5). The intellectualist view holds that knowledge and intelligence are operations of the mind wholly separate from behavior and that behavior is a subsequent manifestation of interior states of mind. This view would assess the morality of actions only insofar as actions point at least implicitly to judgments of the intellect (i.e., what today might be called propositional knowledge, “knowing-that”). Against this intellectualist view, Ryle writes:

When a person knows how to do things of a certain sort (e.g., make good jokes, conduct battles or behave at funerals), his knowledge is actualised or exercised in what he does. It is not exercised (save *per accidens*) in the propounding of propositions or in saying “Yes” to those propounded by others. His intelligence is exhibited by deeds, not by internal or external dicta. (Ryle 1946, p. 8)

Ryle argues that the intellectualist view leads to an infinite regress that renders the view implausible and, furthermore, that knowing-how is “logically prior” to knowing-that (Ryle 1946, pp. 4–5).

Stephen Hetherington and Karyn Lai develop Ryle’s line of thought further under the term “practicalism” and see in it resources for interpreting the kinds of knowledge presented in the *Analects* (Hetherington and Lai 2012, p. 376). They define a strong version of practicalism to be the following: “To know that *p* is to know how to perform various pertinent actions, ones bearing upon or reflecting *p* in particular” (ibid.). They continue, describing practicalism as “[telling] us that knowledge is a state of knowledge-how—the complex knowledge of how to perform actions from some apt *range* of possibilities (the complexity being commensurate with this range)” (ibid., pp. 376–377). Teaching a student a topic may include the making of statements about the topic as well as directives about how to perform actions in connection with that topic (e.g., cooking or writing an essay). A good teacher will know when one sort of instruction is fitting for the student in question. In the encounter with Sima Niu on goodness (*ren*) and hesitance to speak, one can see just such a distinction in play in how a difficult topic may be learned. Knowing-that (i.e., what one might say about *ren*) would be logically dependent on knowing-how (i.e., how one might be *ren*). Moreover, insofar as speaking about *ren* is embedded within a master-novice relationship (Peterman 2015) or moral exemplarist relationship (Olberding 2012), then words fitting for a particular relationship are essential. Not just any words will do for all times, places, or persons. The passages in the *Analects* do not merely present an account of *ren*; they also illustrate an explicit example of commending reticence in the attempt to reform a particular kind of interlocutor (with respect to careless speech).

A different perspective concerning speech and goodness appears in 14.4. The passage reads:

[14.4] The Master said, “Those who possess Virtue will inevitably have something to say, whereas those who have something to say do not necessarily possess Virtue. Those who are Good will necessarily display courage, but those who display courage are not necessarily Good.”

Here, the Master links virtue (*de* 德) with having “something to say.” The remarks in 12.3 and 14.4 present speech and the capacity to teach as flowing from virtue and *ren*. Lest one think there is tension between these remarks and the condemnations of glibness in 1.3 and 5.5, it is important to observe that eloquence (*ning*) is not the same thing as virtuous teaching. Eloquence, fine appearance, and clever words may help one to flatter others, and thus increase one’s apparent influence, but they will not help one to become good or help others to become good. In the *Analects*, suspicion of cleverness or glibness in language use is repeatedly expressed and slowness in speech commended. However, as already seen, that does

not mean that mere quietism, silence, or inaction follows. From these passages, one sees a valuing of care over language use and reticence to speak except when one knows clearly what one is talking about and whom one is talking to.

Passage 13.3, in which Confucius refers to the rectification or correction of names (*zhengming* 正名), conveys an explicit admonition to be reticent about careless speech. When Zilu asks Confucius what the latter would do if he were employed in the government of the Duke of Wei, Confucius replies that he would rectify names. To this, Zilu replies, “Could you, Master, really be so far off the mark? Why worry about rectifying names?” After that, Confucius admonishes Zilu, “When it comes to matters that he does not understand, the gentleman should remain silent.” For the sake of the social order as well as for the preservation of culture, Confucius recommends clarification about names and circumspection about one’s own knowledge.⁸ Clarification of names, however, is compatible with only some roles and not others (i.e., those roles invested with authority).

Again, both explicit references to and implicit acts of reticence appear across the text in encounters between Confucius and his students. In passage 11.12, Confucius redirects Zilu’s question about serving ghosts and spirits. In response, Confucius says nothing about serving these beings. Zilu asks another question, this time about death, but Confucius is resolute in refusing the question. This passage does not necessarily mean that ghosts, spirits, and death are unimportant matters about which Confucius has nothing to say. Indeed, it may be their very importance that leads Confucius to counsel Zilu to attend to the more practical, concrete matters of serving people and understanding life before addressing nebulous or otherwise obscure matters concerning what is beyond this life. Perhaps this can be thought of as an instance of Confucius directing Zilu’s attention to bedrock practices, rather than to matters he is not yet ready to genuinely consider. In so doing, it is an instance of eloquent silence. These moments of reticence in the *Analects* serve the end of the moral education of the student figures in the text as well as the dedicated readers who may submit themselves to be formed by its values and commitments. As we will see in comparison with Wittgenstein, reticence can serve many ends, even as it retains a significant linkage between language and ethical engagement in our lives.

III. Reticence in Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein valued perspicuity—a searching clarity—perhaps above all else in his philosophy.⁹ While he wrote a great deal during his lifetime—attempting to put in words his inquiries into philosophy—the vast majority of the Wittgenstein corpus was published by his literary executors only after his death. As can be gleaned from studies of Wittgenstein’s life and development as a philosopher, his concern for precision, adequacy of

expression, and the difficulty in making himself understood before an audience were lifelong preoccupations of his (Klagge 2011, pp. 5–6).

Contemplating Wittgenstein's knotted relationship with philosophical expression, James Klagge writes that Wittgenstein "was never literally forced from anywhere or banished or expelled. But he did clearly feel very separate from those around him" (Klagge 2011, p. 52). Klagge argues that despite Wittgenstein's not being an exile, there are exilic aspects to his philosophy and that attending to this dynamic helps bring certain features of Wittgenstein's philosophy into view. Klagge writes:

But Wittgenstein lived with the mentality of an exile, and I believe this was because he was also an exile in another sense. He was exiled from his home era—Spengler's culture of the early 19th century and before, as opposed to the civilization of the twentieth century in which he found himself. (ibid.)

In seeing Wittgenstein as an exile, Klagge argues that new features of his thought are brought into view. Wittgenstein could not return to his cultural home of nineteenth-century Vienna. He moved frequently and did not develop many close connections where he lived. He taught and wrote a lot, but claimed he would be understood by only a few. Klagge argues that Wittgenstein was able to put his exilic sensibility to work philosophically and that this was actually a signal element of his approach to philosophy: as Wittgenstein writes in *Zettel*, "The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him a philosopher" (*Zettel*, §455, quoted in Klagge 2011, p. 75).

Wittgenstein's reluctance to publish his work can be read in line with Klagge's exilic interpretation. Klagge links Wittgenstein's exilic sensibility with his valuing of perspicuity (Klagge 2011, p. 74). In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein famously developed and used the approach of clarifying confused instances of language and reframing them within their contexts of sense (e.g., by looking for their use within language games). Working one's way to these sorts of perspicuous overviews of language took a great deal of effort, and Wittgenstein struggled over word choices in passages. Awareness of this difficulty inherent in pursuing philosophical clarity fed into Wittgenstein's own descriptions of philosophy itself (in this case from 1931): "Work on philosophy—like work in architecture in many respects—is really more work on oneself. On one's own conception. On how one sees things. (And what one expects of them.)" (Wittgenstein 1998, 24e). Unclear or incomplete thinking did not merit being published. In this way, circumspection about sharing his ideas was a recurring form of reticence in Wittgenstein's philosophical career.

Perhaps the earliest evidence of Wittgenstein's reticence with respect to writing philosophy can be seen in his composing his diary during World War I in a code—not a very complicated code, but one that would deter someone else from casually reading his entries (Monk 1990, p. 112)—and in

his expression in the Preface to the *Tractatus* that the book might be understood only by a reader who had already had similar thoughts (Wittgenstein 1974, p. 3). This keen awareness of the great difficulty in expressing his ideas in a way that *any* reader could understand speaks to a reluctance to commit to words the description of a thing. Reticent sensibilities pervade Wittgenstein's philosophical corpus and indeed his philosophical orientation. Wittgenstein tends to value care regarding the power of language to mislead over explicit but imprecise descriptions of phenomena. This was not the only form of reticence evident in his philosophy. Concern about cleverness¹⁰ in clarification, eloquent silences, and declarations of inexpressibility also appear in his writings. He also wrote of the need to resist our own inclinations to misunderstand the workings of language (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 47, §109). Wittgenstein's moments of reticence were part of his practice of philosophy, part of the seriousness he brought to the project of being a philosopher.

When thinking about reticence in Wittgenstein's philosophical writings, many readers might think first of the injunction at the end of the *Tractatus*, in proposition 7: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Wittgenstein 1974, p. 89). This declaration of the need for silence [*schweigen*] would be an extreme explicit form of a reticent attitude concerning inexpressibility.¹¹ Resoluteness in that silence—eloquent silence—would be an implicit performance of that reticent attitude. Interpretations of the final propositions of the *Tractatus*, especially concerning the themes of nonsense and silence, vary considerably. In remark 6.54, Wittgenstein writes, "My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them" (Wittgenstein 1974, p. 89). Silence in the face of inexpressibility is the response Wittgenstein advises at the end of that book.

A key area of disagreement among interpreters concerns how to understand the category of nonsense (i.e., what the reader cannot utter, or should refrain from uttering, if she has worked through the book): does the *Tractatus* advance an approach to a deep sort of inexpressibility—ineffability—or should Wittgenstein be taken at his word that nonsense is nonsense? Some Wittgenstein scholars, such as Cora Diamond and James Conant (2004), argue that the text represents itself as critiquing the tendency to appeal to ineffable truths (the "resolute" readers). Yet, others such as P.M.S. Hacker (2000) criticize the resolute interpretations and argue that there are such ineffable truths in the *Tractatus*. That scholarly conversation goes beyond the scope of this article, yet the different sides concur that the remarks on the limits of language are closely connected to a sense of philosophical duty to achieve clarity. Ethics and clarification are linked in the *Tractatus* insofar as climbing the ladder of Wittgenstein's propositions is Wittgenstein's way of responding to the duty to cure oneself of one's own philosophical illusions.

Partly, the question of interpretation concerns whether there is something that one must remain silent about, where silence is the only option in face of the limits of what can be expressed (Conant and Bronzo 2017). While my interpretive sympathies tend to be with resolute readers, both approaches would involve a reticent philosophical sensibility. Wittgenstein sometimes is reticent about what cannot be put decisively in language and at other times about what would go beyond the limits of expressibility in language. Both are forms of Wittgensteinian reticence.

The 1929 “Lecture on Ethics” includes explicit reflection on reticence insofar as Wittgenstein contemplates the “tendency” to run up against the “boundaries” of language in attempts to “write or talk Ethics or Religion” (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 44). Wittgenstein writes this despite his deep respect for ethics and religion (ibid.); this deep respect cannot be expressed in propositional form. Here, as in the *Tractatus*, consideration of sense and nonsense has to do with not trying to express certain experiences as if in the language of science (i.e., an ideal language).

In *Culture and Value*, reticence can be seen again across Wittgenstein’s philosophical career. In a spirit that seems of a piece with the “Lecture on Ethics,” he writes (from 1929), “You cannot lead people to the good; you can only lead them to some place or other; the good lies outside the space of facts” (Wittgenstein 1998, 5e). Here, “the good” is not intelligible within fact-based discourse, and thus one cannot “lead” another to it because that would require the good to be intelligible. In 1930, in a “sketch of a forward” to a book he did not write, Wittgenstein remarks: “It is all one to me whether the typical western scientist understands or appreciates my work since in any case he does not understand the spirit in which I write” (9e). Here, Wittgenstein is critiquing, among other things, the tendency toward scientism then appearing strongly in philosophy, a tendency that is still prevalent ninety years later. A year afterward, he writes: “The inexpressible (what I find enigmatic and cannot express) perhaps provides the background, against which whatever I was able to express acquires meaning” (23e). Wittgenstein is possibly here referring to what he would later call the “grammar” of a language game, the implicit rules of a form of discourse, rules that defy definitive expression in any particular words. These forms of reticence involve eloquent silence and declarations of inexpressibility; Wittgenstein takes great pains to avoid misstating the character of philosophical truths.

While there are many remarks in *Culture and Value* that display Wittgenstein’s reticence about clever expression, a remark from 1938 stands out in importance more for its sense of the craft of philosophy: “In philosophy the winner of the race is the one who can run most slowly. Or: the one who gets to the winning post last” (40e). This remark presents the spirit of philosophy as one of slowness. One might say deliberate care is what is most valuable rather than slowness for its own sake, although being

slow may not be a bad corrective to his—and our—time’s tendency toward acceleration. Nick Trakakis has recently written on “slow philosophy” in an article that considers the institutional contexts in which philosophy is conducted and the ways in which the models of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein might be helpful for a philosophy that resists contemporary institutional incentives and pressures toward speed and productivity (Trakakis 2018). The point here is that steadfastness in resistance to the feeling that one must hurry and obey an external requirement is a mark of genuine philosophy. This is a sentiment with which I believe Wittgenstein would have wholeheartedly agreed. As he wrote in 1947: “This is how philosophers should salute each other: ‘Take your time!’” (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 91).

In *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein refers to grammar as that which allows for the possibility of sense (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 42, §90). He writes in §122, “A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not *command a clear view* of the use of our words” (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 49). Yet, this lack of a clear overview of grammar is what can give rise to philosophical problems. The perpetual recurrence of philosophical problems stems from there being no ideal language in which the grammar of our languages can be definitively expressed. Wittgenstein writes, “One might think: if philosophy speaks of the use of the word ‘philosophy’ there must be a second order philosophy. But it is not so: it is, rather, like the case of orthography, which deals with the word ‘orthography’ among others without there being second-order” (p. 49, §121). The theme of reticence here consists in Wittgenstein’s reluctance to commit to theory what cannot be definitively and conclusively stated, only expressed in local clarifications.¹² This is another way of seeing that care for the fittingness of language and commitment to avoiding over-generalizations—instances of philosophical reticence—are central to Wittgenstein’s model of philosophical activity. To put forward one description of grammar as definitive would be to ignore a key source of our confusion about language and to inadvertently ensure the reappearance of philosophical problems.¹³

Wittgenstein has also exemplified reticence with respect to interpreting religious beliefs and cultural practices. In some cases this would have to do with implicit concern over careless uses of language; in other cases it would be due to attempts to express what cannot be expressed. In the “Lectures on Religious Belief” from the 1930s, Wittgenstein addresses various problems concerning the ways in which such beliefs are different from ordinary perceptual beliefs. Here Wittgenstein wants to emphasize the “enormous [epistemic] gulf(s)” that may be found among human beings. When considering a person believing in the (Biblical) Last Judgment he neither endorses nor rejects what that person believes (Wittgenstein 1967, p. 53). Wittgenstein’s refusal to accept or reject the religious belief of another person stems from his perception of the overall intellectual distance between

himself and someone who could either accept or reject the relevant belief. This refusal is an implicit instance of philosophical reticence, motivated by a *dedication* to accuracy in expression and *resistance* to temptations to adopt clichés in descriptions.

In the “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*,” Wittgenstein offers philosophical reactions to James Frazer’s comparative study of cultures and rituals. Wittgenstein views Frazer as arrogantly analyzing the history of human cultural and religious practices through the lens of “modern” superiority. Far from being mere expressions of superstitious beliefs, rituals in “primitive societies” for Wittgenstein tap into something deep within human nature and are not just an expression of a magical view of the world (i.e., a kind of ineffectual science). Furthermore, Wittgenstein contends that ritual practices are an ordinary part of human experience. While Wittgenstein (for the most part) could not embrace religious beliefs *per se* or religious practices—his “knees were too stiff” (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 63)—he maintained a deep appreciation for religious beliefs and practices in his writings and in conversation with students and friends. Wittgenstein’s philosophical reticence appears both implicitly and explicitly as avoiding tendencies toward this sort of arrogance regarding religions and cultures.

In Wittgenstein’s writings on religions and cultures, we see the presence of an ethical sensibility—also present in the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*—an ethic of avoiding self-deceptive thinking or of uprooting it when it has taken. Reading through Wittgenstein’s preoccupation with clarity of language may lead the reader to achieve a clear-eyed sense of her own embeddedness within a time, place, and language. One’s creatureliness comes to the fore. This serves as a reminder that languages have a natural history. Wittgenstein’s philosophical reticence here seems to flow from a concern with avoiding self-delusion: “Nothing is so difficult as not deceiving yourself” (Wittgenstein 1998, p. 39). Wittgenstein’s philosophical reticence is rooted in a clear-eyed view of the human condition and our tendencies and habits of thought that bend toward cliché and facile thinking.

IV. Conclusion

The reticence of the *Analects* has an eye to the moral education of the novice—and, of course, the reader of the text. Peterman’s interpretation draws out the social and institutional contexts of the moral instruction evident in the text. In his reading, an interlocutor’s questions can be interrogated or redirected by the master. The passages seek to humble novices (and, perhaps, readers) so that they will let themselves be formed by the master’s direction; this is how it is when one approaches the text as a “moral manual” (Olberding 2012, pp. 2–3). In such a context, reticence, whether implicit or explicit, can be a tool of the tradition exemplified in and advised by the text.

Interrogation of questions is important for Wittgenstein, too, but here the questions also belong to Wittgenstein himself (and sometimes, also, his reader). Education of the will, conducted in dialogue with Wittgenstein's dialectic, is self-fashioned. Wittgenstein's moments of reticence serve to remind his audience that his philosophy resists patterns of language others might not refuse (especially in philosophical discourse). These moments of reticence are part of an ethical practice of philosophy as clarification of language. Despite Wittgenstein's imperious presence in the classroom or in conversation, when successful, his philosophizing inspired students to fundamentally question their own habits of language, as well as their motivations for studying philosophy in the first place. In stark contrast with Confucian tradition, in Wittgenstein's model of philosophy there is ultimately no master save one's own philosophical abilities (one's own best self).

The *Analects* is both embedded within a way of life and supports, structures, and models that way of life. In such a context, moments of reticence serve the ends of that way of life (e.g., the restoration of harmony and the cultivation of role-based ethics). Despite numerous scholars emphasizing the practical aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy (of his own wrestling with philosophy), it is a stretch to view Wittgenstein's philosophy as a way of life (à la Pierre Hadot) *in the same sense* in which the *Analects* represents a way of life. For the ancient Greek and Roman philosophers Hadot studied, the content of a philosophy was contained not just within arguments but also within lives as lived; a teacher modeled the philosophy concretely, and the modeling was just as important as the reasoning presented abstractly in texts. As others have argued,¹⁴ Hadot's picture is helpful for approaching the study of philosophical traditions distant from the Mediterranean, including at times classical Chinese philosophy; yet even there it would be prudent to be reticent about over-generalizing Hadot's approach for interpreting ancient Chinese philosophy.¹⁵ While it is right to view Wittgenstein as emphasizing the importance of philosophy being practical and not just theoretical, he did not see himself as participating within a tradition and did not present himself as a philosopher to be emulated; far from it, Wittgenstein wanted his students to find paths that were not merely copying his philosophy, and, indeed, he encouraged some of them to leave philosophy because of its corrupting influence.

Divergent philosophical traditions and approaches do not merely hold different views on key questions; they may also use very different methods for arriving at their views. More than that, divergent philosophies may have different conceptions of what the ultimate ends of philosophical reasoning are. Comparing distant philosophies—if it is to be a genuine encounter—ought to include considering which different views, methods, and ends are in play. Attention to moments of reticence in philosophy is one way to direct one's attention to these dynamic aspects of philosophical traditions.

With these readings in mind, the following is a preliminary analysis of the forms of reticence in the *Analects* and in Wittgenstein's corpus. These are not mutually exclusive but perhaps overlapping kinds of reticence.

1. *Eloquent silence*. This form of reticence would involve the performance of speech acts through what is not said; it would be an *implicit* form of discourse (Ephratt 2008). Of course, in order for silence to be eloquent, it must be clear to an audience—not necessarily the primary audience, as with some encounters between Confucius and students like Zilu—that a speech act is being performed through the silence. This includes pedagogical virtuosity in guiding a student toward a philosophical end and conceptual virtuosity regarding the adequacy of terms to grasp a phenomenon. Consider, for example, Wittgenstein's tendency to dissent from being forced into either accepting or rejecting what another person says, for example when that person is intellectually distant from him. In other philosophers, this could include strategic responses to politically fraught discourse (Tanesini 2018). This form of reticence is common in both the *Analects* and in Wittgenstein's corpus.

2. *Admonitions about careless language*. This is *explicit* instruction to be reticent in linguistic expression and often includes suspicion of cleverness as being unserious or even unphilosophical. This form of reticence is found frequently in both the *Analects* and Wittgenstein. It forms a major ethical theme in the *Analects* with respect to language use, and this ethical theme also runs through Wittgenstein's writings from his earliest texts to his last.

3. *Circumspection about sharing ideas*. This form of reticence is *implicit*. Due to concern about being misunderstood, a person may choose to not to make public or make known their ideas. There is ample evidence of this form of reticence in biographies of Wittgenstein and in his suspicion of idle curiosity about his ideas. In some cases, Confucius redirects or otherwise does not answer questions asked of him. For both of these figures, this mode of reticence is minor, but with other figures who might make use of esoteric teachings, this form of reticence might become more central.

4. *Declaration of inexpressibility*. As with admonitions about careless language, this explicit form of instruction advises reticence about the making of certain types of expressions. Some interpreters effectively find this form of reticence across the Wittgensteinian corpus but notably in the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations*. One does not find declarations of ineffability in the *Analects* although one might argue that the resistance to definition of certain key terms (e.g., *ren*) shows implicitly their ineffability. The different accounts of key terms is linked with particular pedagogical encounters, not with discourses over definitions. This form of teaching could be also understood in line with the communicative eloquence (including silence) described in number 1 above.

5. *Recognition of incompatibility of role responsibilities with expression of views*. Correcting names and remonstrating with others are examples of

speech acts that are compatible with some roles but not others. For example, scholars like Chad Hansen stress that the rectification of names is an action appropriate to rulers alone (Hansen 1992). One could consider here also the roles of women within the *Analects* and subsequent Confucian tradition. Proper modes of expression may be contoured by a person's particular roles, and remaining reticent about expressing one's judgments may be required by particular situations. This mode of reticence can take *explicit* or *implicit* form. While this is a prominent feature of many interpretations of the *Analects*, it is not a Wittgensteinian form of reticence.

This is not a comprehensive catalogue of forms of reticence or of forms of reticence present in Wittgenstein's writings or Confucian traditions. Also, these are not envisioned as mutually exclusive categories of reticence. Additional studies of other texts from the broad family of philosophical traditions would no doubt produce additional forms of reticence. Yet, as we can see, attention to moments of reticence is so much more than refraining from judgment while still seeking to charitably interpret a philosophical view; it is also recognizing that silences, gaps in conversation, times when the subject is changed, and explicit declarations of the ineffability of some matter are frequently themselves moves within philosophical discourses, and these moves have their performative effects.

What is a philosophically defensible form of reticence in one tradition may not be defensible in another—for example number 5 above. Common ground, which appears to some extent in this study, is important only to a certain degree, as differences in philosophical aims and methods also track the vectors of philosophy across its diverse histories. Highlighting these differences can itself be philosophically valuable. That these trajectories might be detectible through a study of reticence shows that the silences, quietudes, and redirections are not mere absences of content but can be communicatively and perhaps even philosophically rich moments of clarification.

Notes

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- 1 – I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for constructive remarks on this matter.
- 2 – Knepper remains concerned over the applicability of the concept of “ineffability” beyond the contexts in which the concept originated

(e.g., beyond Greco-Roman philosophy and the religious thought—Jewish, Christian, and Muslim—that it influenced). Research on adequate comparative terminology is ongoing. See especially [Knepper 2017](#), pp. 270–271.

- 3 – One might contend that a moment that implies something—even without utterance—is a speech act and is therefore not “silent” (i.e., lacking in performative content). To this I would argue that it is closer to ordinary language to describe a speech act without utterance as silent, a silent speech act (if you will).
- 4 – Amy [Olberding \(2012\)](#) argues that the exemplarism and silences of the *Analects* form part of its moral teaching.
- 5 – Olberding also sees letting the silences and gaps in the *Analects* speak for themselves (as it were) as a fruitful approach to interpreting the text. She writes: “one may seek some way to allow the text’s silences or perceived gaps to remain so, either by devising an account in which they operate as a kind of comment by silence or as indications that any gaps are not felt as such by the text’s authors and by Confucius. That is, one may read the text as implicitly rejecting the need for accounts of human nature or flourishing or as simply not discerning the need for such accounts” ([2012](#), p. 44).
- 6 – In this article I use Edward Slingerland’s translation of the *Analects* ([Slingerland 2003](#)) and cite by passage number; I use page number references only in cases of commentary by Slingerland.
- 7 – I am grateful to Carine Defoort for bringing this and other similar passages to my attention in connection with slowness in the *Analects*.
- 8 – Carine Defoort is concerned that this passage, following Feng Youlan, has been over-interpreted by twentieth- and twenty-first century scholars. Such a view is reinforced by the sense that this passage may be a late addition to the *Analects* (i.e., after the chapter on the same topic in the *Xunzi*). While these points are well taken, the reticence on display in the passage is not unique to it. Thus, it is not over-interpreting this passage to observe the presence of the theme here.
- 9 – On this value in Wittgenstein’s philosophy, see [Kuusela 2008](#), and [Carroll 2014, 2016](#), and [2018](#). For an exploration of the tension between valuing clarity and understanding, see [Richter 2018](#).
- 10 – Consider, for example, the following remarks from *Culture and Value*: “One *cannot* speak the truth;—if one has not yet conquered oneself. One *cannot* speak it—but not, because one is still not clever enough” ([Wittgenstein 1998](#), p. 41).

- 11 – One might object here that declarative sentences cannot be instances of reticence. Indeed, insofar as all statements say something about something, these statements are not reticent in being implicit in conveyance of meaning; however, they are—I argue—instances of reticence insofar as they express a reluctance, unwillingness, or perception of impossibility regarding the expressibility of some matter. They are like stop signs that indicate that further travel is fruitless, dangerous, or perhaps impossible.
- 12 – Lest it seem that it is unfitting to refer to this careful philosophical response as “reticence,” Wittgenstein describes a little earlier in the *Investigations* our “urge to misunderstand” the “workings of our language” (Wittgenstein 2001, p. 47, §109). It is in this same remark that Wittgenstein describes philosophy: “The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.” In battling against bewitchment, philosophical activity is a form of resistance.
- 13 – This points to an area of significant divergence between Wittgenstein and the *Analects*. As with the account of rectification of names in the *Xunzi*, some interpreters of *Analects* 13.3 argue that rectification of names (and the connected role clarifications that follow) must hearken back to an ideal model put forward by the ruler. See Carroll 2016 and 2018 for more on comparison between the clarification projects between Wittgenstein and the *Analects* and *Xunzi*, respectively.
- 14 – See, e.g., Stalnaker 2006.
- 15 – Insofar as one might draw back from fully embracing Hadot-inspired approaches to understanding classical Chinese philosophy for reasons drawn from Wittgenstein, it makes sense to refer to this careful stance as a philosophical form of reticence. There are, of course, other reasons one might criticize such approaches; see, e.g., Ames 2011, pp. 270–272.

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