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Reframing Confucianism Epistemology: Exemplarist Morality in the Confucian Analects

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ABSTRACT

This essay includes three sections that examine the embodiment of the modern analytic structure of exemplarist epistemology in The Analects and whether it is appropriate to state that the foundation of The Analects is rooted in this epistemology. A general introduction of The Analects is given at the beginning of section one, which provides the historical context of The Analect's creation and the central ideas present in The Analects, such as Ren and Li. The first and second sections of this essay argue that exemplarist epistemology is presented in The Analects both substantively and procedurally. The third and last section of this essay discusses that while it is reasonable to apply such an epistemology to understand the ideas of The Analects, it does not imply that The Analects was an exemplarist text itself or such an epistemology was the purpose of The Analect's creation. This is mainly due to the lack of analytic philosophical structure in the time of The Analect's writing. In fact, the historical purpose behind writing The Analects and the numerous contents in the text go against the epistemology model of exemplarism. The English translation of The Analects was used to find primary source excerpts. In addition, the book Exemplarist Moral Theory by Linda Zagzebski, the essay Dreaming of the Duke of Zhou by Olberding, and the essay Imagining Confucius: Paradigmatic Characters and Virtue Ethics by Sor-hoon Tan were used as critical reference sources on the definition of exemplarist epistemology and its application in The Analects, respectively.

Keywords: Chinese philosophy, Analects, Confucius, exemplarism, epistemology.

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1. Introduction

Linda Zagzebski is one of the foremost proponents of exemplarist moral theory. Her voluminous exposition of exemplarism can be roughly condensed to systematic usage of positive empirical examples to guide believers as to ethical rights and wrongs. In a sense, the exemplarist morality is much like the common law system of case law, whereby individual cases and their judicial determinations form the legal-socio morality in a piecemeal manner (Zagzebski, 2017, p. 21). In history, this huge archive of case law guiding social moral perceptions is perhaps the historical reincarnation of its predecessor: the Bible. The Bible itself uses anecdotes of Saints, Prophets and other biblical characters and their stories to showcase realistic situations in life. It then goes on to condemn or praise certain acts, acting as a moral lighthouse guiding human notions of good and evil. Likewise, this paper will examine the extent of exemplarism in Confucian thought and in particular focus on the Confucian Analects. This paper argues

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that Confucianism, in particular the Confucian Analects, embodies the modern concept of exemplarism and is epistemologically structured around an exemplaristic model. However, The Analects is not a pure exemplaristic text of morality in and of itself.

2. Literature review

Linda Zagzebski proposed the idea of exemplarist virtue ethics, in which ethical values are obtained through observation of people we naturally admire as virtuous instead of the construction of a conceptual ethical structure. She argues that by doing so, many conceptual circulatory reasoning and appeals to abstract domains, such as God or human, in first conceiving a fixed ethical standard can be avoided. In addition, Sor-hoon Tan argues in her work, *Imagining Confucius: Paradigmatic Characters And Virtue Ethics*, that The Analects demonstrates great presence and emphasis on learning through imagination instead of reasoning through descriptions of exemplars and ancient sages (Tan, 2005, p. 410). Lastly, Amy Olberding applies Zagzebski's exemplarist virtue ethics to the explanation of virtue ethical teachings in The Analects and argues that Zagzebski's exemplarism is an important part of the ethical vision of The Analects. Olberding argues that perhaps the reason for the perceived abstractness of ethical and moral concepts in the Analects is due to solely focusing on the text's theoretical foundations instead of the process through which ethical concepts are derived. For this reason, in the work *Dreaming of the Duke of Zhou: Exemplarism in the Analects*, Olberding proposes that the Analects can be much better understood as a cohesive whole by taking the exemplars as origins of the text's ethical concepts, an idea she terms "exemplarist epistemology".

3. Substantive exemplarism

Confucian thought built on a posteriori discovery of innate morality

The Analects is a classic Chinese philosophy text which was said to be compiled by Confucius' students during the Warring States period. The central Confucian philosophical ideas in the text, which consist of cultivation of personal virtues and normative perspectives on virtues of families and states, are presented as either conversations of Confucius between his fellow disciples or stories of Confucius' various interactions with politicians and scholars during the Chinese Spring and Autumn period. The foremost concern of the ideas of Confucianism is to understand and improve human life in this world. And Confucian scholars believe that life can be improved because of the existence of Dao, the right way to life which can be comprehended by the human mind and implemented by humans in social and personal practice. In order to apprehend and implement this Dao, Confucianism concerns itself with two major questions, which are "what is a good life" and "what is a good government". The major ideas present in these two major Confucian themes are Ren and Li, which can be translated into English as humaneness and rites, respectively. The concept of Ren in the Confucian system of thought can either be broadly defined as a comprehensive set of desired qualities in a person or narrowly defined as love for fellow human beings, especially from leaders to their subjects. In addition, the concept of Li can be defined as the proper relations between different social positions, especially between those of a higher class with those of a lower class. Confucius believed that an orderly society is achievable if its citizens followed proper Li and performed actions in accordance with their social status.

The Analects themselves are replete with examples of exemplars in the Confucian tradition. In Chapter 4:17 (Li Ren), Confucius said: "When you see a good person, think of becoming like her/him. Where you see someone not so good, reflect on your weak points." 子曰：「見賢思齊焉，見不賢而內自省也」(Confucius, 2007, p. 12). Put in our terms, Chapter 4:17 urges the believer to use all empirical examples in ones' daily life as an exemplar of morality, be it a positive exemplar to follow or a negative one to avoid. In effect, Confucian exemplarism advocates readers of the Analects to remove themselves from the chaos of the situation and prompts them to assess the ethical principles of the given situation from a neutral, third party point of view. From such a statement, Confucian exemplarism advocates the procedural benefits of unbiased judgment derived from extricating one's self and making sound moral determinations whilst away from the stresses and emotions of the situation. Confucian exemplarism also gives the necessary pretext to academically explore and conjoin innate human judgements of morality and virtue in a given situation to broader philosophical theories of morality. The philosopher, Amy Olberding, argues that all moral and ethical concepts within the Analects are expounded only after a

process of observation of a person's character and attendant actions (Olberding, 2008, p. 626). Olberding describes her account of exemplarist epistemology as the creation and understanding of the theory of virtue ethics through neutral observation of examples of virtue in others (Olberding, 2008, p. 628). She then moves on to argue that the process of exploration of morality through philosophical discourse forms the genesis of the Confucian theory of virtue ethics. In a sense, Olberding seems to be right in claiming that Confucianism does greatly utilize exemplarism in educating its believers; the substantive text of the Analects already lays out procedural frameworks that could be described as "exemplarist" (Olberding, 2008, p. 630). However, while it is not contested that exemplarism is prevalent in Confucianism, this paper argues that the extent of exemplarism is far less absolute in degree from what Olberding argues for, and of a different nuance to what Olberding envisioned.

Substantively, it appears that the principles of Confucian ethics are established by recognizing what is innately moral and what is not, through a posteriori methods of exemplarism rather than any a priori determinations through logic and rationality. This epistemological structure is perhaps most clearly illustrated in Confucius' methods of distilling virtue. Confucius does not "innovate" and create his own principles from a priori Socratic discourse or King-like dictatorship as to what is moral and immoral. In fact, in Chapter 7:1 (Shu Er), "The Master said: 'I am a transmitter, rather than an original thinker. I trust and enjoy the teachings of the ancients. In my heart, I compare myself to old Peng.'" 子曰：「述而不作，信而好古，竊比於我老彭。」 (Confucius, 2007, p. 19). In Chapter 19:22 (Zi Zhang), "Gong Sunchao of Wei asked Zi Gong: 'From whom did Confucius get his learning?' and Zi Gong said, 'The Way of King Wen and King Wu (the legendary sage kings of antiquity ...'" 衛公孫朝問於子貢曰：「仲尼焉學？」子貢曰：「文武之道，未墜於地，在人。賢者識其大者，不賢者識其小者，莫不有文武之道焉。夫子焉不學？而亦何常師之有？」 (Confucius, 2007, p. 49). Confucius' recognition of the Way of King Wen and King Wu perhaps captures Confucian epistemology in the most concise way. Confucius viewed morality as an innate humanity (ren) that was embodied in the Ways of the original sages, merely waiting for scholars to rephrase it with greater academic clarity and 'transmit' it with the simplicity of the commoners to the next person. In this sense, Confucianism derives general principles from specific observations of ancient sages inductively as a system of exemplarism, rather than operating deductively to prescribe the boundaries of morality and using examples to showcase such boundaries. Therefore, Confucianism seems to utilize exemplars as a methodological means to reflect, process and distill existing innate concepts of virtue so as to communicate and explain with greater clarity and simplicity to the next person.

4. Procedural exemplarism

Using examples within text to illustrate virtue or vice

Apart from the substantive text of the Analects, the procedural format in which the Analects is written is framed in what can be called a consistently exemplarist structure. For instance, in Chapter 3:1 (Ba Yi), Confucius directly uses the head of the Qi family as a negative exemplar of social impropriety. "He (the head of the Qi family) has eight rows of dancers in his court. If he does this, what will he not do?" 孔子謂季氏：「八佾舞於庭，是可忍也，孰不可忍也？」 (Confucius, 2007, p. 7). In context, eight rows of court dancers were the ancient Chinese allowable limit for the highest ranking aristocracy. The Qi family, a lowly noble family, had acted out of traditional social decorum. In using this exemplar, Confucius is in fact using a real-life example to critique acting outside of appropriate social decorum as well as disapproving of the general impudence of the Qi family head. In Chapter 3:22 (Ba Yi), Confucius uses an official named Guan Zhong as an example of frugality and in Chapter 5:1-2, two men named Gong Ye Chang and Nan Yong as an example of someone "fit for marriage." 子曰：「管仲之器小哉！」或曰：「管仲儉乎？」曰：「管氏有三歸，官事不攝，焉得儉？」「然則管仲知禮乎？」曰：「邦君樹塞門，管氏亦樹塞門；邦君為兩君之好，有反玷，管氏亦有反玷。管氏而知禮，孰不知禮？」 (Confucius, 2007, p. 9). Before the presentation of the case of Guan Zhong, the innate existence of the virtue of frugality and its honorable value is automatically assumed by any Confucian thinker. Therefore, Confucius uses the example of the life of Guan Zhong to illustrate how an innate virtue is presented in an exemplar and how such a virtue can be observed for others to emulate.

Confucius, himself, is also portrayed as an exemplary role model in his own right. The verses very often begin with "The Master ...," in a reference to Confucius himself. For instance, in Chapter 9:11 (Zi

Nan), Yan Hui says: “The Master is skilled at gradually leading me all, step by step. He broadens me with culture and restrains me with the rites, so that even if I wanted to give up I could not. Having exhausted all my strength, it seems as if there is still something left, looming up ahead of me.” 顏淵喟然歎曰：「仰之彌高，鑽之彌堅；瞻之在前，忽焉在後。夫子循循然善誘人，博我以文，約我以禮。欲罷不能，既竭吾才，如有所立卓爾。雖欲從之，末由也已。」 (Confucius, 2007, p. 26). Here, Confucius serves as a role model or an exemplar to Yan Hui as Yan Hui learns and mimics the said virtuous qualities of Confucius. Through this passage, the reader learns by example from Confucius as did Yan Hui, and uses Confucius as a role model to mould his character after. This indicates firstly that Confucius did in fact and history attempt to conduct himself as a role model in his daily interactions with his students akin to “teaching by example.” It also sheds light to Confucius as a person and his general outlook and behavior. Secondly, it is also consistent and builds on the exemplarist model of Confucianism; the Analects utilize others as an example but also Confucius. From this, we see two ways in which exemplarism is prevalent in Confucianism.

Other than the above one-off direct statements or anecdotes as to exemplars of morality, the Analects occasionally contain another variation in the form of a dialogue structure. The dialogue-type of verses represent an exemplar of ethical discourse in itself, being the exemplar. In Chapter 5:15 (Gongye Chang), a dialogue occurs between Zi Gong (a disciple) and Confucius. The dialogue has Zi Gong asking Confucius how another man named Kong Wen Zi obtained the “wen” (“learned man” or scholar) title. Confucius thereafter replied that Kong Wen Zi was “diligent and loved to study. He was also unashamed to ask questions to his inferiors.” 子貢問曰：「孔文子何以謂之文也？」子曰：「敏而好學，不恥下問，是以謂之文也。」 (Confucius, 2007, p. 15). Likewise in Chapter 6:8 (Yong Ye): there is a three way dialogue between Jikang Zi, Confucius and Kang over where a certain man named Zhongyou was capable of serving in the government. 季康子問：「仲由可使從政也與？」子曰：「由也果，於從政乎何有？」曰：「賜也，可使從政也與？」曰：「賜也達，於從政乎何有？」曰：「求也，可使從政也與？」曰：「求也藝，於從政乎何有？」 (Confucius, 2007, p. 17). These dialogue-type verses make up the third type of exemplaristic writing in the text. Akin to a micro-play, they communicate ethical standards and notions of virtues by “showing, rather than telling.”

5. Criticisms to an exemplarist framework of Confucianism

From the above, it can be seen that Confucianism displays a high degree of exemplarism in both its substantive and procedural forms. However, there is some criticism against exemplarism in the Confucian Analects because of its highly exclusive and overly sophisticated content.

The Analects have been regularly criticized for being difficult to read and sometimes incoherent. The reason for this phenomena is perhaps the elitist nature of The Analects when it was written. During the ages of Warring States China and the following Qin Dynasty, the literacy rate among the general population was low. This was because classical Chinese society, even in the The Analects itself, advocated for a distinct division of society in which each class performed its duties separately from the others. Such division of society places scholars at the top, and then decreases in prominence from farmers to craftsmen to tradesmen. This point is evident when considering the previous discussion of the Confucian value of Li. This is because Confucius advocates for the idea that if people follow Li, the proper relations between persons of different social positions, then the ideal society can be achieved since no one performs actions that are out of his/her social status. Therefore, it is clear how members of the scholar level in classical China did not interact much with members of the social classes below them. Although the imperial bureaucratic exam, the keju, was later established in the Sui and Tang Dynasties to allow much more social mobility, the classical Chinese societies of the Warring States and Qin allowed very little to no social mobility. In this societal division, the class of literary scholars was placed as the highest class with the fewest members. Therefore, from this historical context, it is confident to say that The Analects was exclusively written for the educated elites in Chinese society, who at the time of the Warring States turned out to be almost exclusively aristocrats. As a result, it would be understandable why The Analects were originally written without punctuation. This was because the absence of punctuation makes the comprehension of The Analects require special training, achieving the goal of preventing ordinary citizens from reading this text and violating the social order.

In addition, the chapters in *The Analects* are not arranged in a continuous stream of themes or a progressively developing argument. Central themes or ideas are sometimes also repeated. Adjacent chapters are usually unrelated to each other and some verses do not communicate the intent with full clarity. Olberding posits that the exemplaristic epistemology is perhaps the “unifying theory” that would make such piecemeal verses, otherwise messily thrown together, a coherent and sensible whole.

However, it should be noted that the purpose of the *Analects* was to educate the attending disciples on issues of morality, and not to systematically create a book of exemplars. In this regard, the intent as at creation is not fully aligned to that of creating an exemplarist model. It is an *actus reus* without a *mens rea*, or at least an incidental *mens rea* of intention at most. A true exemplarist epistemological model would resemble perhaps more like a consistent “FAQ” or compilation of cases of Confucian judgment. Instead, the *Analects* also contain other statements of a priori determinations of morality void of exemplaristic a posteriori anecdotes. For instance, in Chapter 7:25 (Shu Er), the verse reads “The Master taught four things: Culture, correct action, loyalty and trust.” 子以四教：文，行，忠，信。(Confucius, 2007, p. 22). It simply ends without further anecdotal references or exemplaristic elements. In addition, the *Analects* are cluttered with other teachings merely incidental to exemplaristic morality. It includes thought experiments such as Chapter 6:25 (Yong Ye) “The Master said: ‘A cornered vessel without corners! Is it a cornered vessel or not?’” 子曰：「觚不觚，觚哉！觚哉！」(Confucius, 2007, p. 19). or poetic musings (Chapter 6:23, Yong Ye) “The Master said: ‘The wise enjoy the sea, the humane enjoy the mountains. The wise are busy, the humane are tranquil. The wise are happy, the humane are eternal.’” 子曰：「知者樂水，仁者樂山；知者動，仁者靜；知者樂，仁者壽。」(Confucius, 2007, p. 19). In addition, there are reflections such as Chapter 9:17 (Zi Nan): “The Master, standing by a river, said, ‘It goes on like this, never ceasing day or night!’” 子在川上，曰：「逝者如斯夫！不舍晝夜。」(Confucius, 2007, p. 27). And finally, daily accounts of life likewise unrelated to exemplaristic morality such as Chapter 7:5 (Shu Er), “The Master said: ‘I am really going down the drain. I have not dreamt of the Duke of Zhou for a long time now.’” 子曰：「甚矣吾衰也！久矣吾不復夢見周公。」(Confucius, 2007, p. 20). Voltaire once commented Chapter 10’s detailed diary-like descriptions of his everyday activity showed the human side to the scholar-sage. The presence of such a priori determinations of morality, unrelated thought experiments, poetic musings, accounts of daily life and reflections in the *Analects* is thus perhaps the greatest evidentiary obstacle to proclaiming the *Analects* are an exemplaristic epistemological device of morality.

It seems that modern scholars in the present have at times a tendency to over-read or over-glorify past historical acts. In literature, it is not uncommon that an author might have literally meant an object was the color blue. And yet, critiques or scholars sometimes over-analyze that simplistic description as “foreshadowing the unavoidable melancholy to come” or that it was “meant” to express “the coolness of the early winter air, the gloom of the evening and the repressive atmosphere of the characters in the room.” In the same vein, the *Analects* look to be a more-than-feeble-but-less-than-full-scale-professional-biography-level of an attempt at preserving the knowledge learnt from Confucius in the same manner as how a modern-day student might scribble notes in her school notebook. A realistic interpretation of the *Analects* shows little forethought as to professional editorial layouts to sound like coherent prose or a doctorate thesis with clearly substantiated explanations. It is highly unlikely that the text itself was written to communicate a purely concerted attempt at exemplaristic morality as much as it was an average effort to preserve wisdom, but with the side effect of exemplarism. Therefore, the text itself is not intended to be exemplaristic and also not in fact purely exemplaristic. Instead, the text itself was likely written as it is with little forethought and not meant to be epistemologically exemplaristic. However, it happened to be written in a style that was exemplaristic and contained teachings that were also substantively exemplaristic.

6. Conclusion

The *Analects* were not created with the intention to be an exemplaristic case-by-case reference of morality, but rather a collection of Confucian teachings assembled with the intention to preserve and impart his words. Confucius’ thought itself contained many direct, substantive references to exemplaristic morality. The format of the *Analects* is also heavily structured upon exemplaristic statements of morality or two or three-way dialogue that serve to elicit teachings of morality by example.

Consequently, the Confucian Analects is highly exemplaristic and shows a high degree of correlation to exemplaristic epistemology. However, whilst it is highly exemplaristic, it is not a pure text of exemplaristic epistemology. The presence of a priori determinations of morality, unrelated thought experiments, poetic musings, accounts of daily life and reflections definitively proves it is not purely exemplaristic. In conclusion, the Confucian analects should be thought of as being highly exemplaristic and showing a high degree of correlations to exemplaristic benchmarks, but not an exemplaristic epistemological account of morality in and of itself.

Traditional Chinese philosophy such as Confucianism was developed in a profoundly different socio-cultural context from Western philosophical ideas. Therefore, while the use of modern Western analytic structures can unveil much of the hidden message and intention of ancient Chinese philosophers, it would be epistemologically anachronistic to say that teaching through exemplars was what Confucius and the authors of The Analects had in mind. Therefore, perhaps it would be safe to say that the purpose of the application of epistemological structures to non-western philosophies, such as East Asian philosophies and Islamic philosophies, should be restricted to understanding of the text itself instead of interpreting the nature and purpose of the text's creation.

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