For Gale—Without your love, encouragement, extraordinary patience and unwavering support this project would not have been possible
Chapter 13.3 of the Confucian Analects (Lunyu 論語) proposes an intriguing solution to the problem of government: zhengming 正名, conventionally translated “rectification of names.” Confucius suggests that we should be particularly mindful of the vocabulary we use in conversing with one another, as it plays an important role in shaping our communities and values. Language is not simply a transparent medium for the conveyance of information. Rather, it furnishes a complex and subtle form of discourse that affirms and reinforces certain values while neglecting others. By examining 13.3 and related passages in the Analects, we develop a greater understanding as to how zhengming works within the context-sensitive, process-oriented and pragmatic Confucian worldview.

In light of zhengming, the Platonic emphasis on dialectic—a form of community inquiry that is rooted in a specific context—takes on added significance. Whereas Plato is often considered to be a champion of universal philosophical truth, the process of dialectical inquiry has much in common with the more localized zhengming. Important differences are also elucidated.

Dialectic and zhengming are then contrasted with rhetoric broadly construed. In light of the Gorgias, Plato is generally believed to have been an outspoken critic of rhetoric. His Phaedrus, however, suggests a possible way to reconcile rhetoric with philosophy. Xunzi and Aristotle, the intellectual descendants of Confucius and Plato respectively, offer additional insights about the nature of rhetoric and how it might be integrated into philosophical practice.
Different forms of persuasive authority are compared for their respective merits and shortcomings. These philosophical views are then analyzed for their compatibility with pluralism. Finally, zhengming is used to challenge the expansion of economic language into a number of modern discourses, particularly academia.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The relationship between language and the world has been one of the most enduring and beguiling of philosophical problems. The twentieth century will likely be remembered in philosophical annals as "the century of linguistic philosophy," beginning with the logical positivists, through J. L. Austin and later Ludwig Wittgenstein, and culminating (though certainly not concluding) with Jacques Derrida and other postmodernists. There is an interesting—albeit indirect—correlation between the evolution of linguistic philosophy during the twentieth century in the west and the development of Greek philosophy during the time of Plato and Aristotle. Plato is often viewed as the champion of Truth by virtue of his apparent quest for permanent definitions for terms such as beauty and justice, the overarching purpose being the demarcation of a viable foundation for a flourishing society. He was succeeded by Aristotle, who was skeptical about the degree of success achieved by his intellectual predecessor, instead arguing that language, particularly the language of values and ethics, does not lend itself to the kind of permanent certainty Plato appears to have been aiming for.

During roughly the same historical period in China, philosophers among the "Hundred Schools" were debating similar philosophical issues. In what ways does our use of language impact the way we (ought to) live together? The ideas of Confucius

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1 Here I employ the capitalized convention as outlined by Richard Rorty in "The Fate of Philosophy" (The New Republic, October 18, 1982): "Uncapitalized, 'truth' and 'goodness' name properties of sentences, or of actions and situations. Capitalized, they are the proper names of objects—goals or standards which can be loved with all one's heart and soul and mind, objects of ultimate concern" (p. 28).
ultimately rose to prominence, particularly after being developed and elaborated by Xunzi nearly 300 years later. Does the manner in which the Chinese approached the question resonate with the Greeks? Does it correspond directly? Or does it, perhaps, illuminate the problem in heretofore unexplored yet still worthwhile ways? This investigation is prefaced on the latter hypothesis.

When Western scholars first began in earnest to translate and interpret the classical Chinese corpus some 150 years ago, they had a tendency to see Heaven (with a capital “H”) in tian 天, Virtue (with a capital “V”) in de 德, and so on. Looking at Chinese philosophy was akin to looking in a mirror—we look across at the other, but the other essentially appears as a reflection of ourselves. Over time, we have come to realize that the medium through which we perceive the other ought to operate less like a mirror and more like a window. When viewed uncritically in the light of our own presuppositions, the window reveals tantalizingly little information about what lies behind it, and instead we tend to see a reflection of ourselves peering quizzically back at us. When we become conscious of our own assumptions and concentrate on taking an honest look at what lies on the other side of the window, as western Sinology has recently begun to do, we catch a glimpse of something very different, though not entirely alien, from our own philosophical heritage.

Over the last twenty or so years we have made great strides in understanding how better to approach the enterprise of comparative philosophy. What has rarely, if ever been attempted, however, is to reverse positions, so that the viewer becomes the viewed. This is the strategy employed in this investigation. In other words, I begin from a
Confucian perspective, and subsequently reflect heuristically on Plato and Aristotle from that vantage point. In so doing, the purpose is to achieve both a superior understanding of the Confucian perspective on the relationship between language and the world, and a new, more dynamic understanding of how the Greeks dealt with the same issue. This is a worthwhile strategy because, as our understanding of Plato and Aristotle has seemingly solidified over the centuries through countless efforts to illuminate and explicate them, the once lively and vibrant texts have tended to suffer from a kind of doctrinaire ossification. Re-introducing an element of ambiguity by finding a culturally external vantage point significantly invigorates our understanding of each philosopher.

By examining closely 13.3 and related passages from the *Analects*, we will see that the inclusive pluralism advocated through *zhengming* —conventionally translated “rectification of names”—provides us with an important argument against two exclusive and potentially community-impoverishing philosophical movements, relativism and absolutism. The first step, then, is to pursue a greater degree of lucidity with respect to *zhengming*. I will reflect back upon Plato, first, and then Aristotle, sensitive to the fact that the window has a tendency to cast back a reflection regardless of whether we are on the outside looking in, or vice-versa.

As different as the ancient Greek and Chinese worlds must have been (from each other as well as our own), Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, and Xunzi all set out to identify parameters for optimum human flourishing. In essence, what each points to is a communicating community, where the ongoing process of, and sensitivity to, linguistic interaction among its members is understood as the defining operating principle. Where
they differ, however, is how this interaction is best practiced. Still, these four philosophers all believe there is an important relationship between the position a community takes with respect to linguistic practices and how that community can be expected to flourish or flounder. In other words, each was sensitive to the connection between what is said, how it is said, the context in which it is said, and the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of what is said. Despite their many philosophical differences, they are united in sharing such a “rhetorical sensibility”—a sensibility that understands linguistic practices to be significantly more complicated and interesting than, for example, the “language is a map” theory postulated by the early Wittgenstein.

Some of the inspiration for this line of inquiry comes from the work of James Boyd White, who draws attention to the intimate relationship between the way we communicate with each other and the way we experience the world:

> What in my view is essential is that we should insist upon seeing the world as made up of people talking to each other. For me the fundamental image of life is not that of economic production and exchange, nor that of knowledge acquisition and transfer, but that of composition: people seeking to make texts that will establish meanings and relations with others. We should conceive of the relevant world as a world of people speaking to each other across their discourses, out of their languages, out of their communities of knowledge and expertise, and speaking as people seeking to be whole.²

This attempt to establish narrative continuity between persons and communities of discourse has much in common with the Confucian emphasis on zhengming, or “the proper use of language.”

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² Justice as Translation, p. 20.
Of primary concern with each of our four thinkers is identifying what qualifies as an authority—how are we to determine who or what will establish criteria of successful practice, and what constitutes successful practice itself? Whereas Plato emerges as the strongest proponent of dialectic as conducted between particular individuals, Aristotle posited that “Rhetoric is the counterpart of dialectic,” meaning that rhetoric plays an important role in maintaining the viability of community. When Confucius and Xunzi emphasize the pivotal role played by zhengming, they are advocating a different paradigm that locates authority in received tradition as embodied in exemplary models. Order generates and emanates from within persons and culture, rather than by appeal to or application of transcendental or universal standards. Although the particulars of each position are distinct, together these four thinkers share the aim of outlining a framework for linguistic practice that fosters the development of a healthy society.

To some, Plato’s position is elitist and absolutist. His intense commitment to the Good is understandable given the competing forces arrayed against him and his revered mentor, Socrates. Most often, they are the colorfully depicted sophists—practitioners and purveyors of rhetoric. Taken together, these forces pose a direct challenge to Plato’s project of establishing a harmonious state because their priorities lie elsewhere—typically, with building a personal reputation and earning a profit. Plato’s primary weapon against the sophists is dialectic. I refer here to dialectic as practiced by Socrates, where the preliminary goal is elenchus—to force the interlocutor to assent to contradictory propositions, thereby refuting his position or proposition, and leaving him

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3 *On Rhetoric*, 1354a1.
open to further inquiry. Plato’s overwhelming emphasis on dialectic and his critiques of rhetoric might seem to rule out other forms of community-enriching communication unnecessarily. However, Plato’s later work aspires to be more constructive and no longer results in aporia—an indecisive or inconclusive state of affairs. Myths also play an increasingly important role. In order to grasp more thoroughly Plato’s position with respect to language and community, we will look closely at the role of myths within the dialogues and explore how they should be construed vis-à-vis dialectic.

Aristotle did not fabricate myths to augment his position, nor did he share the Platonic resistance to rhetoric. His On Rhetoric argues that rhetoric is an essential tool for the development of a flourishing state. On the whole, however, this document is more of a practical guide to the art of persuasion than it is a philosophical defense of it—though it does, to be sure, contain important philosophical arguments. Whereas Plato seemingly drove a wedge between persuasion as practiced by the rhetoricians and sophists of his day and philosophy (the pursuit of Truth through dialectic, represented by Socrates), the eminently pragmatic Aristotle perceived and argued for the value of rhetoric. While acknowledging that rhetoric can be used for malicious ends, Aristotle ultimately deems rhetoric an important skill, lest the weaker argument defeat the stronger or a weak-minded audience not be persuaded by truth “in the raw”:

Rhetoric is useful (1) because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites, so that if the decisions of judges are not what they ought to be, the defeat must be due to the speakers themselves, and they must be blamed accordingly. Moreover, (2) before some audiences not
even the possession of the most exact knowledge will make it easy for what we say to produce conviction.\textsuperscript{4}

Of particular interest is how Aristotle conceived of the relationship between persuasive ability and moral character. This will provide the opportunity for rich and interesting comparisons with the Chinese tradition.

As with Plato, our objective is to understand how Aristotle conceived of the role of linguistic practices with respect to social arrangement and interaction. Aristotle writes

\ldots Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and she has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech... For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, just and unjust, etc. It is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a household and a state.\textsuperscript{5}

Language is the medium through which a community can grow, and its most significant function is its capacity for the interchange of moral perspectives.

It will be shown that, not unlike Aristotle, the Confucian tradition considers language to be intimately linked with issues of character and community. Confucius was but one competing voice among many during his time. With established textual traditions at his disposal, Xunzi devoted his energies to assimilating the disparate strands of the “Hundred Schools,” with a heavy emphasis on Confucian ideas, while advancing his own particular perspective. This will be explored through his arguments against the bianzhe 辯者 (disputers),\textsuperscript{6} whose logical paradoxes and language puzzles served no

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 1355a21.
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Politics}, 1253a9.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Bianzhe} is sometimes misleadingly translated as “sophists” or “dialecticians.” Both are unsatisfactory. Here “disputers” is provisional and will receive fuller elaboration in due course.
practical purpose in his eyes. There are some interesting parallels between this debate and Plato’s critique of the sophists.

Within the classical Chinese tradition, language is construed as one integral, evolving level of discourse among a manifold of discourses that together shape and lend content to the human experience. This view is developed in 13.3 of the Analects. Here it is argued explicitly that there is an important connection between the language we use, the behavior we encourage and discourage, the appropriateness of punishment, the effectiveness of government, and so on. In short, a broad range of social issues cannot be adequately addressed without first establishing effective and appropriate parameters of language use. A limited amount of scholarship has been devoted to explaining (and, in some cases, explaining away) this particular passage. This scholarship will be collated and reviewed in an effort to situate ourselves comfortably beside Confucius.

Whereas the Analects contain a single compelling explicit reference to zhengming, Xunzi devotes an entire chapter (22) entitled Zhengming to elaborating his understanding of this notion. This chapter will be examined methodically, with particular attention paid to fleshing out the implications for the constitution of community. Xunzi makes a compelling case for the integral relationship between linguistic practice, personal conduct, and governance. To zhengming 正名 is to zhengming 正命 (decree, command, circumstances) is to zhengli 正禮 (ritual propriety) is to zhengzheng 正政 (governance). Attuning oneself to proper language use means that one is taking an active role in fostering harmonious human relations. As an intellectual and cultural descendant of not just Confucius but the “Hundred Schools,” Xunzi in some sense embodies an act of
zhengming itself as he aspires to encompass, assimilate, and reinterpret the breadth of his philosophical heritage.

The title of this investigation, “Refining Discourse,” can therefore be understood on three distinct levels. First, there is the most obvious: the attempt to refine our understanding of discourse. This is something our four philosophers set out to do in earnest, and each delivers a uniquely worthwhile conception. Second, the title could be construed as the discourse of “refinement”: a discourse whose purpose is to refine our understanding of—but not necessarily to deliver permanent definitions for—significant terms. This is a fundamental concern for both Confucius and Plato. Xunzi and Aristotle devote a great deal of attention to this matter as well. Finally, “Refining Discourse” can be taken to signify a discourse of refinement—one that refines the character of the participants. All three of these meanings are at play here, and my humble hope is the reader will discern how they are woven throughout this investigation.

Strategy

Four major themes are discussed in four successive chapters: dialogue and dialectic, rhetoric, authority, and the relationship between philosophy and community. Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of 13.3 from the *Analects*. Then I examine dialectic as it is employed in a number of different Platonic dialogues. Platonic dialectic is compared with dialogue as it appears, for example, in the *Analects*. I also begin to

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7 I am grateful to Dr. Roger T. Ames for cogently suggesting that “Refining Discourse” is a more appropriate title than what I had originally intended: “Defining Discourse.” The reasons will become clear as the investigation unfolds.
explore how different means of practicing philosophy intimate different underlying philosophical presuppositions and agendas.

A discussion of rhetoric follows in Chapter 2, beginning with Confucius and then Xunzi. Absent a rhetorical tradition against which to distinguish his own views, Confucius advances a compelling, holistic program that resists differentiation into rhetorical and philosophical components. With Xunzi’s critique of the bianzhe, on the other hand, we are apt to observe stronger parallels with Plato’s critique of the sophists. Then I examine closely Plato’s denigration of, and subsequent reconciliation with, rhetoric. Finally, I review Aristotle’s sophisticated treatment of the subject. It is important to distinguish persuasion for persuasion’s sake—where the goal is mere winning, or toward selfish ends—from persuasion that issues from the authentic presentation of self with more noble aspirations. Can the means of persuasion ever be considered the message itself? Is the how of communication more significant than the what?

These issues segue into a discussion of authority in Chapter 3. It will be shown that Aristotle tends to locate authority in ideas—through logical defense grounded in logos—much more than Confucius or Xunzi, who locate authority with exemplary persons and inherited tradition. Although at times Plato seems to uphold the ultimate authority of dialectic as it aspires to knowledge of the Forms, it will be argued that many of his most significant ideas receive their most compelling presentation through myth.

In Chapter 4, on philosophy and community, I present a modern theory of pluralism and examine to what extent our four philosophers might embrace it. Pluralism
is an important philosophical alternative to relativism and absolutism. Although Plato is often construed as a philosophical absolutist, I think our understanding of him as such must be tempered by viewing him through the Confucian lens. Similarly, in the case of Aristotle, his position seems somewhat less logos-driven when approached from a Chinese perspective. Instead, his emphasis on practical wisdom—navigating the world while attentive to the particular situation at hand—emerges into the foreground. Along the way, I speculate about possible contemporary applications of these philosophical views. Should certain modes or uses of language be privileged over others, or does a healthy community attempt to incorporate them all? I argue that all four philosophers share at least some commitment to pluralism, and further that this means they would resist the permeation of economic vocabulary into our modern discourses.

Despite the present effort, it should be acknowledged there must be something nascent in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy that prompted their intellectual descendents to construe them as embracing the notion that truth is universal—a position which is exclusive, not inclusive. At the same time, reflecting on possible applications of zhengming brings to light certain features that could be subject to authoritarian abuse—leading to exclusivity, not its opposite. With both the Greeks and the Chinese, however, these interpretations represent misunderstandings, if not outright abuses, of the positions in question. In each case, the movement towards clarity and certainty with respect to their ideas has resulted in what appears as some semblance of dogmatism, when in fact they all recognized ultimately that the ongoing challenges posed by the intricacies of human conversation and community constitution are never fully conquered. Ultimately,
the point is not that Plato and Aristotle fail to offer us anything resembling the Confucian emphasis on zhengming. Nor is it that this is precisely what they offer. By examining this salient dimension of Confucian thought, we must exercise our philosophical imagination to make sense of what is otherwise easily misconstrued. We are also prompted to interrogate and become more cognizant of our own intellectual heritage in the process. In so doing, we are afforded a fresh perspective from which to derive insight into our own philosophical views. We may even come away with novel and more effective ways of living and speaking with each other in the world.
CHAPTER 2
DIALOGUE AND DIALECTIC

The act of engaging others in conversation has a myriad of potential purposes. We inquire, inform, complain, entertain, exhort, praise, blame, and so on. Whatever our motivation may be, the practice of dialogue is fundamentally social, and therefore entails at least a vague awareness of community. Although occasionally our intentions are misinterpreted by our audience, and at times even we ourselves may not be fully aware of our intentions, this in no way means that dialogue fails to influence those around us.

Misunderstandings between persons often have greater impact than lucid exchanges. In fact, insofar as misunderstandings require us to become sensitive to the nuances of the language we use and enhance our understanding of its vocabulary and syntax (as well as the person in question), they ultimately help foster community. The bonds of understanding between us will have grown stronger after deliberate review.

This type of conversation could be considered the primary trope employed in the Confucian Analects—a document not authored by Confucius himself, but apparently intended to record his conversations, pronouncements and habits honestly and directly. In reading the Analects, we frequently encounter this situation: Confucius is asked his view on a particular subject, or to share his understanding of a key term, and his response is not immediately grasped by the inquirer. Nor, for that matter, is it immediately grasped by the reader.

\footnote{The commentarial tradition that has grown around the Analects, however, might be considered unsurpassed in its richness and variety.}
To be sure, a number of interpretive challenges come to the fore when dealing with a written philosophical dialogue. By contrast, most treatises are straightforward enough: the author explains and defines significant or controversial terms, advances his thesis, constructs arguments in favor of it, and refutes potential counterarguments—all of which are more or less intended as a direct communication from the author to the anticipated audience. When dealing with the philosophical outlooks of Confucius and Plato, however, we witness a conversation in progress, held between a number of complex personalities with differing world-views. The primary interpretive challenge for the reader is to determine, to the best extent possible, the salient distinguishing features of the views expressed, and then to arrive at the most promising, worthwhile, or tenable ones. In the case of Plato, this process also helps us come to grips with the author’s own philosophical position. In the case of the Analects, however, the text essentially has no author. It is simply a written compilation and, as some Western readers have complained, a seemingly poorly organized one at that. Plato’s dialogues, on the other hand, are carefully crafted conversations through which one might catch a glimpse of an overarching philosophical vision. Owing to these particular philosophical challenges not faced with the more straightforward writings of Aristotle or Xunzi, and because this investigation is designed to draw attention to the role of spoken language in community constitution, this chapter focuses solely on the written conversations, however different they may be, of the Analects and Plato.

Though it remains to be seen whether this can be adequately ascertained, and furthermore, whether it remains consistent throughout the dialogues.
Aside from this similarly indirect medium through which we approach the ideas of Confucius and Plato, what other justification can be offered for putting them through an exercise in comparative philosophy? Since the words of Confucius are recorded by his disciples, why not compare him with Socrates, whose voice comes to us through the work of Plato? The ideas of Socrates, unlike those of Confucius, are notoriously difficult to portray with any confidence because his words, supplied by Plato, can never be fully disentangled from Plato’s own designs. Although Socrates enjoys a privileged position in the works of Plato, he is derided in the plays of Aristophanes and elsewhere. Plato sought to honor his mentor by using him as the primary conversant in most of his dialogues, but it would be unwise to construe the dialogues as the transcription of any particular historical conversation. They were, of course, inspired by true events, but that is not the same thing.

The *Analects* seem more factually accurate. They document the sayings and conversations of Confucius (and, in certain instances, his disciples) without embellishment or commentary. Confucius is juxtaposed with Plato, then, because we are able to obtain a more comprehensive perspective on their views, and because they continue to be revered within their respective traditions as cornerstones of thought. Of course, one cannot do adequate justice to the ideas of Plato without simultaneously considering the influence that Socrates had on him. In other words, at times we will need to consider the views of Socrates alongside those of his devoted pupil in our comparisons.
with Confucius. Similarities in their philosophical outlooks will emerge in the course of our discussion that will make the reasons for their comparison even more apparent.10

In order to understand Confucius, we often need to set aside a number of our own linguistic and philosophical preconceptions in order to grasp the novel perspective he is advancing. This is made nowhere more evident than in 13.3, which introduces the notion of zhengming 正名. It has been argued by some Sinologists that since this is the only passage that references zhengming, it must not be an important Confucian theme, or should be considered anachronistic or even an anomaly.11 What these Western commentators fail to take into account, however, is that although the term zhengming occurs only once, the theme that language should accord with reality, and further can shape our experience of it in important ways, recurs throughout the document. This will be shown in the course of the discussion below. By highlighting other passages that do not refer to zhengming explicitly but nonetheless operate within its conceptual framework, the emphasis Confucius places on understanding and shaping the relationship between language and the world will emerge. Once I have elaborated the distinguishing characteristics of Confucian dialogue, I will then grapple with the Platonic conception of dialectic—a very different kind of linguistic practice with nonetheless matching intentions: the establishment and enhancement of human community.

Before proceeding to a philosophical translation and exposition of 13.3, perhaps a word needs to be said about hermeneutics. Some may challenge the assumption that, as

10 For additional historical reasons to compare ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy, see Jean-Pierre Vernant's Myth and Society in Ancient Greece, esp. pp. 87-89.
Western philosophers grounded in a twentieth-century Western language, we have any hope of situating ourselves on the other side of the window and viewing the issues from a Confucian perspective. It may even be considered a vain and fundamentally flawed enterprise—since not only does our language require that we perceive and evaluate the world through a certain lens or filter, but language also imposes a definite philosophical framework that cannot ever be fully transcended. Those unaware of these limitations proceed at their peril.

One response to this contention is that there are already a great many disparate philosophical frameworks operating within just our own language, and successfully communicating with others in our native tongue alone requires that we engage in a kind of translation (when listening or reading) or empathy (when speaking). For example, when something is described as "right" in our language we may need to think carefully or seek further clarification in order to more definitively ascertain the intended meaning. Is it "good?" "Correct?" Some kind of agreement? Something one is entitled to? The opposite of left? Context often illuminates the way, but further discussion or reflection is sometimes required in order to discern particular meanings. To understand the subtleties and nuances found in a 2,500 year-old text written in a language never actually spoken undoubtedly involves considerably greater effort, but ultimately it involves the same set of skills. This activity differs in degree, but not in kind, from something we do every day. Leaving aside other hermeneutical arguments for the time being, let us attempt to

\[11\] Arthur Waley is the primary such culprit. One can also infer as much from its notable absence in the otherwise thorough introduction to the translation by D. C. Lau.
see the world through Confucian eyes by way of a philosophical translation and
exposition of 13.3 from the *Analects*.

Zilu inquired: "If the Lord of Wei sought your council as to how to govern
(*zheng 政*), what would be the first order of business?"
Confucius replied: "Certainly it would be to insure that names are used
appropriately (*zhengming 正名*)."
Zilu exclaimed: "Would it indeed? You have wandered astray! Why are we to
do that?"
Confucius retorted: "How uncivilized you are! When an exemplary person is
dealing with an unfamiliar subject, he refrains from making it so apparent. When
names are not used appropriately, then language will not function smoothly. If
language does not function smoothly, then matters will not meet with success. If
matters do not meet with success, then ritual propriety and music will not flourish.
If ritual propriety and music do not flourish, then punishments will miss the mark.
If punishments miss the mark, then people will not know where to put hand or
foot. Therefore, when an exemplary person puts a name to something, it certainly
can be spoken, and when spoken it can certainly be put into practice. The words
of an exemplary person are not wayward or careless." (*Analects*, 13.3)

John Makeham provides a detailed summary of the relevant historical background based
on a citation of 13.3 that appears in the revered historian Sima Qian’s *Shiji*:

In 496 [BCE], Prince Kuai Kui, the son of Duke Ling, was incensed at rumours
that Nan Zi, his mother and the wife of Ling, had renewed an affair with a certain
Song Chao (also called Song Zichao). He attempted to have her murdered. When
the attempt failed he fled to Song. Having no other legitimate sons, Duke Ling
tried to persuade Ying, his son by consort, to become heir apparent but Ying
deployed. In 493 Ling died and Zhe, Duke Ling’s grandson and the son of Kuai
Kui, acceded to the throne. In the sixth month of the same year, Kuai Kui had
attempted to re-enter Wei from the outlying city of Qi, where he had been
installed by the Jin army. Hearing of Kuai’s attempted re-entry, troops were
despatched to attack him, thus foiling the attempt. Four years later, in 489,
Confucius returned to Wei. It was against this background that Zilu asked, “If the
Lord of Wei [Zhe] left the government of Wei in your hands, what would you
attend to first?”

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12 *Name and Actuality*, p. 36.
Makeham further points out that interpretations of 13.3 within the Chinese tradition typically belong to one of two competing camps. The first group follows Sima Qian in arguing that, given the historical events leading up to the passage, 13.3 refers to a particular incident in a particular locale, and therefore ming refers specifically to father and son: “The former is distinguished by interpreting Analects 13.3 in reference to a very specific historical background, the details of which leave little doubt that the term [ming] refers primarily to two roles: father and son.” In other words, Kuai Kui, son of the Duke and father of Zhe, should have been recognized as the proper heir, and 13.3 is intended to express Confucius’ opposition to Zhe’s ascension to the throne. In sum, members of the first camp opt for a more narrow, context-based interpretation of the passage that is couched snugly in the historical record. What such interpreters perhaps fail to take fully into account, however, is the great lengths Confucius goes to elucidate the importance of zhengming—both within this passage itself and in others found throughout the Analects. He is using this specific incident as a springboard from which to make a broader, more trenchant point.

The second group of interpreters is more sensitive to this aspect of the passage, and therefore construe the significance of ming more broadly:

There are other commentators, however, who gloss ming as referring to the title, rank or station of a broad range of subjects...at least as early as the Han dynasty, influential commentators saw the ming of zheng ming as applicable not only to the whole gamut of social roles but also to the names of any and all things generally.14

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13 Ibid.
Makeham is convinced that these commentators have too broadly misconstrued the referent of *ming*, but he then cites five supporting passages from the *Analects* (12.11, 16.14, 3.1, 3.2, and 6.24—to be examined below) that seem rather clearly to support such a broader interpretation.

In order to demonstrate why "rectification of names" is an unsatisfactory translation for *zhengming*, it will be helpful to examine other instances of *zheng* and *ming* in the *Analects*. The supposition is not that the use of these terms will be fixed and consistent throughout the document, but rather that by examining their use in a variety of contexts we will be better able to triangulate around an appropriate range of meanings. Although the Chinese translates literally as something like the verbal imperative "correct names," reasons for a more sophisticated English rendering will emerge below. The second task will be to critically assess the "argument" presented by Confucius above, thereby highlighting the perceived crucial relationship between language and other social discourses. The third objective, which will be facilitated as the passage becomes more adequately understood, is to figure out the reasons that Confucian ethics places such a high priority on *zhengming*. This will simultaneously serve as a corrective to those translators, interpreters, and conveyors of Confucius who have discounted or overlooked this fundamentally critical dimension of his thinking.

The term *zheng* appears in a total of sixteen chapters. A quick survey of how it is rendered in D. C. Lau's esteemed (though not flawless) translation reveals that this single term takes on a variety of different English meanings, depending on context. These include "put right" (1.14, 9.15), "precisely" (7.34), "proper(ly)" (8.4, 10.8, 20.2),
“straight” (10.12), “adjusted” (10.18), “squarely” (10.26), “(to) correct” (12.17, 13.6, 13.13), “rectification” (13.3), “integrity” (14.15), “due [as in ‘due south’]” (15.5), and “directly” (17.10). In their philosophical translation, Ames and Rosemont opt for “find improvement (in)” (1.14), “precisely” (7.34), “proper(ly)” (8.4, 10.8, 10.12, 10.18, 12.17, 13.3, 13.6, 13.13, 14.15), “upright” (10.26), “revised...in proper order” (9.15), “due [as in ‘due south’]” (15.5), “with your face (to the wall)” (17.10), and “correctly” (20.2). Note that Ames and Rosemont, perhaps due to a heightened awareness of the significance of the term, more consistently opted for the sense of “proper”—but wisely refrain from a forced and artificial consistency that would, in fact, betray the variances in meaning that hinge on the context of each passage. In the case of both the Lau and the Ames and Rosemont translations, sometimes zheng is used as an adjective or adverb; other times it is used verbally and occasionally even as a noun.

Taken as a whole, these various occurrences imply a sense of rightness, appropriateness, or suitability. However, it is important to guard against the assumption that zheng involves appealing to some sort of formal, objective standard or principle. The character is comprised of zhi (to halt, this, place, to dwell) and yi—(one, alike, to unite). Thus zheng involves some sort of localized regularity, rather than an appeal to universal or transcendent standards. In many (if not all) of the above instances, zheng requires that one be aware of the prevailing circumstances at hand, and then actively and deliberately implement a measure of order and coherence. What works in one milieu may be ineffective or inappropriate in another. Since the term “rectification” is used frequently in mathematical and scientific fields, thereby appealing to an external,
The presupposed objective standard of correctness, “rectification of names” is a misleading translation at best. The Confucian emphasis on localized regularity rather than transcendent, universal truth sets the stage for what is perhaps the strongest contrast with overtones we find in Platonic and Aristotelian thinking.

The above samplings from Lau and Ames and Rosemont highlight the difficulty one encounters when attempting to produce a faithful and consistent translation of classical Chinese texts. More philosophically significant, we can already begin to discern the relatively loose use of terminology in the Analects, although this apparent looseness nonetheless retains a sense of internal coherence. This coherence can be described as a reliance on “linguistic families,” as opposed to rigid definitions. Each character prescribes a locus and radius of meaning, and this radius can overlap with the radii (and even loci) of a number of other characters in the same family (usually, though not always, based on the radical component). Classical Chinese definitions, then, might be best construed as inclusive rather than exclusive. It is important to bear this in mind when searching for an adequate translation of zhengming, as this further undermines the suitability of “rectification of names,” which implies conformity with a fixed, external standard.

The four chapters from Book 10 in which zheng 正 appears provide a strong link between the term and human conduct, as Book 10 is primarily devoted to detailing the personal behavior of Confucius, often down to the most peculiar details. Consider, for example, the marvelously terse 10.12: [When his] mat was not arranged properly [he] would not sit.” This resembles the concluding statement of 13.3, in which
it is implied that the exemplary person does not speak unless his words are *zheng*. The importance of a properly arranged mat is mentioned again in 10.18. In 10.26, *zheng* is the manner in which Confucius is said to be situated when riding in a carriage. And finally, in 10.8 it is observed that Confucius would not eat unless his food was cut properly. In all cases, *zheng* requires human effort—it is an achievement of sorts.

To the modern observer, it is difficult to glean a philosophical point from these passages, but certainly each is intended to show more than the peculiar personal foibles of Confucius. One thing we should remember is that a properly arranged mat, properly sliced food, and proper positioning in a carriage all involve bringing a sense of ceremonial appropriateness to a particular situation, but not at the expense of the prevailing conditions. The chef must cut with the natural contours of his meat in mind; the mat can only be arranged properly with respect to the other mats present; one’s positioning in a carriage will shift relative to the movement of it. It is reasonable to surmise, then, that in the case of *zhengming* one should strive to accomplish the same thing: manifest a sense of contextually-sensitive regularity while at the same time optimizing harmony. Let us examine how this would apply to *ming*.

In addition to 13.3, instances of *ming* 名 include 4.5, 8.19, 9.2 15.20, and 17.8. The character is a graphical depiction of *xi* 夕 (evening) combined with *kou* 口 (mouth) because, as explained by Wieger, “at dusk, it is necessary to give one’s name to be known.” From these intriguing etymological roots the term became associated not only with personal names, but ranks, titles, notoriety, and fame. These latter connotations, in
fact, are almost invariably intertwined with personal names. Within the Chinese tradition, names are intended not only to distinguish one person from the next, but sometimes the act of naming a person describes a distinguishing characteristic of the person. This phenomenon can to some extent be compared with English family names like Weaver, Smith, Tailor and so on, where the family name derives from the person’s (inherited) trade occupation. More frequently, and much more important given the focus of this discussion, the act of naming is intended as a sort of performative and prescriptive act—the person conferring the name is saying the person named ought to embody the attributes of the name conferred. Naming in this context is an act not merely of designation, but naming also generates an expectation of behavior. According to A. C. Graham,

...in Chinese ming 名 ‘name’ is cognate with ming 命 ‘command, decree’, and it is often the latter which is used for the act of naming. For Confucius, naming is primarily the act which, in calling somebody ‘ruler’ or ‘subject’, ‘father’ or ‘son’, ordains his social function.\(^{16}\)

A name or title, then, is in an important sense more than just a mere designator, because it involves a corresponding role or function.

Hall and Ames explain this in terms of the performative force or function of language:

The performative force of language entails the consequence that to interpret the world through language is to impel it towards a certain realization, to make it known in a certain way. And the extent to which one is able to influence the world is a function of the extent to which one can articulate [one’s] meaning,

\(^{15}\) Chinese Characters, p. 164.  
\(^{16}\) Disputers, p. 23.
value, and purpose in such a manner as to evoke deferential responses from others. 17

For this reason, honorific titles very often become part and parcel of a Chinese name as well. For example, when Western ears first heard of "Kong Fu Zi" (which could literally be translated rather awkwardly as "Mister Master Kong"—a double honorific), this name was clumsily transliterated as "Confucius." Now that our understanding of Chinese language and culture is improving, one might go so far as to suggest that the name "Confucius" should be abandoned in favor of something more culturally attuned—a proposition perhaps unlikely to be welcomed by many, since the name "Confucius" is renowned the world over, however remiss its origins may in fact be. Laozi, Zhuangzi, Xunzi and others have escaped such a fate—each is known in the West by the same name they hold in Chinese. What is important to note here is that each philosopher has come to be known by a family name and the honorific zi ("Master")—with the notable exception of Laozi, who, like Confucius, bears two honorifics (lao 老 [old] is considered wise and worthy of esteem), but unlike Confucius, does not bear any specific family name. In other cases, the name and the title are fused into one inseparable whole—distinguishing the person simultaneously by an inherited name and a title that is earned and conferred by the culture (not by a monarch, as in the case of English nobility, although ancient China also had such titles).

One instance of ming appears in 4.5. Book 4 is devoted primarily to compiling Confucius’ comments with regard to ren 忍 (most often translated as “benevolence’); Hall

17 Thinking Through Confucius, pp. 268-269.
and Ames opt for "authoritative conduct"), perhaps the most well-rehearsed of Confucian virtues. The verse in question reads 君子去仁，惡呼成名 "If the exemplary person abandons ren, how is he to make a name for himself?" In other words, exemplary or benevolent conduct is an integral part of being an exemplary person. Ming in this instance means the name which corresponds to exemplary conduct—exemplary person, or junzi 君子. According to Ames and Rosemont,

For most of us, the goal of junzi is the highest to which we can aspire. There is, however, an even loftier human goal, to become a "sage" or shengren; but in the Analects it is a distant goal indeed. What the shengren shares in common with the junzi is that both categories emerge out of effective communication. Etymologically, the junzi 君子 is one who "oversees (yin 尹)" community through effective "communication (kou 口)." In the absence of ren, the junzi has no hope of living up to such a noble title. Confucius is using ming as the linchpin linking the title, the conduct and, most importantly for our overall discussion, the communicative ability. Hall and Ames make a similar point:

The performative dimension of naming and its relationship to meaning is evidenced in the fact that "name" (ming 名) is frequently defined as "to cause certain possibilities to be realized" (ming 命). In the early Chinese corpus, in fact, these two terms are frequently used interchangeably. The Shuo-wen defines "name" (ming 名) as "self-selected possibilities" (tzu ming 自命). In our modern English idiom, a man can be a father in the biological sense without fulfilling the corresponding role of fatherhood. This is precisely the kind of discrepancy that Confucius is concerned with. Thus, zhengming is an effort to connect how one is referred to and how one ought to conduct and comport oneself—including the way one communicates.

A father should be fatherly just as a mother should be motherly. A president should be presidential, while a professor should be professorial. This does not mean every person in each role is expected to act precisely the same, but there are certain general ways of conduct that inhere to each. Likewise, there are certain forms of conduct considered inappropriate to each role. Benjamin Schwartz explains the matter as follows:

Language carries its own embedded reflection of the true order. The crisis is not a crisis of language but of the human abuse and distortion of language. Thus the language of familial and social roles—words that refer to father, ruler, son, or minister—do not refer simply to bare biologic or political facts but, as in the doctrine of certain varieties of modern sociology, every role is the bearer of its own role-norms. The word “father” carries the implication that the father will “act like a father” as well as the assumption that the language will provide information on how to do so. Thus when Duke [Jing] of [Qi] asks Confucius about government he simply says, “Let the prince be a prince, the minister a minister, and the son a son.” Duke [Jing], whose rule was being threatened by the rising menace of the [Chen (Tian)] family, exclaims, “How true. When the prince is not a prince, when the minister is not a minister... one may have a dish of millet in front of one and yet not know if one will live to eat it.” [12.11] The knowledge of how one ought to behave in one’s role was already available. One did not have to engage in a painful process of dialectic reasoning in order to discover the true meaning of the uses of the word “minister.” The literature provided ample examples of model ministers and ample illustrations of the acts of good ministers.20

Schwartz makes several important points that are relevant here and will prove germane to subsequent chapters. First, Confucius clearly shares the Platonic concern with human abuses of language and indicates a readily available remedy: what Schwartz calls “the literature.” This means the histories, the Songs (or Odes), and other documents reflective of inherited tradition. This proposed source of authority differs notably from those advocated by Plato and Aristotle. Interestingly, Confucius does not specify the precise

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form and content of these roles—he only needs to point to “the literature.” Confucius is simply stating that titles must be more than empty designations if society is to cohere, and further that the resources explaining how these roles are to be fulfilled are readily available. Responsibility lies with anyone who would assume any given title to model oneself after the patterns revealed and revered throughout history, thereby serving as an exemplar for the functions and behavior that correspond to that particular role.

Hall and Ames offer another persuasive argument about the importance of ming to Confucius, discussing several important passages along the way:

The term ming means both “to mean” and “to name.” “To name” is to contribute meaning, and “to mean” is to construe names. In the Analects, we find that Yao, as a creator of meaning in the tradition, could not be “named” by his people, yet he himself was responsible for the patterning of culture in such a manner as to accommodate his contributed meaning (8/19):

How great indeed was Yao as a ruler! How majestic! Only [tian] is truly great, and only Yao took it as his model. How expansive was he—the people had no name to do him justice. How majestic was he in his accomplishments, and how brilliant was he in his cultural achievements.

...Of course, the most immediate and apparent “name” in which one invests meaning is his own reputation. This notion that one’s name has contributed meaning explains Confucius’ concern for personal reputation (15/20): “The exemplary person hates the prospect of arriving at the end of his life without having made a name for himself.”

Ming has a similar meaning in 9.2, where Confucius is praised by a villager because he 搏學而無所成名 “studies broadly without making a name for himself in any one particular field.” We can conclude from the preceding passages that because ming does

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20 World of Thought, p. 92.
21 Ibid., pp. 272.
not translate consistently into one particular term, a working translation for *zhengming* is
“use names appropriately.”

How shall we evaluate the philosophical argument in 13.3? The method of
demonstration Confucius uses, which is common in classical Chinese texts, involves
drawing a long, conditional chain in order to demonstrate why the initial clause is either
desirable or undesirable. This strategy should not be compared with the Aristotelian
syllogism or any other type of formal, logical demonstration, as the kind of thinking
involved is fundamentally different in kind. Far from aiming to accord with the canons
of reason, demonstrations of this kind are designed to highlight intrinsic relationships that
are more sophisticated and complex than external relations between individual, atomic
entities or phrases.

To begin, consider the clause demonstrating the immediate consequence of failing
to render names appropriately. Confucius says if we fail to do so, then *yan bu shun* 言
不順. *Yan* 言 simply connotes words, usually spoken. *Bu* 不 is the verbal negative. The
crucial term, then, is *shun* 順. This is what spoken words will fail to do if we do not
render names appropriately. But what is *shun*? Not surprisingly, it is a complicated term
with a wide range of connotations. Graphically, it depicts a waterway adjacent to a
human body (most often connoting the head), suggesting the sense of “headwater”—the
origin of a river. Karlgren offers “instruct, explain; obey; follow, comply with.”\(^{22}\) This is
especially interesting because his definitions offer both a sense of instruction and
compliance—that is, to *shun* can mean both to teach another and to accord with or follow.
Although there may not be an English term that captures this sense adequately, I will work with “function smoothly”—hoping to suggest the sense of a natural process unfolding, such as the inherent movement of water. By reversing the argument, then, we can deduce that “function[ing] smoothly” is the proper exercise of spoken words. Lau translates this clause “what is said will not sound reasonable” (p. 118), which seems somewhat off the mark. Ames and Rosemont translate 言不順 as “language will not be used effectively” (p. 162), which seems more apt to capture both the performative and compliant aspects of shun.

The next clause of the argument postulates that if language fails to function smoothly, 事不成—affairs will not meet with success. Of the five demonstrative clauses, this may be the greatest leap in terms of logical defensibility, since it is not at all clear how a failure of language inevitably results in a failure of affairs. Or is it? Can human affairs be carried out in the absence of language? Perhaps on a rudimentary, individualistic level they can be, but even the simplest of familial or governmental matters is going to require at least a modicum of effective communication between persons. If one is instructed to “deliver this scroll to the Prince of Lu” and it winds up in the hands of the Lord of Wei, we have a problem. As shall be shown, even more problematic to Confucius were those instances when the Prince of Lu was merely a prince in name, not function. The same can be said for the Lord of Wei, or any would-be title-holder.

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25 Grammata, p. 118.
The next step in the argument moves in this direction. If matters (of family and state) do not meet with success, then ritual propriety and music will not flourish. This develops the relationship between spoken language and additional levels of human discourse—in this case, ritually prescribed roles and relationships. Disruptions in the social fabric occur when roles are not adhered to, and perhaps most threatening to social stability were those usurpers who put on airs by performing rituals traditionally reserved for those of higher rank. A duke, for example, should fulfill those roles and relationships and only those roles and relationships prescribed for a duke’s station—that is what the tradition has upheld as appropriate when someone is afforded the title of “duke.” If the duke either fails to fulfill his ritual obligations or does more than is traditionally prescribed, we have a situation that calls for zhengming. The argument, then, is not so dubious after all, although it is perhaps understandable how Zilu was puzzled by Confucius’ response: he was not able to draw connections among the relevant issues on his own. What remains to be seen, however, is the effectiveness of zhengming, for at this point it is hardly clear how it alone can be expected to establish and maintain social cohesiveness.

For further elaboration as to how some of the key concepts mentioned in 13.3 are related, Mark Edward Lewis provides the following historical background:

...Legal punishments functioned within a broader framework created by the ritual bestowals of the ruler that produced specified relations, statuses, and obligations. The clearest example of this is the titles of rank. These ranks were received as gifts from the ruler in exchange for service, and they were the chief reward obtained by the common people. Holders of title could surrender them for reduction of punishment...
The hierarchy created through the system of ranks was itself an extension and modification of earlier ritual practices commemorated in inscriptions. The Zhou state had featured a variety of titles held by rulers of states and their leading ministers, and these titles had been theoretically received from the king. The distribution of titles by the king to the populace was a universalization of a ritual practice linked to writing that had defined the old nobility.23

Here we see the important conceptual connection between titles, ritual propriety, and the distribution of punishment. The dissemination of authority begins with the names and titles bestowed by the ruler. Social cohesion under such a system depends upon proper recognition and fulfillment of these titles. This was considered part and parcel of 《禮》，the intricate system of roles and ritual obligations tightly woven into the fabric of ancient Chinese daily life.

Music was also integrated into ritualized Chinese living in a way that is difficult for most moderns to understand fully. Take 3.23, for instance, where Confucius makes the following observation to the Grand Music Master of Lu: “With regard to music, this much can be understood: it begins being played in unison. Then improvisation commences, with purity, in harmony, the melody develops on through the finale.” Although he is speaking specifically of musical performance, one might suggest that he may also be implying something about how to live life in general. Certain types of music were specifically reserved for specific rituals, and other forms of music were considered (by Confucius, anyway) to be lewd and were thus disparaged and discouraged.

Confucius makes decisive judgments with respect to music on several occasions in the Analects. For example, in 3.25 he comments that the shao music was both

23 Writing and Authority, pp. 24-25.
supremely beautiful and supremely felicitous, while the *wu* music was supremely beautiful but not supremely felicitous. These are not merely reflections of personal taste, however: *shao* was the music of Shun who took the throne via the abdication of Yao, while *wu* was the music of King Wu who overthrew the Yin by military force. Music, then, was also considered symbolic of particular authorities. When Confucius, in the context of arguing for the importance of *zhengming*, states “If ritual propriety and music do not flourish, then punishments will miss the mark,” he most likely is making explicit something that for all intents and purposes should be implicitly evident to his contemporaries. Taken as a whole, these discourses—of language, music, and ritual—situate each person in an integrated matrix: they inform people where to stand (both literally and metaphorically), and they accord status. Just as syntax makes linguistic communication meaningful, these other levels of discourse make human relationships meaningful.

The final conditional clause of 13.3 reads, “If punishments miss the mark, then the people will not know where to put hand or foot.” In one sense this is a metaphor for not knowing the proper way to behave, but in another sense it is meant quite literally: in the absence of a clear social structure with definite boundaries for acceptable and unacceptable behavior, grounded in a common cultural and linguistic vocabulary, the people would be at a loss as to what they can and cannot do, and those punishments administered by authorities might very well be construed as arbitrary. This would tend to establish and perpetuate a vicious circle: if the rule-makers and enforcers behave

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24 D. C. Lau, p. 71 fn.
arbitrarily, I might as well act in any way that suits me. Regardless of the way I conduct myself, I may be punished or I may not be.

Is such disorder really a logical consequence of failing to zhengming? It has already been pointed out that rigorous logical consistency or demonstrability is not a quality of such statements. If that is not the intention, then what does the argument amount to? Leaving aside the intermediary steps, Confucius essentially is saying that, unless we (beginning with the ruler) zhengming, people will not know what to do. Whether the argument stands on its own merits or not (I believe it does), this is a powerful claim about the fundamental importance of language in regulating human behavior. In this case, an admonition to use language properly is simultaneously an admonition to act properly. Confucius calls for a synchronicity of word, deed, and inner orientation (avoiding misleading terms such as “will” or “psyche”).

What are the implications of this strategy for Confucian ethics? Chad Hansen perceptively describes the importance of zhengming as follows: “[l]anguage is a convention transmitted by copying the performance of experts. Natural authorities (opinion leaders) determine usage by modeling language and behavior together.” The modeling of proper language use is as important as modeling appropriate behavior—in fact, language is behavior of a kind. This does not mean simply that exemplary persons refrain from using expletives, address their associates courteously and remember to say “please” and “thank you.” Rather, language generates certain expectations. To bestow or

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21 Daoist Theory, p. 65.
adopt a name, absent the corresponding prescribed conduct, is to sow the seeds of chaos and confusion.

Some commentators have been inclined to interpret zhengming as an admonition to clarify language in a way that emphasizes correct definition—a sort of correspondence theory of truth. The arguments listed in favor of zhengming (or, more specifically, the anticipated consequences for failing to do so) might support such a notion to some extent. After all, linguistic intelligibility is an important aspect of effective human interaction. However, by now it should be clear that Confucius is talking about much more than just language use. In the cryptic yet highly significant 6.25, Confucius protests: “a gu ritual vessel that is not [serving as] a gu ritual vessel—a gu indeed! A gu indeed!” The irony of “indeed” should be evident enough. This example may seem trivial, but it makes an important point: any object or title that is merely a term of reference (i.e. where the referent does not fulfill the corresponding performative dimension) has not in fact achieved the name in question. The problem is not solved by selecting another, seemingly more appropriate name or title. The problem is solved by insuring that the gu be used only as a gu. At first blush this may seem like a particularly obtuse approach to language use. Would it not be much more straightforward to simply employ a different name when an object is used in a different capacity? The difficulty with such an approach becomes more evident when we recall to what an extent ancient Chinese culture was steeped in ritual. Using a gu for something other than its intended ritual function

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26 This can also be construed as something being used as a gu that is not, in fact, a gu.
would be akin to the inappropriate use of holy artifacts at a Catholic mass. The solution is not acceptance and re-designation; it is remonstration and improved conduct.

12.17 is another illuminating passage. Like 13.3, it draws a connection between governance zheng 政 and zheng 正. Ji Kangzi asks Confucius about governance, to which he responds: 政者，正也。子帅以正，孰敢不正？ “To govern is to set things proper. If you, noble sir, rule properly, who would dare be improper?” Notice that the character for governance contains zheng 正 as the radical. The other half of the character is derived from the pictogram of a hand holding a rod, and means “to tap” or “to beat.” By removing this element, Confucius is making a comment about how good government does not attempt to control or punish its subjects. Rather, the focus is on the behavior (and, as zhengming 证明 illustrates, the language) of the ruler, who ideally serves as a model for the rest of the populace.

When it comes to human titles and names, Confucius is offering a theory of governance that is keenly attuned to human psychology. Nobody wants to be a bad office-holder; nobody wants to be a poor family role model. By linking titles with their respective historical exemplars, Confucius is delivering a theory of order that capitalizes on the human capacity for chi 懔 (shame, humility)—a term that appears in eleven different chapters. Graphically, chi is comprised of the ear er 耳 and the heart/mind xin 心. In other words, it is the capacity for what one hears to inform and regulate one’s feelings and thoughts. According to 2.3, chi is the result of excellent (de 德) leadership and observance of ritual propriety, and moreover tends to render people self-ordering (jiu 且格). By contrast, rule (zheng 政) by penal law (xing 刑) does not engender a sense
of shame nor lead to self-ordering—it merely encourages people to avoid doing whatever will incur punishment. Furthermore, it is shameful to be affiliated with government when the way (dao 道) does not prevail in the state (8.13, 14.1). And, perhaps most relevant to our present discussion, a sense of shame will also induce one to be careful with one’s words, for fear they outstrip one’s deeds: 君子恥其言而過其行 “The exemplary person is ashamed of his words exceeding his actions” (14.27, see also 4.22). The recurring emphasis on effective communication (both speaking and listening), tempered by an understanding that language and behavior should coincide, is unmistakable. Chi is the capacity that induces word and deed to accord. In the absence of such a capacity, the efficacy of zhengming could be seriously undermined. It is incumbent on authority figures to set and follow the appropriate example.

Recall Schwartz’s reference to 12.11, an even more straightforward illustration. Duke Jing of Qi asks Confucius about governance. Confucius replies: 君君，臣臣，父父，子子 “The ruler rules, the minister ministers, the father fathers [is fatherly], and the son sons.” Note that, grammatically speaking, Confucius is simply stating a noun and then re-stating it—the first reference is topical while the second is imbued with deeper meaning. This technique transforms the significance of the second term into an expectation of certain corresponding types of behavior—this is zhengming in action. As stated by Hall and Ames, “not only do names describe, they act in that they impel a person towards a certain kind of experience.”

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27 Thinking Through Confucius, p. 274.
Now I will consider in what sense 13.3 (or any passage in the *Analects*) can be considered a “dialogue.” At face value, we have Zilu, a disciple of Confucius, posing a hypothetical question, to which Confucius provides a curt response with no accompanying explanation. Since Zilu is astounded to the point of challenging the suitability of his master’s answer, Confucius chides his disciple for his brashness and proffers one of the longest exegeses in the entire text (which is still quite brief when contrasted with some of Socrates’ speeches in the writings of Plato). We typically expect a dialogue to involve the free and open-ended exchange of ideas between participants. Dialogues normally involve some degree of give-and-take; there are no trump cards or sacred cows. Ultimately what matters is how the ideas hold up under evaluation and scrutiny by the participants.

The characterization of dialogue above is often what we find in the Platonic dialogues. Conversations in the *Analects*, in contrast, seem much more like lessons or pronouncements, with the views of Confucius having ultimate authority. He rarely seeks answers from others; it is usually the case that others seek answers from him. Though he pursued learning (xue 學) doggedly, it is rare for him to acknowledge the contribution of others to his own understanding.\(^\text{28}\) In other words, “dialogue” in the Confucian sense usually involves at least an implicit hierarchy of expertise, where Confucius is typically deferred to as the expert on matters of morality, custom, tradition, and so on.\(^\text{29}\) At the

\(^{28}\) See 3.8 for an exception, where Zixia seeks the help of Confucius in understanding a passage from the *Songs*. The quality of Zixia’s questions ultimately shed new light on the passage for Confucius. See also those passages that praise Yan Hui.

\(^{29}\) One interesting exception is 3.15, where Confucius is reported to have asked a number of detailed questions while visiting the Grand Temple. This led someone to question his knowledge of ritual
same time, however, it must be acknowledged that Confucius was in no way a vain or self-righteous person; in fact, he is often praised for his humility and deference. For now it is important to understand the Confucian manifestation of “dialogue,” particularly with respect to the theory of zhengming. The operative conception of authority means that “dialogue” in a Confucian world differs strikingly from our normal understanding of the term.

What, then, does zhengming tell us about the particularly Confucian conception of dialogue? Taken together, the above passages depict Confucius as a plain-speaking man not given to flattery, deceit or conceit. He also comes across as a moral man, determined to advocate “the right way of life” in the face of princes and other rulers who place their own selfish interests above those of the people whose care is entrusted to them. When Confucius engages in dialogue, then, we essentially witness zhengming in action. Every conversation presents an opportunity to use language appropriately and attend to the vitally important relationship between language and conduct.

The fact that Confucius mentions zhengming as the first order of business in governance reflects a deep appreciation for the power of language in its ability to influence how we perceive and interact with the world. Some may argue there is a certain irony here, as Confucius himself takes a measure of liberty with the language in order to advance his meliorating agenda (e.g., his use of the received term for prince, junzi, to designate a moral category of person). This observation does not undermine the propriety. When Confucius learned of this remark, he explained that his questioning itself embodied the proper ritual.
philosophical point at hand, however: *zhengming* merits serious consideration as a theory of rulership. *Zhengming* is primarily focused on raising expectations for human conduct and language use, and only secondarily on choosing the term which appropriately describes the object or behavior in question. Confucius is aiming to invigorate the connection between meaning and use in an effort to strengthen the bonds of human community. In speaking, we not only describe the world; we constitute and shape it as well.

**Platonic Dialogues, Platonic Dialectic**

"The labor of dialectic, in which the truth of what is finally flashes upon us, is by nature unending and infinite."\(^{30}\)

If "dialogue" is normally construed as the free and open exchange of ideas—an intellectual give and take between persons in good faith—to what extent do the Platonic "dialogues" approach that conception? In what ways do they manifest or appeal to authority? What forms do authority take, and what lends them credence? In order to answer these questions, we first need to come to grips with Plato’s distinctive conversational strategy: dialectic. In keeping with the comparative theme outlined in Chapter 1, Platonic dialectic will be viewed to a certain degree from a Confucian perspective. In peering through the glass, bearing *zhengming* in mind should lend a touch of freshness to the present inquiry, although it would not be adequately served without at least some assistance from the thorough treatments made available by Western scholars.

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Perhaps a few words need to be said about why Platonic dialectic has been selected as the counterpart to zhengming. It is not immediately apparent—after all, zhengming is usually not a focal point for Western Sinologists, whereas dialectic for Plato is a fundamental and recurring theme. The reasons for the comparison will come to light as the investigation unfolds, but at present this much can be said: zhengming is, first and foremost, a theory of rulership. It is advanced by Confucius as the first order of business in an inquiry about how to govern. As we shall see in the discussion to follow, dialectic also can (and, it will be argued, must) be construed as a necessary component of Plato’s theory of political organization—a foundation upon which a society can develop and flourish.

Equally important, as a theory of rulership zhengming emphasizes the critical importance of language and attunement to the power of linguistic expression. To put it a bit too succinctly, good language is good rulership, and bad language is bad rulership. As discussed previously, “good” and “bad” language refer not so much to “polite” and “vulgar” respectively, nor even “true” and “false,” but rather to “appropriate within the given context, and in accord with historical models,” or not so. Such appropriateness distinguishes polite speech from vulgar speech. To be rude, then, is to be inappropriate. A performative aspect is also entailed, where names and titles are more than mere designations—there is a corresponding expectation of use (for objects) or conduct (for roles and titles). Dialectic, too, is a kind of specialized language use but instead is designed to inspire the participants toward greater understanding of truth—and, by
inference, genuine knowledge of the right way to live in society.\(^{31}\) Thus, \textit{zhengming} and dialectic share at least two common points of reference: they both deal with how to manifest and manage effectively a human community, and both point to language as playing a significant if not \textit{the} fundamental role. A third similarity between \textit{zhengming} and dialectic is that neither operates on an individual basis: both presuppose some sort of hierarchical relationship between persons, whether it be ruler/subject, master/protégé, or some other form.

There are three general strategies adopted by scholars in analyzing the Platonic texts. First, each dialogue can be analyzed in isolation, with the arguments therein taken at face value to represent a particular sliver of the Platonic vision. This approach has merit insofar as it honors the integrity of each dialogue as an independent work. At the same time it does not assume a strained uniformity between dialogues, or point to superficial inconsistencies that Plato himself was most likely quite aware of.\(^{32}\) The limitation, of course, is that one can indulge a dialogue in such a fashion only at the expense of all the others. Unless we are simply interested in understanding one dialogue in isolation, this strategy precludes the possibility of reaching an understanding of Plato’s overall project, whatever it might be.

A second strategy is to demarcate Plato’s work into early, middle, and late periods, with the expectation that this provides an adequate account of perceived changes

\(^{31}\) It could be argued that, according to Plato, the practice of dialectic itself embodies the right way to live in a society, with certain qualifications. One could make the same argument about \textit{zhengming}.

\(^{32}\) This is not to ignore the fact that a close reading of many dialogues is quite likely to reveal a number of internal tensions. The point is that any attempt to take the arguments merely at face value, ignoring the fact that they take place within a carefully-crafted dramatic context, is to miss Plato’s point.
in style and content. The argument typically goes something like this: the early
dialogues are heavily influenced by Socrates, and as such are *aporetic* (deliberately
inconclusive) and implicitly suspicious of the written word. The middle dialogues are an
attempt to be constructive within the dialogue format, and therefore embody the greatest
dramatic tension between the early and late periods. Finally, the late dialogues are not
really dialogues at all and can essentially be read as treatises depicting the full maturation
of Plato’s thought more or less independent of the Socratic influence. Although many
scholars employ this strategy in some form or other, and it has some merit, the aim here is
to make sense of the entire range of comments vis-à-vis dialectic while remaining
sensitive to the evolution of Plato’s thought.

With that objective in mind, we come to our third available strategy, and the one
most closely followed here: we take the Platonic texts as an organic whole representing
the full breadth and depth of his thought. Tensions between texts, then, do not so much
represent a shift from one position to another, but rather should be construed as integral
components of an extremely complex whole. Surely, it would attribute more genius to
Plato than seems humanly possible to propose that he had his entire project in mind from
the start and unfolded it in deliberate, methodical fashion. Still, it seems reasonable to
propose that the overall purpose any single dialogue cannot be thoroughly understood
without simultaneously considering how it meshes with each of the others and the body
as a whole. In fact, this is analogous to the way dialectic itself works. Dialectic

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33 To some extent this is the position endorsed by Charles H. Kahn—at least with respect to the early,
“threshold” and middle dialogues.
simultaneously considers the subject of inquiry as it relates to other concepts (synthesis/collection) and breaks the subject down into smaller components (division).

Inconsistencies and contradictions between and within dialogues, then, need not be explained away nor taken as indications of flaws in Plato’s overall philosophical outlook. Rather, we are obliged honor such tensions for what they are: a necessary and deliberate outcome of a philosophy that emphasizes the fundamental importance of dialogue between persons, who are invariably contextually and temporally situated, in the philosophical enterprise. That is to say, philosophy does not exist in the absence of people conversing with each other, and different people have different things to say in different contexts. The suitability of spoken language also hinges upon the people and situation in question. Since people all have different experiences and different perspectives on the world, philosophy will inevitably reflect these differences. Plato’s position, then, is one that ultimately resists closure and certainty, while paradoxically ever striving for it.

This is not to say that this is all Plato had to say. In fact, his contributions to philosophical inquiry across most major disciplines are still considered significant. It would be quite difficult, not to mention a betrayal of his overarching vision, to focus only on one particular strand of his thought. The strategy adopted in these pages, however, is to pursue an understanding of one notion that seems to bind the rest of his ideas together: dialectic. Although dialectic is the principal mode of conversation employed by Socrates, it bears little resemblance to what we often loosely refer to today as “the Socratic method.” While they both share a question-and-answer format, dialectic typically aims to
channel the interlocutor into choosing between two binary opposites (i.e. affirmation or denial), with one answer being the “right” or “rational” one. When practiced today, the Socratic method tends to be either more open-ended, or it seeks to elicit a specific, correct answer—not a sequential chain of yes or no answers.

The difficulty we encounter in analyzing dialectic is compounded by the fact that Plato himself is not explicitly clear and consistent throughout his dialogues on the subject, and passages can be located to support a number of competing interpretations. One treatment that is especially effective at harmonizing these disparate views is the 1965 work by Herman L. Sinaiko titled *Love, Knowledge, and Discourse in Plato: Dialogue and Dialectic in Phaedrus, Republic, Parmenides*. Sinaiko formulates some compelling arguments about the overall strategy with which Plato presents his theory of dialectic. Following Sinaiko’s lead, I will examine the overt discussions of dialectic as they appear in the above three dialogues. I will also briefly attend to relevant remarks in *Sophist, Statesman, Philebus, and Laws*. Significant differences in presentation of dialectic will be attended to with due care, but an effort will be made to bring these together under a common understanding. In other words, it does not need to be argued that the style and purpose of Plato’s dialogues evolves over time, and that his points of emphasis shift accordingly. What did not change, however, is his use of the dialogue format, which is by nature grounded in a particular context. As a result, significant attention will be devoted to determining what kind of conclusions can be drawn based on Plato’s unswerving commitment to the dialogue format.

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31 See the *Meno* for what is perhaps the most explicit such demonstration.
Before delving into specific dialogues, a brief overview of Richard Robinson’s *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic* will pave the way for the inquiry to follow. With respect to references to dialectic that appear in the Platonic dialogues, Robinson offers this summary:

In respect of method, the outstanding features of the early period are the Socratic elenchus and the Socratic definition. The notion of dialectic is not characteristic of the early period, but is found in both the middle and the late. Prominent in the middle period is the notion of hypothesis, and in the later period the notions of synthesis and division. This is not to say that no trace of elenchus occurs after the *Meno*, or that no trace of division occurs before the *Phaedrus*, or any such sweeping and simple statement that would be overthrown by a single instance to the contrary. What is meant is a matter of degrees or percentages or emphasis.35

Although Robinson withholds the term “dialectic” from that form of dialogue that pursues elenchus, perhaps dialectic should be more broadly construed—to include both dialectic as a specialized debating strategy (destructive, and often confused with eristic) and as the means to develop foundations for thought (constructive)—in order to fully appreciate the uses Plato intended for dialectic. At the very least, elenchus (that is, the termination of a line of argument via refutation and resulting in *aporia*) must be considered a necessary propaedeutic to dialectic.

Without doubt, elenchus is the method of dialogue most prominently employed by Socrates in Plato’s “early” or “Socratic” dialogues. According to Robinson,

‘Elenchus’ in the wider sense means examining a person with regard to a statement he has made, by putting to him questions calling for further statements, in the hope that they will determine the meaning and the truth-value of his first statement. Most often the truth-value expected is falsehood; and so ‘elenchus’ in the narrower sense is a form of cross-examination or refutation... Propositions to

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35 *Plato’s Earlier Dialectic*, p. v.
which the answerer feels he must agree have entailed the falsehood of his original assertion.36

There are, then, three basic ingredients necessary for elenchus specifically (and dialectic generally) to take place:

1) A principal questioner, who aims to induce the interlocutor to assent to contradictory propositions, thereby refuting the initial claim

2) An interlocutor, who responds to the questioner using only “yea” or “nay,” and always answers truthfully while aiming to refrain from assenting to contradictory propositions

3) A topic of inquiry, presumably (though not necessarily) with which both parties are familiar

Importantly, Socrates typically introduces a topic that we locate within the realm of ethics, such as “What is justice?” or “What is piety?” and so on. Already we can observe significant differences from Confucian dialogue. Although topics of inquiry are quite similar (that is, they share an interest in pursuing questions related to ethics and ethical vocabulary), strategies of inquiry are diametrically opposed. People most often come to Confucius for answers—more often than not, he does not instigate the conversation.

Also, whereas Confucius intends to leave his interlocutor better off and better informed than before, Socrates seems determined to do just the opposite: he undermines his interlocutor’s convictions, leading him to a state of frustration and bewilderment.

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36 Ibid., p. 7.
If Socrates is dubious from that start about his interlocutors’ ability to answer his questions satisfactorily, then what is elenchus really designed to do? To answer this question, Robinson highlights three different discussions of elenchus that appear in the *Meno*, *Sophist*, and *Apology*. Summarizing *Meno* 84, where Socrates has finished refuting Meno’s false presuppositions and is about to lead him to the correct understanding, Robinson says:

> Of two ignorant persons, this passage implies, the one who knows that he is ignorant is better off than the one who supposes that he knows; and that is because the one has, and the other has not, a drive within him that may in time lead him to real knowledge. The elenchus changes ignorant men from the state of falsely supposing that they know to the state of recognizing that they do not know; and this is an important step along the road to knowledge, because the recognition that we do not know at once arouses the desire to know, and thus supplies the motive that was lacking before. Philosophy begins in wonder, and the assertion here made is that elenchus supplies the wonder.\(^{37}\)

As long as a person maintains strong convictions, however ill-founded and erroneous they may be, there is no motivation to engage in philosophy. Elenchus, then, aims to erode the edifice of false belief (opinion) and engender the thirst for genuine, or at least better-founded, knowledge.

*Sophist* 230b-e offers high praise for elenchus when considered as an educational tool because it “[eradicates] the spirit of conceit” that impedes the learning process. In the hands of a skilled practitioner, elenchus works as follows:

> They cross-examine a man’s words, when he thinks that he is saying something and is really saying nothing, and easily convict him of inconsistencies in his opinions; these they then collect by the dialectic process, and placing them side by side, show that they contradict one another about the same things, in relation to the same things, and in the same respect. He, seeing this, is angry with himself,

and grows gentle toward others, and thus is entirely delivered from great prejudices and harsh notions, in a way which is most amusing to the hearer, and produces the most lasting good effect on the person who is the subject of the operation. For as the physician considers that the body will receive no benefit from taking food until the internal obstacles have been removed, so the purifier of the soul is conscious that his patient will receive no benefit from the application of knowledge until he is refuted, and from refutation learns modesty; he must be purged of his prejudices first and made to think that he knows only what he knows, and no more...For all these reasons, Theaetetus, we must admit that refutation is the greatest and chiefest of purifications, and he who has not been refuted, through he be the Great King himself, is in an awful state of impurity...

These words, delivered by the Eleatic Stranger, seem more than a little optimistic in their appraisal as to how people will respond after undergoing this process. By contrast, the early dialogues most often show Socrates’ interlocutors growing quite agitated and/or abandoning the conversation altogether—a far cry from the kind of humbled gratitude anticipated above. Either this is wishful thinking on the part of the Stranger, or perhaps the Socrates of the early dialogues was not quite going about it the right way.

The discussion of elenchus in the *Apology* unfortunately does little to clarify the matter, although it does introduce an ethical or quasi-religious dimension absent from the preceding two accounts. Robinson summarizes the matter as follows:

Socrates at his trial regarded his habit of elenchus as one of the main counts against him, and set out to justify or at least explain it. He declared that it arose from the Delphic god’s response to Chaerephon, which was that no one was wiser than Socrates. He felt that he had no wisdom; but he also felt that the god could not lie. After a long time of perplexity, it occurred to him to approach a man with a reputation for wisdom and study him at first hand. He found that the man thought he was wise but was not. Going then to many other men of repute, he always had the same experience...Socrates concluded that he was really wiser than the wise because, whereas they knew nothing, he knew the single fact that he knew nothing. But why did Socrates continue the elenchus after he had ascertained these facts to his satisfaction? Because, he tells us (23AB), he felt that the god had imposed upon him the duty of demonstrating to all men that no man is wise. Later he says that the god has told him to philosophize and to scrutinize himself and others (28E); that the purpose of his elenchus and the command of the
god is to shame people into putting first things first, and that the first thing is the
virtue of the soul (29DE)....

The *Apology*, like the *Meno* and the *Sophist*, regards elenchus as a way of
convincing men that they are ignorant of things they thought they knew; but it
places this procedure in a strongly moral and religious setting of which the other
two works show little trace. It tells us that the elenchus arose out of a divine
oracle, and that Socrates continued it because he felt divinely commanded to do
so. It represents the ultimate aim of the elenchus not as intellectual education but
as moral improvement. Its purpose is, as it is expressed at the end of the *Apology,*
to make men better men, to give them more of the highest virtue of a man; and in
practising it Socrates is a moral reformer.38

In a similar vein, Alexander Nehemas points out that “at *Apology* 38a1-8 [Socrates]
claims explicitly, after again alluding to the god’s command, that the elenchus, which is
the daily concern with *aretē,* is ‘the greatest human good.’”39 *Aretē* (excellence/virtue)
plays a crucial role in Plato’s philosophy, including its use as an analytical device
employed by Socrates in his debates with the sophists. In the *Apology,* we see that the
pursuit of elenchus has important ethical implications not made explicit elsewhere.

Another way to look at elenchus in the *Apology* is that it “is a testing of persons, not of
propositions.”40 In this significant regard, Plato’s dialectic resembles Confucian
dialogue, where the focus is building the character of those present, not establishing truth
claims.

On the one hand, this moral dimension is no surprise, given that textbook
interpretations of Plato often depict him as equating knowledge with virtue, and a lack of
knowledge with a lack of virtue (referred to as “Socratic intellectualism”)—an
oversimplification of sorts. On the other hand, however, a greater sensitivity to the

subtlety and complexity of Plato’s dialogues renders this observation an important one, as it brings him closer to Confucius in this important ethical and pragmatic sense. For Confucius, there is no knowledge for knowledge’s sake—knowledge (to the extent we can even use the term comfortably in a Confucian context) always entails a practical, ethical dimension. Knowledge (or perhaps “understanding” might be a better term) is always knowing how and knowing to, not just knowing that. A performative dimension is entailed with Confucian knowing—meaning that genuine understanding of appropriate behavior inherently involves conducting oneself accordingly. The pursuit of elenchus yields similar results, as Kahn writes: “we may conclude that it was not so much the refutation of a thesis by formal contradiction that Socrates pursued, but rather the more pragmatic contradiction between what the interlocutor claims to believe and the life he actually leads.”

If elenchus is a propaedeutic to dialectic, then what does Plato say about dialectic proper? According to Robinson,

The particular method which Plato discusses and recommends is called by him ‘the dialectical method’ (Republic 533C) or ‘the power of conversing’ (Republic 511B) or ‘the art concerning discussions’ (Phaedrus 90B) or ‘the procedure of discussion’ (Sophist 227A). This ‘dialectical method’ fills him with the greatest enthusiasm from the time of Meno (75D) to the end of his life; and he speaks of it usually in highly laudatory language. It is the best and noblest of all possible methods. It is the only art or science that is really awake (Republic 533BC).

There is an important relationship between the specific practice of dialectic and the more general art of conversation. How, then, are we to practice dialectic? The answer, in

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39 Virtues of Authenticity, p. 44.
40 Plato and the Socratic Dialogue, p. 97.
41 Ibid., p. 302.
keeping with one theme under development, depends upon which dialogue we read. At
times, dialectic is represented by Socrates' question-and-answer quest for the definition
of a particular term. Other times it comes across as the hypothetical method. Still other
times it is construed as the method of synthesis and division, leading Robinson to
propose, "the word 'dialectic' had a strong tendency in Plato to mean 'the ideal method,
whatever that may be'."43 Apparently, then, dialectic can be construed as more than just
one particular conversational technique, and Plato may be more interested in the ends
than the means of it.

Though dialectic may be manifest in a variety of ways, it ultimately aims for the
same thing: the Forms. Despite Plato's commitment to critical examination via dialectic,
he seems to hold curious metaphysical convictions about the Forms. Is the notion of
Forms itself also subject to dialectical investigation, or does it serve as a sort of
unquestionable ideological bedrock for Plato? Below, I will examine how Plato wrestles
with this apparent contradiction in the Parmenides. According to Robinson, dialectic

...Is always the search for 'what each thing is' (Republic 533B). That is to say, it
seeks the 'essence' of each thing (Republic 534B), the formal and abiding element
in the thing. It regards 'what neither comes into being nor passes away, but is
always identically the same' (Philebus 61E). Thus it presupposes that things have
unchanging essences; and if anyone denies this he absolutely destroys the power
of dialectic (Parmenides 135BC)...Above all, it is implied by Plato's views that
dialectic is the method of philosophy, that philosophy commands the faculty of
knowledge as opposed to that of opinion, and that knowledge as opposed to
opinion is infallible (Republic 477E).44

42 Plato's Earlier Dialectic, p. 69.
43 Ibid., p. 70.
44 Ibid., pp. 70-72.
There is a palpable tension in Platonic dialectic. On the one hand, we see philosophical authority vested in practitioners of a particular art of conversation—something that is inherently dependent upon the variances of person and context. An agreement or mutual accord reached by two persons could very well seem like nonsense to a third person not involved in the conversation. On the other hand, however, these practitioners aim for something that is permanent and unchanging—in other words, beyond such variances: a Form or definition that represents any and all possible manifestations of the idea in question. Confucius is likely to find this latter aspect of dialectic confounding—his own moral vocabulary does not implicate abstract, transcendent entities or concepts removed from context. The extent to which Plato actually believed in such a realm, as opposed to merely hypothesizing its existence for the sake of inspiring us to reach beyond ourselves, remains an open question.

What chance do imperfect, context-bound conversationalists have to obtain thorough and certain knowledge of the Forms? Plato surely believed dialectic is difficult to practice, and success should be measured not in terms of accumulated knowledge but more in terms of mastery of a particular (in this case, the most important) skill:

Plato, when he is considering progress in dialectic and philosophy, emphasizes skill against knowledge much more than the twentieth century would. Dialectic is a skill to be acquired, much more than it is a body of propositions to be learnt. Plato does not regard the philosopher’s or the dialectician’s work as the construction or accumulation of something external to himself, but as the alteration of his own personality in a fundamental way, as character-building. The nature of the alteration is vaguely indicated by the phrase ‘becoming wise’. That is why he frequently insists on the training of the soul (Phaedrus 241C), and why
he states that we should value "the pursuit of the ability to divide according to forms" above the knowledge thereby obtained (Statesman 286D-287A)...

This is unquestionably the most important point with respect to dialectic: although dialectic is in principle reaching for knowledge of the Forms, its most significant function is how it develops the character of those who practice it. Furthermore, dialectic fundamentally emphasizes the process over the end result: we never reach a point where our dialectic work is done. Ideally speaking, dialectic is a lifelong pursuit designed to develop character and, as we engage others in dialectic (meaning philosophy), it bolsters the moral fiber of our community as well. This is, no doubt, a point with which Confucius would heartily agree, as he has great reverence for people that haoxue (love learning)—meaning they are committed to a lifetime of actualized erudition.

For all his astute observations, Robinson makes this curious claim that needs to be examined in order to guard against potential misunderstandings of Plato. He writes:

By addressing itself always to this person here and now, elenchus takes on particularity and accidentalness, which are defects. In this respect it is inferior to the impersonal and universal and rational march of a science axiomatized according to Aristotle’s prescription. Plato might urge, however, that elenchus is the means by which the irrational and accidental individual is brought to the appreciation of universal science, brought out of his individual arbitrariness into the common world of reason.\(^4\)

This passage seems at odds with Robinson’s more subtle reading of Plato highlighted in preceding paragraphs. “Particularity and accidentalness,” far from being defects, are understood by Plato to be necessary aspects of any conversation between persons, including any manifestation of dialectic. There are, of course, numerous interpretations

\(^4\) Ibid., p. 74.
of Plato that share Robinson's view, and there are kernels of thought in both Plato and Aristotle that, when viewed from a certain ideological vantage point, could be construed in this way. Such interpretations, however, seem more concerned with upholding a rational/scientific worldview that postdates Plato by more than twenty centuries than with understanding Plato's project on its own terms. Rather than manufacturing a defense of the particularity of dialogue that answers the impersonal demands of modern science (which Plato certainly had no intention of answering to), however, would it not be preferable to attempt to wrestle with Plato's format on its own terms?

This is what Sinaiko sets out to do. His thesis with respect to Platonic dialectic, and Plato's philosophy in general, reads:

True philosophical discourse, as represented in the dialogues, can take place only among real men living in an actual society, men who are discussing issues which are of serious concern to them. The truth, the understanding, or the wisdom an individual can attain in such a discussion is not expressible in the form of an abstract proposition that can be demonstrated once and for all to all men everywhere; it is rather the perception of a concrete and personal solution to the specific, existential problem faced by that individual...In modern terms Plato's conception of philosophy, of the search for wisdom, may be described as a search for values, for the concrete principles in terms of which we actually order our lives, make our choices, resolve our difficulties, and judge ourselves and others. So conceived, the philosophic endeavor is a universal and ever-present element in the lives of all men. Yet the activity itself and its results are incapable of adequate expression in the generalized, abstract language of a formal treatise; for the intensely personal and unique quality of each man's search for wisdom stands at the very heart of the philosophic enterprise.47

Plato understood philosophy (and therefore dialectic) to be both a fundamentally social activity and an activity that involves the unique individual on a personal basis. As such,

46 Ibid., p. 16, emphasis added.
47 Love, Knowledge, and Discourse, pp. 6-7.
it cannot be adequately conducted on the level of abstract generalizations and formal propositions. Thus, it is no accident that Plato wrote dialogues. Sinaiko enhances our understanding of the reasons he did so: to avoid the dogmatism and obtuse applications that follow from less conversational formats, and to engender the dialectic process in his readers. As such, "No statement or argument in a dialogue should be treated as an abstract, formal proposition of Plato’s until its significance within its proper context can be grasped." In essence, this means virtually no arguments can be taken at face value. Both the situational context and the flow of the conversation introduce an element of uncertainty as to which position (if any) holds ultimate authority in Plato’s eyes. If we come away perplexed, or, better yet, wanting to discuss the matter with a colleague, then Plato has at least partially succeeded in his task.

The *Phaedrus* is often taken to be Plato’s authoritative work on writing, speechmaking, and rhetoric. The fact that we are presented with three speeches on erōs (love) also suggests that we might look therein for Plato’s views on that subject. Specific to the present discussion, dialectic is also mentioned explicitly on several occasions. However, the reader who is hoping to come away enlightened in any of these regards will likely be disappointed. Each of these subjects is rehearsed in some detail, but even those topics upon which some agreement seems to be reached leave the reader unsatisfied. Taken on the whole, Sinaiko suggests that the *Phaedrus* might be best viewed as a triumph of dialectic manifested in the form of love:

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48 Ibid., p. 18.
...The process of dialectic is identical with the highest act of love. Dialectic, for Socrates, is the true art of making love, and love is the divinely inspired process by which the soul is "able to perceive what is naturally [collected] into one and [divided] into many."49

Love, in this case, is love of beauty, which is also love of good—a love that motivates us toward the Forms, but also a love that impels us to become better, more reflective people.

Confucius would wonder at the need to "go universal" in our pursuit of beauty or goodness—isn't the most pressing concern to make ourselves as good as possible, right here, and right now? How does knowledge of the Forms accomplish this? We must not forget the importance placed on the process of dialectic, although we have yet to discover an adequate case for the equation of dialectic practice and moral goodness. Plato might contend that we must first really know (or at least know that we need to know) what such qualities are, in order to engender them. Confucius does not seem to share this overriding epistemological concern. Instead, he directly evaluates persons and conduct with terse, pithy justifications—without compulsion to elucidate the thread uniting them under the common rubric ren, or yi, or shan. In any case, both Plato and Confucius would agree that honest, dogged pursuit of goodness is in itself worthwhile.

Collection (or synthesis) and division are the two activities most obviously associated with dialectic in the Phaedrus. While counseling Phaedrus on the best strategies for speech-writing, Socrates explains these two procedures:

The first is that in which we bring a dispersed plurality under a single form, seeing it all together—the purpose being to define so-and-so, and thus to make plain whatever may be chosen as the topic for our exposition. [The second procedure is] the reverse of the other, whereby we are enabled to divide into

49 Ibid., p. 117.
forms, following the objective articulation; we are not to attempt to hack off parts like a clumsy butcher... 50

What Socrates refers to as the “objective articulation” can also be construed as the natural contours of the topic in question—as suggested by the butcher analogy. In other words, distinctions should not be drawn randomly or arbitrarily. The thoughtful and observant dialectician can discern how best to delineate his logos (account). At the same time, these distinctions can also be brought together and illuminated in their harmonious interrelations. This implicitly assumes that language somehow inherently maps accurately onto the world, though not necessarily without some careful effort. The validity of this assumption will be discussed in the context of Xunzi and Aristotle. At present, it is instructive to compare this with Confucius’ view on the matter. Much like his perspective on knowledge, his interest in language has a strong ethical component. In other words, the primary concern is not so much that language accurately describe the world, but rather that one’s words do not surpass one’s deeds. Language, for Confucius, has as much a prescriptive aspect as it has a descriptive one. In due course, we will see that Plato, in his own unique fashion, ultimately expects that a perfectly precise (or at least increasingly accurate) description of the world will entail some sort of prescription as well.

Having established synthesis and division as the two complementary activities germane to dialectic, Socrates later discusses how the dialectician applies his art:

The dialectician selects a soul of the right type, and in it he plants and sows his words founded on knowledge, words which can defend both themselves and him

50 Phaedrus, 265d.
who planted them, words which instead of remaining barren contain a seed whence new words grow up in new characters, whereby the seed is vouchsafed immortality, and its possessor the fullest measure of blessedness that man can attain unto.  

Here Socrates says much that can be compared fruitfully with Confucius, and yet more that serves to highlight how distinct they really are. Socrates (more accurately, Plato’s Socrates in the Phaedrus) and Confucius both are careful about selecting interlocutors—their methods and messages are not suitable to all persons at all times. Together they also share a strong emphasis on the importance of one’s words, although Socrates emphasizes the link between words and knowledge being authoritative in a way that Confucius does not. Confucius, instead, appeals to the authority of his own inherited tradition, made manifest through effective, benevolent rulership. Finally, Socrates’ spectacular promise about the immortal destiny of the dialectician is enough to make one blush. Confucius, by contrast, refrains from making such fanciful guarantees—they would seem to present a serious risk of one’s words outstripping one’s deeds.

Summarizing his conversation with Phaedrus, which amounts to a summary of how the art of rhetoric should be pursued, Socrates says:

First, you must know the truth about the subject that you speak or write about; that is to say, you must be able to isolate it in definition, and having so defined it you must next understand how to divide it into kinds, until you reach the limit of division; secondly, you must have a corresponding discernment of the nature of the soul, discover the type of speech appropriate to each nature, and order and arrange your discourse accordingly, addressing a variegated soul in a variegated style that ranges over the whole gamut of tones, and a simple soul in a simple style. All this must be done if you are to become competent, within human limits,

51 Ibid., 276e.
as a scientific practitioner of speech, whether you propose to expound or to persuade.¹²

Some hints as to how dialectic works are also clearly implicit. However, even the first step presents a tremendous stumbling block to the diligent practitioner, for how often do we actually know the full and complete truth about any given subject, and how many examples of successful definition do we find in the dialogues? The answer is: very rarely and very few (if any), respectively. What seems superficially like a set of pat, straightforward guidelines should actually be construed as a warning about how difficult both activities—rhetoric and dialectic—in fact are. Assuming we could ever adequately attend to the preliminary steps of definition and division, our work is not yet complete, for we must be discerning about the human soul and take the predilections of our audience into consideration. Although the *Phaedrus* is considered by some to represent Plato’s reconciliation with rhetoric (in the wake of the trenchant critiques that appear most notably in *Gorgias* and *Protagoras*), it might still be construed as yet another critical appraisal, albeit a much more well disguised and subtle one.

At times Plato seems to want to have it both ways. On the one hand, it is assumed there is a universal, transcendent truth to which we can (or should) aspire—for which dialectic is best suited; but, as context-bound and flawed human beings, our efforts are best devoted to reaching agreement amongst ourselves—for which rhetoric is useful though liable to abuse. This begs the question: what constitutes an adequate definition?

Is definition the product of thorough, certain knowledge, or agreement among persons in a conversation?

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates takes up precisely this question. He begins, in dialectical fashion, by distinguishing those words upon which there is common agreement from those words whose meanings are disputed. Examples of the former include terms such as “iron” or “silver,” while “just” and “good” are examples of the latter (263a). Leaving aside the question of whether or not there actually is agreement about the meaning of terms such as “iron” and “silver,” what is most interesting is that Socrates, in offering examples of controversial terms, summons two words with obviously moral connotations. Since the purported topic of his conversation with Phaedrus is love, “love” is also clearly a disputed term—about which there will be no agreement until a definition is reached that shows both its nature and effects (237d).

After identifying definition as the important first step in the practice of rhetoric, and distinguishing the two categories of terms, Socrates does not specify precisely how we are to go about arriving at adequate definitions for controversial terms. How could Plato not seize such an opportunity?

This could not have been an oversight. In fact, the dialogue as a whole deliberately refrains from offering an adequate formulation (or definition) of definition.  

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53 Perhaps Aristotle’s Four Causes are intended to solve the problem of definition. Although it may work well with physical objects and such (Socrates’ undisputed terms), it proves unsatisfactory with Socrates’ disputed terms.

54 One might point to the *Euthyphro* as offering a tentative Platonic formulation of definition: “the essential form of [X] which makes all [X] actions [X]” (64d). Socrates, however, is arguably setting Euthyphro up for *elenchus*, as the dialogue ends in *aporia*. Based on the way Plato’s early dialogues unfold, it seems the ancient Greeks considered it quite normal to offer an example in response to the
In other words, the pursuit of definition here is construed as a difficult process that ultimately depends on the efforts of people conversing with each other—there is no pre-established, external formula or criteria for success. Rather, it is incumbent on the participants to determine their degree of success internal to the conversation, because the ultimate aim of dialectic is to reform the soul or character of those involved. By engaging in a discussion of a controversial term, then, we essentially are participating in philosophy—and this is what Plato’s dialogues are designed to make us do. In other words, the search for adequate definitions cannot reach completion through reading the writing of another. It will ultimately require that we talk it out with others.

Jasper Neel offers a similar reading of Plato while straddling the seemingly irreconcilable worlds of Plato and Derrida and working toward an understanding of dialectic in the context of the Phaedrus. Mimicking Derrida’s propensity to manufacture neologisms, Neel coins the term “psophistry” and explains it as follows:

In the theoretical matrix Plato leaves for us, the only way to save writing is to condemn it. Such a condemnation saves both writing and Platonism by creating the opening in which truth becomes possible. The catch is that the Platonic frame of reference can open a text to the possibility of truth only by making truth a possibility; for truth to remain itself, it must remain forever a possibility, never an actuality. Thus, truth as a possibility depends on the impossibility of truth’s appearing in writing.

As a way of keeping this “saved” writing pure, Plato gave the West his own version of sophistry (which, for reasons that I hope will be obvious, I spell with the same silent p that appears in the Greek and English word pneuma). This Platonic psophistry is not the sophistry of Protagoras or Gorgias (which I will refer to with the usual spelling), or even that of Lysias or Isocrates. Psophistry, like the Platonic Socrates, is a fiction. Yes, of course, psophistry must bear some question of a term’s meaning. Socrates and Plato find this method unsatisfactory—a method that, interestingly enough, was also often employed by Confucius.
resemblance to the sophistry of Lysias, Gorgias, Protagoras, and Isocrates, just as the Platonic Socrates must bear some resemblance to the historical person. But by writing a psophistry that differs from that of the sophists, by writing a psophistry that defers the need for theirs by replacing it, Plato creates the field where true knowledge can occur without ever really being there.\textsuperscript{55}

“Pneuma” refers to the spirit, and therefore his invented term, “psophistry,” denotes a sort of spiritual activity, compelling the soul toward a vision of truth that transcends mere appearance and opinion. According to Neel, psophistry never actually reaches its destination. Nonetheless, it is a distinct and important enterprise by virtue of its unique goal, which therefore distinguishes it from other practices such as rhetoric, which seeks success at the level of appearance and opinion, rather than psophistry’s (and dialectic’s) loftier goal. Psophistry, then, or in this case Plato’s writing, opens up the reader to the possibility of dialectic.

Neel is particularly concerned about coming to grips with Plato’s apparent condemnation of writing as it appears in the \textit{Phaedrus}. This well-rehearsed view can be summarized as the belief that truth can never be adequately conveyed through writing because, as Robinson explains,

> It makes men forgetful, by inviting them to trust the ink instead of their memories; whereas true knowledge involves memory graven in the soul. Secondly, it cannot answer questions; ‘if you ask a question, wishing to understand one of the statements, it only says some one and the same thing all the time’ (275D). It therefore can neither explain anything you do not follow nor remove any objection you may have. (Similarly, the \textit{Protagoras} complains that you cannot ask a poem what it means, 347E, cf. 329A.) Thirdly, the written word cannot choose whom to address, but inevitably speaks to anyone who reads it...For these reasons, he holds, written discourses cannot teach. Their proper

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Plato, Derrida, and Writing}, pp. 80-81.
purposes are only to remind those who know, and to provide amusement and recreation.\textsuperscript{56}

These are interesting (though not entirely persuasive) arguments as to the potential shortcomings of reading. Plato has very carefully crafted a form of writing that serves as not merely a demonstration of dialectic, nor merely a philosophical defense of it, but an invitation to participate directly in dialectic that the attentive reader simply cannot refuse:

As psophistry and dialectic struggle against each other...psophistry offers ideological certainty through the rhetorical (doxological) closure of truth; dialectic counters this degraded psophistry by showing that truth must be excluded for that closure to occur. Dialectic, in other words, poisons the poison of closed truth and ideological certainty.\textsuperscript{57}

Psophistry is a kind of written elenchus, challenging the reader's own ideological predispositions and perhaps even those of the writer himself. Some might argue against seeing dialectic as a pursuit that continually resists closure, preferring instead that it be seen as delineating fixed definitions once the "natural" contours of a given term have been determined after exhaustive investigation. After all, this seems to be how dialectic is defined and exemplified at times. Overall, however, the Platonic corpus seems to lack a compelling example as to how dialectic achieves permanent, unquestionable success with regard to a contested term. Some efforts come close, perhaps, but we also have myriad examples of failure (or aporia), such as the discussions of piety and courage in the \textit{Euthyphro} and \textit{Laches} respectively. Even the somewhat tedious later dialogues that often seem to march inexorably toward a certain truth are nonetheless couched in a

\textsuperscript{56} Plato's Earlier Dialectic, pp. 79-80.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., p. 86.
particular context. At times, too, ideas are conveyed in the form of myths (an issue explored in Chapter 4) or qualified as "the best account available to us now."

With these considerations in mind, Neel defends Plato against Derrida’s oversimplified critique:

Derrida proves that the human condition, the linguistic condition, precludes absolute truth, and as a result he thinks he has overturned Plato. In fact, however, the forever out-of-place, displaced text that Plato left never for a moment claims to be the closure of truth. And even if one accepts Socrates’ second speech in *Phaedrus* and his dicta on truth, rhetoric, and writing that come after that speech as an exact transcription of what Plato “meant to say,” a reading that I find hopelessly naive and simplistic, even if one accepts such a reading, those speeches and those dicta present truth as a possibility unavailable to humans. Truth is a journey as two lovers begin to explore the play of meaning in order to see where it goes and how it works. This journey requires a lifetime of trying to know and come near the right, the beautiful, and the good—concepts that never pretend to be other than metaphors, concepts that *present* themselves as incomplete and inexact replacements for what humans can neither know nor say. And if one reads Plato’s text as a truly complex weaving of the play of meaning, any sort of closed explanation of *Phaedrus* would immediately call itself into question. Plato was a writer every bit as (p)sophisticated as Derrida. He understood both the forever-playing nature of the search for meaning *and* the danger that writing presents in its ability to seem to end that play.58

It would be in keeping with Neel’s freewheeling interpretive spirit to suggest that his words on the subject could hardly be considered the last. Though Neel here presents us with a potent perspective—one that I have little occasion to quarrel with (at least in the context of the *Phaedrus*)—it does leave a number of questions unanswered. In particular, what do we do now? If truth is beyond our grasp, does that mean anything goes? If truth remains forever a possibility, never an actuality, then what (if any) motivation do we have

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to aspire to truth? In the absence of such an ultimate court of appeal, how exactly do we distinguish sophistry from psophistry, and either from dialectic?

Our answer will most likely revolve around the notion that truth is an important motivating factor in the pursuit of dialectic, but that ultimately it is the process, not reaching the goal, that matters most: "A dialectical position always holds itself in question."59 This resonates with Robinson and Sinaiko as well as my own view.

Unfortunately, Neel's account derives almost exclusively from a reading of the Phaedrus—he does not wrestle with such accounts that appear in, for example, the Republic that could call his perspective on Plato into question.

The Republic, often considered Plato's magnum opus in the field of political philosophy (and, perhaps, human psychology), presents dialectic in a somewhat different light than it appears in the Phaedrus. After presenting the Allegory of the Cave and the Divided Line, Socrates says:

... When anyone by dialectic attempts through discourse of reason and apart from all perceptions of sense to find his way to the very essence of each thing and does not desist till he apprehends by thought itself the nature of the good in itself, he arrives at the limit of the intelligible, as the other in our parable came to the goal of the visible.60

Here dialectic is described using vocabulary that would be quite alien to Confucius, who operates within a conceptual framework that does not make it a point to distinguish the sensible from the intelligible, nor the essence of things from their particular manifestations. It will be shown that Plato draws these distinctions in an effort to combat

59 Ibid., p. 87.
60 Republic, 532a.
the sophists of his day, whereas Confucius fought his ideological opponents with quite different weapons and on different battlegrounds. Sinaiko astutely points out: “The dialectical soul is defined not by its absolute position with respect to knowledge and ignorance, but by the direction it faces—that is, up towards the Good and not down towards appearances.” As presented here, dialectic also involves a sort of inward intellectual turn that was not explicitly mentioned in the *Phaedrus*. We can also detect a trace of the possibility of success, albeit only after tremendous individual (rather than collective) effort.

When Glaucon asks Socrates for a further explanation of dialectic (or a dialectical account of dialectic), Socrates replies that Glaucon will not be able to follow him further (533a)—lending credence to the contention that dialectic is an activity that does not reach completion and cannot be fully explicated. And yet Socrates claims that dialectic represents the pinnacle of essential training for the Guardians: “we have set dialectic above all other studies to be as it were the coping stone—and that no other higher kind of study could rightly be placed above it” (534e). We are then warned that dialectic can be dangerous if one is exposed to it at too young an age:

...Lads, when they first get a taste of disputation, misuse it as a form of sport, always employing it contentiously, and, imitating confuters, they themselves confute others...And when they have themselves confuted many and been confuted by many, they quickly fall into a violent distrust of all that they formerly held true, and the outcome is that they themselves and the whole business of philosophy are discredited with other men.63

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62 At the very least, Glaucon is incapable of pursuing dialectic further than this.
63 *Republic*, 539b-c.
Here Plato is concerned that dialectic (and elenchus) not be conflated with eristic—
disputation for disputation’s sake, where victory is the only concern. Again we see Plato
taking steps to insure that his program be clearly differentiated from the rhetoricians and
sophists of his day. Sinaiko explains:

Whoever has turned towards the Good is dialectical while those facing away from it, no matter how knowledgeable they may be, are truly fettered by the unexamined assumptions of their knowledge.

Dialectic is a search for knowledge and truth and as such it is essentially an activity of the soul. Yet, since there are many limited forms of the search for truth, any one of which may be the vehicle for a dialectical investigation, dialectic can reveal itself only by making clear its own unique subject matter, method, and aims. This revelation can be effected only through a logos, a rational account, that emerges from an elenchus. It is not what a man says, but what he means by what he says that determines whether or not he is dialectical; and his meaning can become fully clear only through a sustained process of question and answer. It is therefore no accident that as Socrates presents his view of dialectic, describing in order the subject matter, method, and aim of the discipline, he couples each part of his account with a reference to the logos produced by an elenchus....the logos is an account of “the beings” as well as a revelation of the soul of the speaker. When an individual fails to withstand a critical cross-examination, he comes to recognize not only the insufficiency of his own knowledge, but, and this is far more shocking, he also realizes that “the beings” he has hitherto known are in some crucial respect unreal.64

By exposing the “unreality” of inferior views, dialectic—when conducted by a skilled, patient practitioner—steers the interlocutor toward something more “real,” and, as Plato would have us believe, more good. Dialectic moves its practitioners toward an understanding of good that entails both a strong moral character and, if carried out by the right people in the right positions in society, a harmonious community.

64 Love, Knowledge, and Discourse, pp. 188-189.
It remains to take up the third of three dialogues employed by Sinaiko in his discussion of dialectic: the *Parmenides*. Despite its relative brevity, the *Parmenides* is one of Plato’s most complex dialogues, and as a result, it has been subject to a broad range of interpretations. On initial consideration, this may seem a curious choice for an investigation into dialectic, since the dialogue contains no explicit discussion of the term itself. Nonetheless, Sinaiko argues convincingly that the dialogue as a whole is intended to demonstrate that “dialectic is to be understood in its ordinary, commonplace sense of “discourse” or “conversation.” But this in turn requires that discourse itself must be raised from the level of the commonplace to a unique position in the philosophic endeavor.”65 He reaches this conclusion in light of several considerations concerning both the structure and content of the dialogue.

The importance of attending to context when analyzing Plato’s writing has already been emphasized, and the *Parmenides* is no exception. What is particularly striking about the framework of this conversation is that it is being reported *fourth* hand by Cephalus (from Antiphon, who heard it from Pythodoros) and more than *fifty* years after it purportedly took place between Socrates and Parmenides. In other words, Plato is placing a considerable asterisk next to the contents of the *Parmenides*—an asterisk that should make us very wary of taking anything in the dialogue at face value.

Roughly speaking, the first half of the dialogue represents the efforts of a young Socrates to defend his inchoate theory of ideas (or Forms) against the challenges of Parmenides. In all, Socrates makes six different such attempts, none of which is

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ultimately beyond critique. Of course, none of these arguments is final or conclusive; rather, the overall flow of the conversation demonstrates the inherent tendency of dialectic to be rigorously self-critical. No ideas are exempt from dialectical examination—particularly those of Plato himself. Still, just when Socrates seems to be at wit's end, Parmenides suggests that despite major complications that inhere to the theory of Forms, it nonetheless cannot be done away with:

...If, in view of all these difficulties and others like them, a man refuses to admit that forms of things exist or to distinguish a definite form in every case, he will have nothing on which to fix his thought, so long as he will not allow that each thing has a character which is always the same, and in so doing he will completely destroy the significance of all discourse.\(^6\)

Whether true or not, and whether Plato truly believed it or not, this is a fascinating claim. Does all language use implicitly affirm a theory of Forms—that there is a permanent and unchanging aspect to any object of discussion? Or can language be confined to a strictly conventional or appearance-based level and remain intelligible?\(^6\) Rather than engaging this tantalizing question, Socrates simply agrees with Parmenides, who then tells Socrates that he has been seeking definitions for "beautiful," "just," "good," and so on too soon—preliminary training is required.

The second half of the dialogue represents a somewhat convoluted (and reluctantly delivered) attempt on the part of Parmenides to provide Socrates with an example of the kind of preliminary training required to pursue definitions dialectically (and philosophy in general). It is beyond the scope of this investigation to laboriously

\(^6\) _Parmenides_, 135c.
rehearse each of Pannenides' eight hypotheses. However, the point of the exercise resonates with the emphasis on synthesis and division as developed in the Phaedrus, albeit in a much more all-encompassing way. Pannenides' eight hypotheses ultimately serve to demonstrate that no one idea (or Form) can be understood in the absence of the others, as summarized by Sinaiko:

...As long as Socrates conceives of each idea as being "just by itself" in a grand and total isolation from the other ideas he will, Pannenides implies, never find the "truth" he seeks.

The complex interrelation and interpenetration of the ideas implies that an adequate and viable theory of ideas cannot be achieved piecemeal by the successive investigation and understanding of individual ideas. If the ideas are essentially interconnected and if they mutually imply each other, then an adequate understanding of any one, single idea requires some understanding of all the ideas as a whole.

One further point must be made about the advice which Pannenides gives to Socrates. The training or exercise he requires takes the form of talk or discourse. This discourse will presumably serve to prepare Socrates for the genuine philosophic investigations he wish [sic] to make. Since he will be training himself in a certain kind of discourse, it seems reasonably clear that his activity as a trained and mature philosopher will also consist essentially of engaging in discourse. Discourse or conversation, then, is to be understood as the appropriate form of philosophic activity, and as every apprentice craftsman must learn to use his tools well, so a young philosopher must necessarily achieve a genuine understanding and mastery of discourse.68

It might be expecting too much to suppose that Pannenides' eight hypotheses provide a framework for philosophy generally. Rather, together they represent a specific response to the particular interest and needs of a young Socrates. The paradoxical arguments found in the Parmenides serve to demonstrate the ultimate indivisibility of the Forms,

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67 It is beyond the scope of this investigation to answer this question thoroughly, although it will arise again later. It could be argued that Aristotle believes so and wrote accordingly. It could also be argued that zhengming represents one solution to the problem posed by Plato's reality/appearance dichotomy.
and how any discussion of them will ultimately chafe against the intrinsic limitations of discourse (or language). As a result, they also can be construed as an attempt to guard against the belief that dialectic should strive for (or can achieve) a level of “scientific” certainty or closure, while at the same time hinting that, despite its inherent limitations, the conversation must always go on. This is Sinaiko’s compelling conclusion about Platonic dialectic as drawn from the *Phaedrus, Republic,* and *Parmenides.*

Now I will briefly examine references to dialectic that appear throughout Plato’s other dialogues, beginning with the *Sophist.* Here Plato employs the reality/appearance distinction established in the *Republic* in order to distinguish the business of the philosopher/dialectician from that of the sophist—a pejorative term in Plato’s lexicon. Of particular interest is how the kind of discernment or discrimination enabled by dialectic is referred to as a “purification of the soul or intellect” (227c). “Purification” in this case refers to the “evil” of “ignorance” (228d)—as alluded to previously in the discussion of Robinson. This reinforces our understanding of dialectic as not merely the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but also as something that has a corresponding positive impact on the soul or character.

Viewed from a Confucian perspective, it may be tempting to construe these repeated references to what is good for the soul (*psyche*) as comparable to what is good for the heart/mind (*xin*). Such an analogy should be resisted, however, primarily due to the fact that Socrates often refers to the *psyche* as something that persists after bodily death. In addition, the body is referred to as a shell housing, or even fettering, the *psyche.*

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64 *Love, Knowledge, and Discourse,* p. 226.
Neither can be said about the *xin*. Confucius, despite maintaining the importance of honoring one’s ancestors, refused to discuss ghosts and spirits. In fairness to Socrates and Plato, however, we cannot be certain to what extent they maintained these views about the *psyche* as firm convictions (which in many ways would seem to be out of sorts with the theory of dialectic under development here), or offered merely as a possible account, or even as a soteriological device.

The *Statesman* contains perhaps the best available example of dialectic division. Weaving is the topic of choice, but the process is so painstaking as to be virtually comical to all but the most humorless readers. Although an important point is at hand, Plato seems to have been aware that he might be in danger of boring his audience. As a result, the Eleatic Stranger makes an effort to explain and defend the dialectic method (as it appears here and, apparently, also in the *Sophist* and *Parmenides*) against criticism:

...Ease and speed in reaching the answer to the problem propounded are most commendable, but our principle requires that this be only a secondary, not a primary reason for commending an argument. What we must value first and foremost, above all else, is the philosophical method itself, and this consists in ability to divide according to real forms.\(^69\)

Despite Plato's efforts to explain the changing focus of his writing, it is difficult to understand how the passionate inquiries into ethical vocabulary that appear in the early dialogues could give way to the dry, methodical hair-splitting that is advocated and exhibited here. Even more difficult to understand is how this process is ultimately going to provide us with any better account of those contested terms.

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\(^69\) *Statesman*, 286d.
Nonetheless Plato, we must remember, never abandons the commitment to dialectic or to the dialogue format, as pointed out by Charles H. Kahn: “If for Plato the highest form of philosophical activity is named ‘dialectic,’ the art of conversational discussion, that is an obvious reminder that the method of Socratic conversation remains Plato’s model for philosophical teaching and research.”70 Despite the increasingly systematic presentation of his dialogues, dialectic—the art of synthesis and division as pursued by people in conversation—remains his preferred activity, as Socrates points out in the Philebus: “But we, Protarchus, are likely to be repudiated by the art of dialectic, if we prefer any other to her.”71 When Protarchus inquires how best to characterize dialectic, Socrates responds

Plainly everyone will recognize her whom we now speak of. The cognition of that which is, that which exists in reality, ever unchanged, is held, I cannot doubt, by all people who have the smallest endowment of reason to be far and away truer than any other.72

Once again, dialectic appears as an activity devoted to knowledge of that which is real and unchanging (as if that which is real is unchanging, and vice-versa)—evidencing a metaphysical outlook foreign to Confucius. What is striking and different, however, is that the process of inquiry receives less emphasis here than the achievement (“cognition”) of knowledge.

This raises the question whether Plato remains genuinely committed to dialectic as conversation, or whether he abandons that imperfect enterprise for the sake of something believed to be more permanent and more likely to achieve certainty. Martha

70 Plato and the Socratic Dialogue, p. 72.
C. Nussbaum and Kahn are fundamentally at odds over how best to construe Plato’s work in this regard. Nussbaum argues forcefully that Plato’s views evolved so distinctly that much of his later work amounts to a virtual recanting of his earlier work. Kahn, by contrast, strives to massage uncomfortable differences between dialogues into a single, unifying whole. He further argues that the dialogues, taken as a literary corpus, in fact represent a deliberate strategy planned and carried out by Plato. With that thesis in mind, he delivers this summary about dialectic:

What I suggest, then, is a multiply unitarian view of Platonic dialectic, a flexible unity recognized by a process of Collection and Division, respecting the radical diversity of perspective between dialogues without losing sight of the underlying unity of content. In all of the different manifestations, both in the later and in the earlier versions, dialectic is concerned with operations of the intellect in the investigation of eternal essences, as exhibited in the disciplined controversial technique of question and answer.

It is certainly not my intention here to attempt to resolve the debate—if anything, one might suggest Plato would be pleased just to know that his writings continue to be debated so vigorously almost 2,500 years after being authored. Of primary importance to the present investigation is to emphasize the significance of Plato’s continued reliance on the dialogue format. This would seem to locate the present investigation somewhat closer to Kahn’s position than Nussbaum’s, insofar as Kahn prefers to see continuity and deliberate design where Nussbaum sees contradiction and recantation.

71 Philebus, 57e.
72 Ibid., 58a.
73 See, for example, The Fragility of Goodness p. 228, where Nussbaum argues that the Phaedrus represents an important turning point.
74 It is beyond the scope of this investigation to re-present Kahn’s monumental effort in this regard. Although his referencing of Sokratikoi logoi (“Socratic discourses”) as a literary genre contemporary with
In fact, Kahn uses the vocabulary of dialectic as introduced and employed by Plato to defend his position, which also helps to explain how Plato distinguished his own practice from both eristic and rhetoric.²⁶

The terminology for dialectic provides what is perhaps the clearest case of progressive disclosure. In Plato as elsewhere in Greek, the verb dialegesthai means “carry on a conversation.” In three dialogues of Group I—the Hippias Minor, Gorgias, and Protagoras—this verb serves to describe the Socratic technique of discussing a topic by question and answer, in contrast to the rhetorical practice of making long speeches. In three other dialogues of Group I we find forms derived from the corresponding nominal stem dialektr—Thus we have in the Meno 75c–d the adverbial form dialektikōteron, which characterizes a friendly method of inquiry as “answering questions more gently and more conversationally,” in contrast to the hostile, competitive techniques of eristic disputation. If the distinction between dialectic and rhetoric is in some sense pre-Platonic, this contrast between dialectic and eristic, as drawn in the Meno, is presumably Plato’s own. And the term dialektikōteron seems in fact to be his invention.

The next step in terminological elaboration is marked by the expression dialektikos for the dialectician, literally someone who is “skilled in the art of conversation.” (This term also seems to be a Platonic creation. The feminine form for the art itself, dialektikē, does not appear until Republic VII.) This word for dialectician turns up in only two passages in Group I: in the Euthydemus and in the Cratylus. In both contexts the dialektikos is unexpectedly introduced as someone in possession of a superior art, which enables him either to make use of the truths discovered by mathematicians (Euthyd. 290c), or to judge the correctness of the words which the namegiver has assigned to things (Cratylus 390c). These two passages are truly proleptic, in that they must strike the reader as enigmatic in their context. They require an explanation that will be provided only in a later text. Only in the discussion of the Divided Line at the end of Book VI, and in the following references to dialectic as the sequel to

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²⁷ In the following quotation, “Group I” refers to those sixteen Platonic dialogues Kahn considers to have been written in the early and “threshold” stages of his literary career. Of course the validity of his argument hinges on to what extent we concur with his chronological categorization. Regardless, however, his analysis of the vocabulary is sound and relevant to the present investigation.
mathematical studies in Book VII, does Plato explain why the *dialektikos* is in a position to judge the results of mathematical work and the correctness of names.\(^77\)

The ability of the dialectician to gauge properly the "correctness of names" bears a striking similarity to the Confucian admonition to *zhengming*. Despite this similarity of purpose, however, Confucius neither appeals to metaphysical Forms nor relies on analogical reference to the certainty that inheres to mathematics. Yet given what Kahn has to say here about the conversational acumen of the dialectician, Platonic dialectic still resonates with Confucian dialogue. On the other hand, although both activities involve a principle questioner and respondent, the residing authority assumes opposite roles in each. Confucius is both the primary respondent and most frequently the authority as well. Platonic dialectic, on the other hand, requires that the questioner be the person of authority while the respondent is guided down a particular path.

Looking more closely at 13.3 from the *Analects*, however, we might be able to discern faint traces of dialectic therein. One might even consider it a much abbreviated dialectic. Each of the "arguments" presented by Confucius to defend his claim that *zhengming* should be the first order of business for the Lord of Wei could be subject to intensive dialectical examination and defense. One may even imagine Socrates (in the context of a Platonic dialogue) involving himself in an elaborate discussion of *ming bu zheng, yan bu shun* ("When names are not used appropriately, then language will not function smoothly"), with the express purpose being getting his interlocutors to agree that this is indeed the case. The same might be said with regard to the rest of the clauses.

\(^77\) *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, pp. 60-61.
Confucius, rather than involve himself in such a meticulous exercise with the somewhat thick-headed and brash Zilu, prefers to spell it all out for him efficiently and succinctly. The lingering question is: which method is more effective and is more likely to produce the desired results? Based upon the depiction of Zilu in other chapters, it would be difficult to argue that he has undergone significant transformation. Perhaps he first needs to undergo elenchus?

This leads to another point of contrast, as Socrates is depicted as pursuing the conversation tirelessly and enthusiastically with whoever had the stamina and patience to engage him. Confucius, on the other hand, often comes across as curt and miserly with his wisdom, even going so far as to say “I do not open the way for students who are not driven with eagerness; I do not supply a vocabulary for students who are not trying desperately to find the language for their ideas. If on showing students one corner they do not come back to me with the other three, I will not repeat myself” (7.8). If only those of us who have made education our career could adopt the same posture! On second thought, however, Confucius may not be so parsimonious as he seems at first glance. He would not refuse instruction to anyone who could only afford a gift of dried meat.78 Whereas Socrates, equipped with the elenchus, had a strategy for bending the ear of his fellow citizens, Confucius instead primarily devoted his energies to instructing those who were eager to learn and willing to listen.

One final similarity between 13.3 and Platonic dialectic needs to be emphasized. At the end of the passage, Confucius says, “Therefore, when an exemplary person puts a
name to something, it certainly can be spoken, and when spoken it can certainly be put into practice. The words of an exemplary person are not wayward or careless." This does not seem to follow directly upon what has come before, and indeed, it does not.

13.3 begins with Zilu asking a particular question about a particular hypothetical situation. Confucius responds with a claim that Zilu does not adequately comprehend, therefore affording Confucius the opportunity to expound at length as to the significance of zhengming. Now what relevance does this talk about the exemplary person and his words have to the preceding explanation? While it has no immediate connection, Confucius is performing a move that is fundamental to the practice of dialectic: he is moving from the particular to the general. That is, he is moving from a particular claim about the government of Wei to a general claim about the importance of zhengming generally, and then to a further general claim about how the exemplary person (or ideal ruler) essentially is an embodiment of zhengming. This is quite similar to the move that Socrates encourages his interlocutors to take: instead of pointing to an instance of courage, for example, what is it that unites any and all manifestations of courage?

Still, this illuminates the most salient difference between Plato and Confucius in their understanding of what constitutes proper language use. Whereas Plato considers clarity and precision in the drive toward knowledge of the Forms of ultimate importance, Confucius values efficacy above all: "Communicate effectively—that's

78 Analects, 7.7.
enough!” The brevity of the passage splendidly exhibits the very point it conveys.

When it comes to moral vocabulary, Confucius operates as if general terms are only useful insofar as they help us navigate through specific situations. Calling an action ren, or yi, or shan, makes it so—provided this is done thoughtfully rather than arbitrarily, of course. These notions do not exist absent their particular manifestations. What matters is not that we can offer an adequate definition, but rather that we can recognize (and, more importantly, actualize) them in given persons and/or circumstances.

Plato’s Socrates, quite the contrary, does not accept particular examples as adequate definitions of general terms, and instead insists that we must at least try to ascertain clarity with respect to such terms before employing them with confidence. People ask Confucius the meaning of key ethical vocabulary. He responds by offering examples in order to induce analogical thinking about how they can be applied to specific issues and situations. Plato wants Socrates’ interlocutors to provide definitions for key ethical vocabulary. When they try to respond with examples, the dialectical process reveals such examples as inadequate.

On reflection, one can certainly question the extent to which Socrates engages in the dialectic process openly and honestly, and to what extent Plato carefully plans how the inquiries will proceed and where the inquiries will go. We might attribute this in part to the “exercises” prescribed in the Parmenides. After all, who is likely to be more skilled in practicing dialectic than the author who advocates it? Plato, through the

79 Ibid., 15.41. Though 有達 has been translated a number of ways, little liberty has been taken with my particular offering. Literally something along the lines of “speak through” or “speak with success,” it might also be construed as “make your point.”
medium of writing, has the opportunity to script the unfolding of the dialectic process in advance. In the early dialogues, the drive toward clarity moves Socrates' interlocutors through elenchus and concludes in *aporia*; in the later dialogues we can perceive the effort to establish increasing levels of certainty. Regardless of which dialogue we are dealing with, Plato models the entire conversation, and Socrates' dogged (though sometimes ironic) pursuit of linguistic precision is paramount. With the *Analects*, on the other hand, we find terse and often ambiguous responses to complicated questions that provoke further discussion and inquiry into the inherited tradition, rather than a conversation completely mapped out. Insofar as 13.3 evinces an effort to elaborate the issue under consideration, it is somewhat atypical of the format generally followed in the *Analects*—prompted, presumably, because Zilu so miserably failed to grasp the meaning of Confucius' initial response.

Despite its relative attempt to be thorough, 13.3 still retains a high degree of ambiguity when contrasted with the precision and clarity striven for in the Platonic dialogues. Plato represents a dialogue; Confucius inspires a real one. With Platonic dialectic, there can be no agreeing to disagree—the drive toward clarity with regard to "the right answer" tends to impose a consistent perspective on all participants in the conversation. Confucius, on the other hand, while taking strong stands on a number of issues, ultimately leaves room for negotiation and interpretation. When two people with fundamentally different world-views try to establish some sort of mutual understanding or determine a course of action, the drive toward clarity can come at the expense of efficacy. The result is stalemate, if not fisticuffs. Confucian ambiguity seems not the
result of inadequate thinking but rather the corollary to analogical examples, the overarching emphasis being to get things moving in a better direction.

Confucius saw the improper use of names and language to be both a symptom and a cause of breakdown in the societal order. With regard to moral vocabulary, he responds to questions and manufactures examples intended to illuminate specific manifestations of certain key terms with an interest in efficacy—what will get the job done. Plato, by contrast, is primarily concerned with pursuing a clear understanding of moral vocabulary, having witnessed how Socrates exposed the ill-founded conceptions held by his fellow citizens. His later works, particularly *Sophist* and *Statesman*, show an increasing interest in coming to grips with those very titles—bringing him closer to the Confucian position, even while the pursuit of clarity, not efficacy, tends to move him further away. Together, however, they believed the pursuit of mutually acceptable language is indispensable to any society that aims to flourish. However disparate the content of their philosophical perspectives may be, Confucius and Plato surely had this method in common: an unswerving commitment to the philosophic project as carried out between persons in discourse. In a sort of historical irony, their intellectual disciples, Xunzi and Aristotle respectively, failed to carry this torch despite maintaining a philosophical interest in the proper use of language. This will emerge through a consideration of their views vis-à-vis an important philosophical foil: rhetoric.
"The philosopher and the sophist are all too easy to mistake for each other. Hence it must be the task of philosophy to separate them and to separate itself from the impurity of sophism within itself, a task which creates the perpetual tension in which philosophy has found itself since Plato's time."\(^{80}\)

Imagine: ancient Greece and China, rooted in dramatically different cultural and historical milieus, nonetheless at virtually the same time spawned trenchant philosophical analysis of the seemingly mystical power of language. Awareness transforms. No longer is language used simply as an unconscious, transparent medium, but rather it becomes recognized as a multifaceted matrix capable of swaying masses, toppling dynasties, and ordering the world in new ways. This was not the first time the Greek and Chinese civilizations experienced the power of language, but, as far as the written record indicates, it was the first time they became conscious of and actually reflected on it.\(^{81}\)

Novel terms, like the Greek rētorikē (rhetoric), were introduced as a way to describe this new discovery. Since its inception, rhetoric has enjoyed—some might say suffered—a colorful history in the narrative of Western culture. Most often, it is distinguished from "philosophy" by being construed as the "art"\(^{82}\) of persuasion. It is a convenient oversimplification to say that Plato differentiated the philosophical enterprise from the rhetorical by arguing that the former aspires to ascertain certain knowledge of truth while the latter aims to mould and capitalize on "mere" opinion. Confucius, on the

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\(^{81}\) There are many available examples, but perhaps most obviously, the Greeks enjoyed a rich history of oral epic poetry, while the Chinese **li** featured a number of compelling linguistic dimensions.

\(^{82}\) The term "art" must be used judiciously and in this case is only provisional, since Plato is greatly concerned whether rhetoric can properly be considered an "art," or technē.
contrary, did not explicitly distinguish philosophy from rhetoric in this or any overt fashion. Although neither term has a direct analogue in the Analects, it will be shown below how his philosophy is most effectively conveyed in those passages where he displays impressive rhetorical sensibility.\textsuperscript{83} This means he employs language in a way that evinces sensitivity to context and, in the interest of efficacy, an awareness of the need to tailor both one’s words and mode of expression to the audience at hand. “Bare” truth—the ostensible aim of Platonic philosophy—does not seem to have been recognized as a philosophical category. In any case, truth is not referenced or employed specifically either as an object of discussion nor as a persuasive device. At the same time, it is important to note that Confucius raises a number of objections to flattery and clever talk—the inauthentic use of persuasion merely for selfish ends.

Rather than truth, Confucius operated with an overriding interest in what might be termed “trust”: a fiduciary community (carried out generally via dialogue, and specifically via zhengming). Given the rather different ends of Confucian dialogue and Platonic dialectic, their positions on rhetoric broadly construed will prove to be more similar than we might otherwise expect. In order to achieve a more comprehensive view of rhetoric, I will also introduce the contrasting views of Xunzi, who sought to organize, interpret, and re-present the Confucian world-view as seen through his own unique, historically-situated lens, and Aristotle, Plato’s chief intellectual descendent.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{83} Many scholars have noted that Plato evinces a tremendous rhetorical sensibility in his writings as well. The difference between Plato and Confucius in this regard lies in the criteria established for acceptable use: to what end is rhetoric employed?

\textsuperscript{84} Insofar as Aristotle studied at Plato’s Lyceum. Of course, Aristotle eventually formulated a considerably different philosophical model.
Without delving into the intricacies of religious psychology, it seems plausible that opinion, when it comes to how we live our lives and the choices we make, can have an even stronger influence than the certain knowledge of truth. Leaving aside those occasions when we may deliberately avoid or ignore truth despite its being readily available to us (assuming it ever is), often we lack the ability or resources to pursue a more thorough understanding. Other times we lack the inclination; still other times even the most diligent pursuit of knowledge yields incomplete and/or inconclusive results. Quite often, however, we nonetheless must decide and act, despite having access only to imperfect or inadequate information. Such decisions and actions typically proceed, then, in accord with our assumptions and opinions—which are, arguably, unreliable and mercurial guides. Throughout the history of human civilization, some individuals have deliberately sought to capitalize on the ill-founded—and easily swayed—opinions of others. There have also been those who made a career out of training others how to do this. In ancient Greece, this group of entrepreneurs was known as the sophists, and the skill they peddled is still known as rhetoric.

The persuasive power of rhetoric, as Plato would have us see the practice of the sophists, sought to substitute one ill-founded set of beliefs for another, rather than aspiring to the certainty of truth or objective knowledge. Certain sophists would agree with this characterization without shame (e.g., Callicles), while others might object to it (e.g., Gorgias). Is the study and use of rhetoric a hollow enterprise, or can it be construed as something nobler? That is, if rhetoric is principally the self-interested “knack” Socrates denigrates in Plato’s Gorgias, then we cannot help but condemn it. If, on the
other hand, rhetoric is understood as an instrument for finding an effective way to proceed when faced with bitterly divergent or flat-out wrong opinions, as Aristotle contends and Confucius exemplifies, then rhetoric might be an important skill that can be invoked for the development of a harmonious, flourishing community. Even at this early stage in the investigation, we can anticipate distinguishing that sophistic rhetoric disparaged in certain of Plato’s works from a more sophisticated, or philosophical, rhetoric exemplified by Confucius and, perhaps at times, by the Platonic Socrates.

Confucian Rhetoric: The Harmony of Word and Deed

In approaching the Confucian conceptual framework, it would be a mistake to proceed as if there is a factual or objective language that describes the world while other aspects of language—flattery, rhetoric, and so on—color how we perceive and interact with it. If we reflect upon the implications of zhengming, one consequence is that we become aware that virtually no language use is entirely value-neutral. All language is spoken from a particular perspective—an objective view is unavailable. The perspective of the exemplary person is, of course, considered more authoritative—and hence more trustworthy—than that of the petty person, but neither can lay absolute claim to “the truth of things.” In this sense, for Confucius, all language is ultimately rhetorical, although we nonetheless can discern better and worse—or efficacious and ineffectual—language use.

Herein lies the crux of the difference between Confucius and Plato: as a pragmatist, Confucius evaluates the value of what is said or done in terms of efficacy—to what extent is the desired result achieved? Under optimum conditions, this entails an
understanding and explication of whatever the desired result may be. In any case, persuasive force is measured in terms of efficacy: how do one’s words transform the world? Plato, on the other hand, measures persuasive force in terms of truth. Truth alone is the desired result, because it is implicitly assumed that truth is also beautiful and good.\textsuperscript{85} The expression “the truth hurts” suggests how truth at times is like a double-edged blade. It cuts to the heart of the matter but may damage other vital organs in the process. Because sophistical rhetoric typically is not interested in truth and tends to be practiced by selfish individuals, Plato challenges its social value.

Confucius prompts us to consider that the \textit{way} things are said is sometimes more important than \textit{what} is said. Most language use entails a certain value dimension (or lack thereof)—few utterances are completely neutral in this regard. Chad Hansen has described this as the regulative dimension of language, as opposed to the descriptive dimension. For example, there are many ways to convey the notion that one is hungry, but surely there is an appreciable difference between gently asking, “Would anyone else like something to eat?” and bellowing “I’m starving!” Value is discernable by reflecting on the differences between the two expressions. The former is a more or less subtle hint; the latter is a brash pronouncement. The former is exploratory and invitational; the latter borders on accusatory. For Confucius, rudeness is immoral because it damages the fabric of human relationships. With few deliberate exceptions, he models language that is conducive to social harmony. At the same time, he exhibits the importance of tailoring

\textsuperscript{85} This is true as far as Platonic dialectic is concerned. I will discuss the Platonic myths, and how they operate within the broader Platonic framework, in the following chapter.
one’s mode of expression to the circumstances at hand. In the ways that we choose to express ourselves, either we are bolstering the community fabric, or we are unraveling it.

Now imagine that we need to obtain the attention of an unfamiliar, elderly woman in order to alert her that she has dropped something. How should we go about this? There are myriad options, from saying “Excuse me, madam,” or simply “Excuse me,” to “Hey lady,” or just “Yo!” If we are feeling rushed or at a loss for words, we could even refrain from saying anything and instead tap on her shoulder. Whatever manner we choose to obtain her attention establishes an immediate, tentative relationship with her. Our tone, inflection, countenance and demeanor all contribute to the communicative impression. Do we honor her? Do we consider her an equal citizen, or perhaps consider her a fool? At the same time, our style of address can reveal as much about ourselves as it does about how we view the woman in question. It bears with it our implicit understanding of how we are situated vis-à-vis the woman within the larger community.

Of course, another option is not to alert the woman at all, and instead leave whatever she has dropped on the ground, or keep it. I need not mention the impact such neglect, or theft, has on the community.

Perhaps another example will illuminate the regulative dimension of language in other ways. While I was cashiering at a concession stand, a woman marched up to the counter to protest the use of disposable cardboard trays. Her tone was shrill, her countenance strained, and her manner agitated. At the very least, she said, someone should round up the used trays so they might be re-used; better yet, she added, we should discontinue their use altogether. Perhaps realizing that her position was in need of logos
(some sort of rational account or explanation) after looking at the dumbfounded faces of my coworkers, she blurted, "Our landfills can't take it!" Ideologically, I agreed with the woman. Her delivery was so vehement, however, that I had difficulty supporting what the woman had to say. Judging by the befuddled reactions of my co-workers, the environmental movement did not win any new converts on this occasion. In fact, I worry that they will be less inclined to embrace environmental concerns in the wake of such a disconcerting encounter. While a lack of evidence in the written record prevents us from determining whether Confucius would support her environmental outlook, he would surely raise questions about her insensitivity to context and her strident delivery.

Confucius, with his interest in efficacy over and above clarity, models a particular kind of persuasive speaking that is nonetheless invested in the common good. At the same time, however, Confucius holds a special contempt for those who practice persuasion—often in the form of flattery—for merely selfish ends.

One important theme that bears on spoken language is that one's words ought to accord with one's actions. Xin is the character that exemplifies this idea. Quite suitably, it graphically depicts a person standing by what they say—denoting trustworthiness and/or sincerity. For example, in 1.13 Youzi says "Living up to one's word [xin] approaches appropriateness because one's words will bear repeating."

Confucius contrasts action and speech, emphasizing alacrity with regard to the former but reticence with regard to the latter, in 1.14: "[The exemplary person] is decisive in action but cautious in speech." Reflecting on the sage-kings of antiquity in 4.22, Confucius observes: "The ancients were loath to speak. They would be ashamed if they failed to
live up to their words." Finally, in 4.24 he uses the well-rehearsed pattern of holding up the *junzi* as a laudable model and echoes the sentiment from 1.14: "The exemplary person wants to be slow to speak yet quick to act." Taken together, these passages call for the exercise of caution and restraint in human communication. Confucius seems to be indicating that one's words should be weighed as carefully as one's actions, if not more so. He juxtaposes action and speech in order to demonstrate that while enthusiasm in conduct is laudable, we ought to be especially cautious with our words. His overarching point, however, is that speech, in effect, is the special counterpart to action. Using language inappropriately, or selfishly, makes a disharmonious world. For example, when Zilu blurts his surprise upon hearing Confucius endorse *zhengming* in 13.3, Confucius admonishes him for his lack of prudence. The exemplary person can model the appropriate use of language by refraining from speaking unnecessarily, or even at all, depending upon the situation. Words bear the force of action, as does silence under certain circumstances.

Related passages merit closer consideration, beginning with 2.22, where Confucius says: "I don't know how a person who fails to live up to their word is acceptable." If a large carriage lacks a crossbar, or a small carriage lacks a yoke, how can it go anywhere?" Here Confucius begins with a general expression of doubt as to the viability of people who fail to live up to their word. This bears on braggarts, for example, and those who make promises they cannot keep. Confucius then uses a pair of metaphors

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86 Or "works" as a person, where "person" is considered an achievement of sorts, not merely a descriptive category.
that call for the application of analogical thinking. Such people resemble a faulty carriage. The carriage is faulty because it lacks an integral component and thus is unable to function properly. This renders the carriage essentially useless, since it cannot do what it ought to do. Not accidentally, Confucius uses the term *xing* 行 to indicate what the carriages should be able to do under normal circumstances, a term which is used pervasively for human conduct. Persons lacking *xin*, then, lack a crucial dimension of character that prevents them from achieving the conduct associated with genuine personhood (*ren* 仁).

Analogical thinking is again called for in 5.10:

*Zaiwo was lounging in bed during the day. Confucius commented: “Rotten wood cannot be carved, walls of dried manure cannot be trowelled. What is the point of admonishing him?” He added: “There was a time when I trusted (xin 言) people to live up to their word. Now I listen to their words and observe their deeds. It is on account of him that I have made this adjustment.”*  

Confucius compares Zaiwo, lounging in bed during the day, to a piece of rotten wood or a wall of dried dung—fit for burning, perhaps, but little else. Neither is amenable to craftsmen by whose hand they might otherwise be fashioned to serve a more useful purpose. By analogy, sages and educators can train people to become productive citizens and/or exemplify how this is achieved, but Confucius concludes that certain persons are incapable of benefiting from such training. He does not suffer fools gladly, and here he subjects Zaiwo to extraordinarily harsh censure. Not only does Confucius consider him beyond remedy, perhaps worse, Zaiwo’s repeated failures have forced him to change from trusting people to live up to their word, to scrutinizing their conduct to verify that they do. Confucius, then, seems to uphold a kind of aristocracy of character, and
according to his evaluation, certain persons are incapable of being educated or rehabilitated. Then again, Confucius may be holding forth with especially severe criticism in an effort to produce a desired effect in Zaiwo and/or his disciples—in other words, he may be displaying a rhetorical sensibility of his own.

When Confucius muses on the possibility of refraining from speaking in 17.19, he again is employing a kind of analogical thinking:

Confucius said: “I want to give up speaking.” Zigong inquired: “If you give up speaking, what will we, your disciples, have to go on?” Confucius replied: “What does heaven (tian 天) say? Yet, the four seasons revolve and the myriad things flourish. What does heaven (tian 天) say?”

Here, he imaginatively aspires to model his own behavior on that of tian, often misleadingly rendered “Heaven.” Carefully avoiding the Judeo-Christian connotations that inhere to this kind of mistranslation, Ames and Rosemont say, “Tian is both what our world is and how it is...tian can be described as an inhering, emergent order negotiated out of the dispositioning of the particulars that are constitutive of it.” In aspiring to model his conduct on tian, Confucius is seeking to follow the example posed by the accumulation of culture in harmony with the natural order of things. Because tian does not speak and yet natural processes continue to unfold, perhaps it is not necessary for humans to speak. Indirectly, he is suggesting that if people conducted themselves appropriately in accord with tian, words might be virtually superfluous. He seems to be implying that appropriate conduct is more efficacious than words—or perhaps that words,

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87 Analects, p. 47.
particularly when ill-chosen or ill-spoken, cause more problems than they solve. If nothing else, reticence is preferable to the self-serving perversion of rhetoric.

Chapter 12.3 merits closer consideration because here Confucius is offering a context-specific response based on his evaluation of the character of Sima Niu—a strategy that might be compared with Aristotle’s theory of effective rhetorical practice:

Sima Niu asked what it is to be humane (ren). Confucius replied: “The humane person is cautious in speech (ren, jJ).” “Just being cautious in speech makes one humane?” Confucius replied: “When it is difficult to act, how could one not be cautious in speech?”

This is not the only occasion on which Confucius tailors his responses to what he diagnoses as the specific needs of his questioners. Since Sima Niu was known for his brashness, Confucius explains ren paronomastically in terms of ren, restraint or caution in speech. If a person with an overly timid disposition had posed the same question, Confucius would have proffered a different response—one that called for a greater degree of assertiveness. Still, Confucius’ explanation as to why he defines ren in terms of ren makes a more general point: since acting appropriately is, for most people, a difficult endeavor, exercising restraint in speech will at least help avoid the embarrassment of one’s words outstripping one’s deeds.

The passages in which Confucius displays his own rhetorical sensibility must be carefully distinguished from those in which he contends manipulative language and moral uprightness are unlikely to occur together. The crux of the matter lies in one’s purpose: Confucius aims to uplift the character of others, while those he denounces serve a selfish motive. Benjamin Schwartz observes:
Language carries its own embedded reflection of the true order. The crisis is not a crisis of language but of the human abuse and distortion of language... The locus of the trouble lies in how living human beings, particularly among the vanguard of society, use words in speech. The misuse of language in the speech of men driven by ulterior motives is the ultimate source of the disconnection of language from reality. While Socrates accuses the Sophists of using speech rhetorically to promote their own careers as masters of public relations, he basically believes that the confusion of moral vocabulary is in the end due to intellectual confusion. Confucius sees the cause as mainly moral. There is a distortion of both the terms that refer to objective behavior and the terms that refer to inner dispositions. Hence the repeated attack on “clever talk” which provides men with that fatal capacity for disguising real feelings and embellishing ulterior motives by the abuse of words... The constant admonition to reticence and caution in speech, on stressing action rather than speech relates to this mistrust not of language but of the perverse misuse of language in a corrupt world.  

Authenticity is important to Confucius. His natural inclination is to speak his mind directly, and as a result, he occasionally appears stern or insulting as in the case of Zaiwo. Those who practice flattery, by contrast, tend to mask their true feelings and intentions behind a veneer of amicability. On several occasions, Confucius contrasts ethical or appropriate behavior with manipulative speaking. For example, 1.3 reads:

“Humanity (ren 仁) is rarely found in clever (qiao 聰) words and an ingratiating countenance.” Chapter 17.17 is identical save the substitution of “artful” (kao 巧) for “clever” (qiao 聰): “Humanity (ren 仁) is rarely found in artful (kao 巧) words and an ingratiating countenance.” The term qiao is looked upon with suspicion once again in 15.27: “Clever (qiao 聰) words ruin excellence. If one is impatient with minor details, it will ruin great plans.” In these passages, Confucius emphasizes the importance of integrity over and above the ability to manipulate others through language. The point, it

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\[\text{World of Thought, pp. 92-93.}\]
seems, is that an upright character will be able to speak and act in a way sufficiently efficacious. Clever or conniving talk is detrimental.

Another term used disparagingly, and viewed with suspicion, by Confucius is NING (止め). For example, 5.5 reads:

Someone said, “Yong is humane but not glib (ning (止め)).” Confucius commented: “What use is glibness? A stubborn person with a facile tongue will often earn the enmity others. I don’t know whether he is humane or not, but what use is glibness?”

Again, laudable character is dissociated from unctuous language. In 15.11, Yan Hui inquires about making a state viable. Confucius responds in part by saying “...keep glib (ning (止め)) people at a distance...glib people are dangerous.” What, precisely, is Confucius objecting to, and why? Interestingly, Karlgren cites no uses of ning in classical texts beyond the Analects, defining the term as “eloquent, clever, artful.” The best opportunity to discern Confucius’ understanding of the term through context comes in 5.5, where he questions the utility of ning, then says: “A stubborn person with a facile tongue will often earn the enmity others.” It seems Confucius glosses ning with intractability, conjuring the image of a person who, rather than seeking a mutually satisfactory perspective via compromise, persists in dogmatically pursuing their own agenda, albeit behind a veil of feigned amicability. Reflecting on how the Greeks would correspond to such a characterization, an uncharitable reader could conclude that both Socrates and the sophists were ning—although Socrates claims to speak plainly. On further reflection, ning is associated with someone more interested in delivering a quick

99 Grammata, p. 223.
barb or clever retort than in resolving the issue at hand in a manner satisfactory to all parties involved—a trait more applicable to the sophists, since Socrates pursues consensus to the greatest extent possible.

Another opportunity to reflect on the meaning of ning comes in 11.25:

Zilu sent Zigao to serve as the prefect of Bi. Confucius commented: “That is ruining another man’s son.” Zilu responded: “There are many citizens there. There are altars to soil and harvest there. Why must one study books in order to be considered erudite?” Confucius observed: “This is why I detest glib (ning [녕]) people.”

Here Confucius expresses his displeasure with Zilu’s response to his criticism of sending Zigao to Bi. Confucius’ concluding remarks operate on dual levels, just as both the form and the content of Zilu’s words challenge core Confucian values. First, Zilu’s retort serves as an overly clever rejoinder to Confucius’ criticism. The language is terse yet provocative, mimicking a certain parallel structure with four four-character clauses. He implies that although Zigao may not have the requisite background education, his new post will afford him “hands-on” experience. What Zilu overlooks, however, is that without an adequate foundation in the classic texts, Zigao cannot help but fail. At the same time, because Zilu has questioned the importance of studying the classics, he essentially gives away the fact that he does not understand or appreciate their value. One thing they offer, ironically enough, is a compelling critique of the kind of glibness evinced by Zilu. Confucius detests those who are ning, then, in part because ning persons are brash and contentious who, in turn, undermine community integrity.

Ning is also considered an undesirable attribute for a friend in 16.4, where Confucius says: “Three kinds of friends are a source of improvement, and three kinds of
friends are a source of harm. Upright friends, trustworthy friends, and studious friends are a source of improvement. Ingratiating friends, friends who are too quick to please, and glib (ning) friends are a source of harm.” These three contrasting pairs further illuminate the meaning of ning, which is associated with those who are ingratiating and too eager to please—both attributes of inauthentic personalities. Interestingly, ning is juxtaposed with studious, which implies that the more astute one is, the less prone one is to glibness. This resonates with 11.25 above, so it appears Confucius considered study of the classics an important safeguard against the various temptations to employ—and fall sway to—clever or manipulative language. Those who are not aware of history are doomed to repeat it.

Ames and Rosemont translate ning as “glib(ness)” in a derogatory sense, thereby reserving “eloquence” for loftier status. Xing Lu makes a similar point:

Confucius should not be understood to denounce eloquence. For him, virtue essentially carries with it eloquence. *To be virtuous is to be eloquent*. Thus, Confucius was primarily concerned with the speaker’s moral character, which determines the intention and effect of a speech as opposed to its presentation and delivery. That Confucius values upright character and scorches ning has been well-documented here and elsewhere. Confucius refrains from glibness even when chastising or disagreeing with others. Still, to say that being virtuous amounts to being eloquent must be carefully qualified, since “eloquence” generally involves the stylish and persuasive use of language, which *prima facie* has nothing to do with virtue and vice-versa. However, if we construe eloquence as speaking both authentically and persuasively, then indeed,
many of his quotations could well be considered eloquent. Lu’s point, of course, is that
Confucius laments the persuasive power of those who are *ning* because it is manipulative,
inauthentic, and generally not intended to foster a harmonious community, but rather to
advance a self-serving agenda. Confucius instead seeks to invest persuasive authority in
“virtuous” character, which may not be as immediately seductive or gratifying but
ultimately serves the common good. The virtuous language and conduct advocated and
exemplified by Confucius does carry a kind of persuasive power of its own—one that
might very well be considered eloquent.

Thus, while Confucius did not find himself in competition with a rhetorical
tradition, through his strong aversion to clever speaking and flattery he is at least opposed
to eloquence for eloquence’s sake. When people employ persuasive language, they
typically are aiming to accomplish something that would not be immediately agreeable to
the parties in question. Clever words have a way of re-presenting an otherwise
objectionable proposal in a more favorable light. In other words, eloquence can involve a
lack of authenticity—putting a kind face on devious motives. Confucius makes subtle
distinctions, and it is important not take his juxtaposition of character and artful language
as an outright condemnation of all subtlety in speech. His point, rather, is that the latter
must not come at the expense of the former. By focusing on character development, the
ability to speak persuasively will generally follow as a matter of course. If one’s
character is not adequately developed, then reticence is the best policy.

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90 *Rhetoric*, p. 164, emphasis added.
Taken together, Confucius' communicative efforts seem focused on getting the point across in as efficient and effective a manner as possible. Recall, for example, 15.41: "Communicate effectively—that's enough!" While we can debate what he means by effective communication, Confucius certainly seems suspicious of unnecessary linguistic ornamentation and verbosity. Although his straightforward communicative style has a certain charm of its own, the persuasive force derives primarily from his strength of character and convictions. Or rather, his character and convictions shape his words, and his words reveal his underlying character. As he says in 14.4, "A person of excellence is certain to have something to say, but a person with something to say isn't necessarily a person of excellence."

Another chapter of rhetorical interest is 11.22, where two different disciples ask the same question and yet Confucius offers contrary responses to each. When Zilu asks if one should act upon what one has learned, Confucius responds by saying "While your father and older brothers are still alive, how can you act upon what you have learned?" Ranyou, on the other hand, receives this response: "Act on what you have learned." Gongxi Hua then asks for an explanation. Confucius replies: "Ranyou is restrained, and so I encouraged him; Zilu has the eagerness of two, and so I restrained him." Confucius tailors his advice to suit his audience—there are no universal maxims one can live by. One size does not fit all.

Although Confucius does not insist that the same advice will suit different personalities, he does emphasize the importance of maintaining a certain degree of consistency with regard to one's position in the course of a particular conversation.
Chapter 16.1, one of the longest in the entire *Analects*, portrays a political discussion between Confucius and Ranyou, an adviser to the lord of Ji, who is plotting to attack a neighboring vassal state. Ranyou begins by expressing his opposition to the plan. When Confucius challenges Ranyou’s reluctance to support his lord, Ranyou reverses his position and gives reasons to justify the proposed attack. Confucius then chastises Ranyou for his inconsistency: “the exemplary person loathes going back on what he has said and making excuses for doing so.” Confucius uses this as an opportunity to point out further that, if Ranyou and his fellow ministers were doing their job effectively, they would not need to attack Zhuanyu. Instead, it would voluntarily allow itself to be annexed by a government that demonstrates exemplary rulership. Lau’s translation of this selection reads, “The gentleman detests those who, rather than saying outright that they want something, can be counted on to gloss over their remarks.” Regardless of how the passage is translated, Confucius is here condemning both Ranyou’s equivocation and his attempt to use clever language to disguise it. The related political point is that a less than exemplary ruler is bound to encounter such difficulties with both neighboring states and within the ruler’s own bureaucracy. Ranyou, rather than concerning himself with either endorsing or resisting the proposed attack of Zhuanyu, would best serve his lord and his state by doing what he can to transform the government into a worthy model—one that the people of Zhuanyu would willingly make themselves subservient to.

One final example, 9.24, should round out this discussion of Confucius and rhetoric. This could be construed as a tidy summary of his views on language and its indissoluble bond with conduct:
Confucius said: "The words of model sayings—can one but agree with them? Reforming one's ways in accord with them is of greater value. The words of deferential exchanges—can one but enjoy them? Unraveling their meaning \( \text{yi} \) is of greater value. Those who enjoy but do not unravel, those who agree but do not reform their ways—I don't know what can be done with such people."

In the original Chinese, this passage is marvelously eloquent and employs several parallel structures to great effect. Here, together, we find the two most salient points made by Confucius with regard to language. His first point is that agreeing with or approving of model sayings (fa yu 法語, such as one finds in the Odes) is not adequate. It is more important that one's conduct reflect a genuine understanding and embodiment of their meaning. Again, the harmony of word and deed is paramount. Similarly, it is not enough to take pleasure in deferential exchanges or any manifestation of civil language or conduct. It is more important to appreciate genuinely the meaning of the intricate communal matrix through which these exchanges take place.

The crucial term here is \( \text{yi} \), for which Karlgren references the Analects in a sense more or less represented in the translation above: "draw out (as a thread), unfold." This is accomplished not merely by rote participation in li, nor merely by finding pleasure in li, but by striving to employ language in the spirit of zhengming. The silk radical is particularly relevant insofar as it suggests the weaving of a social fabric. The emphasis placed here on this particular meaning of yi is apparently unique; the only other instance of the graph is in 3.23, while discussing how the performance of music should culminate. Still, it is unquestionably in keeping with one prevailing theme of the Analects—that authentic participation in the language of social ritual involves a profound
understanding how the fabric of community is improved by doing so. If one participates merely for the sake of enjoyment, then the _li_ are liable to corruption or neglect whenever they fail to produce such gratification. In the case of the usurping and thus inauthentic Ji clan, the aim of such mere enjoyment actually motivates them to perform an inappropriate ritual.\textsuperscript{92}

This passage bears on rhetoric in several ways. First, the use of model sayings is available and applicable to all citizens.\textsuperscript{93} Extending through and beyond language, Confucius looks for a transformation in concrete human behavior, not merely assent or agreement with a particular perspective expressed in a quotation from a received authority. As for the issue of enjoyment, flattery generally aims to make an audience more agreeable by whatever means possible. Although flattery aims to succeed by way of pleasing the audience, Confucius considers it inadequate—and potentially damaging—due to its dearth of authenticity. It seems that Confucius, like Plato, is interested in _good reasons_ for our utterances. By “good reasons,” I mean a genuine disposition and a propensity to produce tangible, positive results. Based on the preceding passages, it would be fair to conclude that good reasons for Confucius would often involve an appeal to overarching community welfare or harmony.

For Confucius, rhetorical prowess does not involve the ability to compose and deliver a lengthy, rousing speech—in fact, the above passages demonstrate how rhetorically powerful his terse utterances can be. He is not averse to using language

\textsuperscript{91} Grammata, p. 208.
\textsuperscript{92} Analects 3.1.
thoughtfully in order to influence more effectively the situation at hand. The problem with flattery is that it tends to be a superficial practice representing a kind of feigned compliance. Confucius asks that the sentiment behind our words and conduct be genuine. The purpose of zhengming is to emphasize how character and integrity are reflected through the language we use with each other—nearly all language influences the social fabric in some way. Some readers might be uncomfortable with the suggestion that nearly everything we say entails such a regulative dimension, but it is difficult to study the Analects and not come away with this impression. Still, when it was first expressed, zhengming was an idea-in-progress, proposed by Confucius as a response to what he perceived as the troubles of his day. In order to compare Confucian ideas more specifically with rhetoric, it will be fruitful to examine Xunzi’s perspective on zhengming.

**Xunzi on Zhengming: Philosophy as Rhetoric**

When Xunzi set out to elaborate and defend Confucian philosophy more than 200 years after the death of its originator, he did so under very different ideological and political circumstances from those under which it was first espoused. Whereas Confucius lived during the time that the “Hundred Schools” were still under development and not widely recognized, Xunzi lived during a time when many of these lineages had become codified and promulgated through the work of various representative thinkers. As a result, he was more familiar with competing philosophies than Confucius had been. He

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93 In the context of the present discussion it is worth noting that Aristotle counsels such sayings be
readily critiques and, at times, assimilates them in his own writing. Confucianism, too, had flourished under the institutional propagation of multiple schools affiliated with various disciples of the Master, not to mention the work of Mencius—and Xunzi spares no criticism where he believes they have misunderstood or perverted the original message. At the same time, both the content and style of his writing indicates that he was influenced by certain strands from competing creeds as well.

The *Xunzi* is much more like a philosophical treatise as we have come to recognize them in the West than the seemingly ambiguous and disorganized *Analects*. In looking at Xunzi’s philosophical defense of *zhengming* and critiques of competing schools that bear particularly on rhetorical issues, the respective advantages and disadvantages of each document’s format will emerge. Whereas the rigorous, methodical presentation found in the *Xunzi* achieves greater degrees of clarity and certainty with regard to the ideas conveyed, it also becomes more doctrinaire. The *Analects*, by contrast, lends itself to the creation of multiple interpretations, allowing greater flexibility and adaptability in real-world applications, albeit with less analytical rigor.

The proliferation of multiple competing interpretations seems to have been Xunzi’s leading concern with regard to Confucius’ message. As a result, he offers detailed explanations of core Confucian vocabulary, so that *his* view might be seen as the orthodox view. Of particular interest to the present investigation is Chapter 22, titled *Zhengming*. Xunzi develops this original Confucian idea in important ways that further employed by the skilled rhetorician at appropriate instances for persuasive effect.  

*4 It should be noted that this aspect, together with his ability to incorporate competing lines of thought, were primary factors leading to the adoption of his program as state ideology.
elucidate the difference between a constructive philosophical rhetoric and mere argument for argument’s sake—represented by competing thinkers of his day. It will be shown how his particular style of analysis—more like synthesis—is representative of the spirit of zhengming, while the treatise-based argumentative format undermines it somewhat. It is worth noting that nowhere in Xunzi’s treatment of zhengming does he refer to the specific historical circumstances under which Confucius is believed to have first proposed the idea (see 13.3 of the Analects). In other words, Xunzi belongs to the second camp of interpreters who see zhengming more as a general theory about authoritative language use than a specific strategy for sorting out aristocratic titles, and their related power struggles, in the state of Wei.

Xunzi begins Chapter 22 by stating the origins of various kinds of terminology as established by later kings. He claims that legal terms were derived from the Yin dynasty, ranks and titles from the Zhou, and that the language of culture (wen 文) follows ritual propriety (li 禮). As for the names of the myriad things, these are said to be derived in accordance with established customs so that a common form of communication might be used across disparate lands. Language, in other words, is primarily but not entirely conventional—it has no transcendent, truth-bearing status. In a subsequent portion of the text, he explicitly contends that “Names have no inflexible appropriateness...Names have no inflexible reality” (22.6). Xunzi warns, however, that this does not mean language can be used willy-nilly at the whim of the speaker. On the contrary, it means vigilance is required to uphold and employ received vocabulary, lest the chaos and confusion of wayward language use muddle our conversations.
Still, this does not mean that all names must be maintained as a matter of course. Ultimately, if people stop using a name, or agree to use a different name, then so be it. Xunzi, much like Confucius, is interested in *mutual accord* above other considerations. Although there is no objective standard by which to judge the rightness of names, they nonetheless are considered “efficacious” (*shan* 善) when they are clear (*jing* 徑), simple (*yi* 易), and not in opposition (*bu fu* 不拂) to that which is named (22.6). This clause in particular renders Xunzi’s theory of language more sophisticated than a standard conventional theory because it implies that language should reflect a certain harmony or accord between names and their corresponding referents.

Xunzi’s position is further complicated by his claim that appropriate language use is ultimately modeled by the ruler. John Makeham observes:

...Xun Qing [Xunzi] recognized the essentially arbitrary and conventional nature of the practice of giving names to objects (for example, what is now called horse could equally have been called an ox). Nevertheless, it is evident that for Xun Qing “the way of dividing reality into objects to be named” was the prerogative of the ruler. “Common acceptance” and “conventional practice” were matters subsequent to the ruler’s ‘ordination’ of a name, names being based on his conception, arbitrary or otherwise, of how objects should be differentiated, how the world should be cut up and named. However far-fetched this may seem and however much it is at odds with some of the more influential modern views on language, it must be borne in mind that Xun Qing’s primary concern with names was pragmatic, not semantic.

Makeham is overstating the case for Xunzi’s commitment to the conventionality of language. The ruler, too, should be constrained by both pre-existing language patterns and the criterion of “efficacy” (*shan* 善). At times it may seem difficult to determine

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95 All *Xunzi* translations are ultimately my own, with assistance from the translations by Burton Watson and John Knoblock. See p. 144 of Watson for this reference.

96 *Name and Actuality*, p. 59.
when the *Xunzi* intends to be *descriptive* and when it intends to be *prescriptive*. In light of the preceding discussion on Confucius and the regulative dimension of language, it must have been integral to certain dimensions of Chinese thinking, particularly *zhengming* itself, simply not to make this distinction: speaking or writing an account inherently tends to entail a prescriptive dimension as well—whether we are aware of it or not. A. C. Graham labels this phenomenon the "absence of the fact/value distinction."97 Reading the *Xunzi*, then, is one way to experience *zhengming* in action. The author aspires to re-conceive certain key terms and how language functions in general, and ultimately thereby shape the world.

This is not to say that *zhengming* allows for a sort of willful disregard for the facts of the matter, but rather it recognizes that any account is ultimately grounded in a certain subjective, evaluative perspective: "The purpose of names, then, is to show up clearly the similar and the different, particularly in grades of value ('noble and base')."98 Lacking a transcendental view from which to make final judgments about the suitability of language, *zhengming* as explicated by Xunzi is an effort to regulate human behavior through the modeling of appropriate language use. The hope, then, is that the ruler becomes sufficiently attuned to the social and moral implications of linguistic practices so that they may be more efficaciously employed for the common good. In other words, Xunzi is not referring to any specific ruler who might happen to be in power, but rather a comprehensive political and religious authority: "When the king ordains names, if names

97 *Disputers*, p. 262.
are fixed and realities distinguished so that the *dao* prevails and his purpose conveyed, then he leads the people with care and they are as one" (22.2). Xunzi simultaneously diagnoses the problem and proffers a solution.

To say that *zhengming* does not aspire to establish an objective view does not mean that it does not aspire to establish an authoritative view. We have already seen how Xunzi locates authority for names and naming in the language of the ruler. At the same time, the ruler is implicitly encouraged to employ names that are recognized by society broadly, or at least by the educated class as "efficacious" (*shan* 善). Situating linguistic authority with the ruler is not so much an effort to "get things right" in the sense of establishing true and certain accounts of the world as it is a strategy for laying down recognizable patterns of communication for the sake of effective community practice. This, in turn, provides a framework for the development and exemplification of character. A. S. Cua observes, "Rectification of terms is ultimately a matter of rectification of moral faults and misconduct and not merely a matter of avoidance of logical or linguistic errors." 99 Xunzi's advocacy of *zhengming* also involves an implicit expectation that the ruler will regulate language with community welfare and not merely his own in mind, since the responsibility of rulership is ultimately his alone.

Continuing with 22.2, the subsequent passage is generally considered to be a critique of Hui Shi and others who devote their energies to crafting linguistic paradoxes, known collectively as the School of Names. Although Xunzi of course had no

99 *Ethical Argumentation*, p. 1.
knowledge of the Greek sophists, it might be appealed to as a critique of their particular form of rhetoric as well:

Hence, to quibble over expressions and create neologisms on one’s own authority, thereby disordering established names (zhengming), leading the people into doubt and delusion, and causing men to become contentious, is a great iniquity that should be punished like those who tamper with weights and measures. (22.2)

A person who interferes with the smooth operation of zhengming by the clever manipulation of words is compared with a person who willfully tampers with standards of measurement. The analogy is straightforward enough: weights and measures have a pre-established, conventional regularity in order to facilitate commerce and other human interactions, but they also reflect a kind of reliable knowledge of the world. Janghee Lee observes:

...While measurement is a human construction, it does not follow that measurement can be totally independent of the world. If it were [sic] based solely on human agreement and did not reflect the objective world at all, we could not possibly build bridges and houses and measurement would be useless. That is, although measurement is a human invention, it must not be 'at odds with the world.'

Similarly, Xunzi says, a certain consistency with regard to language is necessary for the harmonious flourishing of persons in society. Disordered language leads to a disordered state.

Having maintained that contravening zhengming should be a punishable offense, Xunzi continues with a further argument explaining the consequential benefits:

If so, then people would not dare make up bizarre language and disorder established names (zhengming). Instead, they will be straightforward. If straightforward, they will be simple to command, if simple to command, then

much can be accomplished. If people would not dare make up bizarre language and disorder established names, then as one they will accord with the law and comply with edicts. If so, the ruler’s accomplishments will endure. (22.2)

Xunzi here almost seems to be addressing a ruler directly by way of appeal to his aspirations for achievement and recognition. The authoritarian tone clashes with several modern Western sensibilities, particularly notions of autonomy, freedom, and independence. Given the heterogeneous intellectual climate and chaotic political circumstances during which Xunzi was writing, it is understandable that he would emphasize a kind of enforced homogeneity. In fairness to Xunzi, he emphasizes zhengming for the sake of communal harmony and stability, not merely for the sake of endorsing an arbitrary, authoritarian regime.

Xunzi continues by condemning the status quo, thereby paving the way for an explanation of how to apply zhengming:

Nowadays, there are no sages, names are used carelessly, bizarre language arises, names and realities (shi 實) are disordered, what is and is not is unclear. Even the officials who uphold the law, and the scholars who recite the classics, are all muddled. Were a true king to arise, he would certainly revive the old names, and create new ones only where needed. To do so, he would examine carefully why names are needed, how to distinguish that which is the same from that which is different, and ordain names according to fundamental needs. (22.3)

Here the attentive reader can detect a curious tension in Xunzi’s argument. On one hand, he has already argued that names are conventional in origin, and yet in the above passage he contends that it is necessary to uphold a certain uniformity of linguistic application consistent with “the forms of what is and is not”—reality or actuality (shi 實) as it presents itself to us.
Does reality dictate the appropriateness of the name, or does the name delineate reality as it should be perceived? The question as framed is epistemological in nature; Xunzi’s overarching concern, however, was altogether different. According to John Makeham, “the ultimate justification, however, is not philosophical but political...For Xun Qing it is imperative that the sovereignty to ordain the appropriateness of a name for a given object be invested in the ruler.”

Again, Makeham overstates the degree to which Xunzi’s theory is conventional. However much power the ruler may wield in linguistic ordination, ultimately he is still constrained by reality (shi 實). Janghee Lee explains:

On the one hand, when [Xunzi] ascribes established names to the Later Kings and claims the conventionalist aspect of names, he appears to be a flexible, pragmatic thinker. On the other hand, when he advocates conformity to standardized language and harsh punishment for bringing confusion to the proper use of names, he appears unyielding and conservative. We can explain these dual aspects of Xunzi as follows: although Xunzi holds a “conventionalist” position regarding the theory of naming, in his denial of the “essential” relationship between a name and its object, he does not insist that names can be arbitrarily invented or instituted without taking into consideration their applicability to the world. Xunzi, rather, seems to believe that even in order for the language to exert a “performative” function properly, it first has to give due respect to the world as it is; otherwise, language would be ineffectual and disastrous to sociopolitical order, which is not just a human invention, but also a part of the cosmic order. However, since names themselves have no intrinsic appropriateness, if we have lost the names instituted by the Ancient Kings or find a better alternative to meet the criteria for good names, we could invent new names or adopt a better alternative. Language, for Xunzi, is, after all, a pragmatic instrument to “convey our intentions” and to “carry out our duties.”

One lingering practical question for Xunzi’s theory of zhengming is the extent to which political stability is best achieved through linguistic ordination by an autocratic ruler, and

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101 Name and Actuality, p. 60.
to what extent it would be more effective to rely on a democratic or scientific effort to derive names in keeping with "what is and is not."

This question will be better answered after examining Xunzi's theory as to how suitable names should be established as spelled out in 22.5. First, we must distinguish things alike and unlike, and in order to do so we employ the senses. Xunzi provides a straightforward account of the proper function that inheres in each faculty of sense (eye, ear, mouth, nose, body). Then he delivers this interesting claim about the overarching role of the xin: "Speech, thinking (gu), happiness, sadness, joy, love, hate, and desire are distinguished by the heart/mind. The heart/mind also has overall understanding." This overall understanding means that although it relies on data from the senses, at the same time it regulates our understanding of them. Note how Xunzi locates the seat of emotion with the same human capacity, xin, which is also responsible for both speech and thought. The root meaning for gu is "precedent," which leads to the notion of "inference." In other contexts, gu is often used in the sense of "therefore" or "because," but here Xunzi is using the term to denote the capacity that renders us capable of making such cognitive connections.

Once proper distinctions with regard to sense data are made by the xin, it assigns words to categorize them, lest others say that a person lacks understanding. Xunzi seems to have an unshakable faith in the certainty and uniformity between persons of sense data.

103 22.4 is a brief, pedestrian explanation as to why names are necessary—an argument not particularly relevant to this investigation.
104 Burton Watson translates gu as "events," which seems rather vague. I believe a conditional application of "reasoning" is more in tune with Xunzi's intent.
and he is not concerned with the problem of “other minds”—meaning that he implicitly assumes all persons to have the same impression of a given object or experience and formulate the same necessary cognitive distinctions about it. Certain modern philosophers have worked diligently to demonstrate that the problem of other minds is an important one that cannot be taken lightly.\textsuperscript{105} Even contemporaneous texts like the Daoist Zhuangzi, with its irreverent, radical perspectivism, raises incisive questions about the kind of realism Xunzi seems to take for granted. Nonetheless, for Xunzi the problem begins and ends with the regularity and consistency of language, and, following the example set by Confucius in 13.3 of the Analects, zhengming is upheld as a remedy for society’s ills.

The Daoists, to be sure, were not Xunzi’s primary concern, as can be seen by his attacks in 22.7 on the famous (or infamous) paradoxes employed primarily by the School of Names and Mohists to advance their own philosophical agenda. Interspersed with terse refutations, Xunzi quotes his ideological opponents. Here are a few examples: “to kill a thief is not to kill a person” (attributed to the Later Mohists); “mountains and valleys are level” (Hui Shi); “a white horse is not a horse” (Gongsun Long), and so on. Xunzi suggests that such misleading statements fall into one of three categories. Each is explained by Xing Lu:

The first situation involves playing with words that seemingly share similar meaning to refer to different situations...Although the word kill is used in two places in the sentence and shares the same semantic meaning, “to kill a robber” and “to kill a man” may refer to different realities with pragmatically different meanings. In the second situation, the misuse of names involves using names that

\textsuperscript{105} Hilary Putnam’s “Brain in a Vat” is perhaps the most notable such example.
represent only a partial reality to represent the whole... For Xunzi, Hui Shi’s fallacy was that he presented the statement as the absolute truth regarding how mountains and marshes are situated, while, in fact, only in certain places are mountains and marshes at the same level. The third case involves the confusion caused by the abuse of names... the claim distorts reality by twisting the use of names, since, in reality, a white horse is a kind of horse.  

Despite Xunzi’s attempted methodical debunking, it should be recognized that these quotations were deliberately constructed in association with certain philosophical positions—positions objectionable to Xunzi. He contends that such statements can be refuted if we “examine them in light of agreed usage of names, accept those that accord with it, and reject those that do not” (22.7).

The target of these critiques needs to be specified in order to enhance the comparison with parallel developments in ancient Greece. A. C. Graham writes:

During the 4th century B.C. we meet for the first time thinkers who are fascinated by the mechanics of argumentation, delight in paradoxes, astonish their audiences by ‘making the inadmissible admissible’... [They] came to be known retrospectively as the School of Names. Earlier they were known simply as [bianzhe] 辯者 ‘those who argue out’, sometimes translated as ‘Dialecticians’. Confucians, Taoists and Legalists alike scorn them for wasting their time on abstractions such as ‘the similar and the different’, ‘the hard and white’, ‘the limitless’ and ‘the dimensionless’.  

The components of the graph bian could hardly be more appropriate. It depicts two similar but not identical images of xin 辛 (root meaning: “bitter, pungent, painful”) separated by the speech radical. Thus, we arrive at the connotation of “distinguish, discriminate, dispute,” and so on. George A. Kennedy compares bian with rhetoric:

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106 Rhetoric, p. 189. For another, more detailed treatment of the arguments in question and Xunzi’s refutations, see Cua pp. 147-158.
107 Disputers, p. 75.
109 Ibid., p. 73.
In classical Chinese, the word [bian], literally “to till apart,” thus “to distinguish,” “to argue,” or “argument”... is probably the closest approximation to “rhetoric” as understood in Greece: It can refer to an art of persuasion including understanding of audience psychology, as well as moral and rational actions in the interest of social order, but it lacks the connotation of artistic composition or style, which “rhetoric” often carries in the West.\(^{110}\)

Bearing this comparison in mind, the “abstractions” with which the bianzhe were concerned are remarkably similar to the sort of “preliminary training”—a rigorous precursor to the practice of dialectic—recommended to the young Socrates in Plato’s *Parmenides*. This seems counter-intuitive, since Plato is concerned to distance his program from that of the sophists. One might think, then, that the bianzhe could be considered the “dialecticians” of ancient China. Is this really an appropriate characterization? If so, we would expect them to be concerned with matters of philosophical truth while opposing whatever sophistic or rhetorical tendencies manifest in their day. We might also expect them to employ a specific form of the question-and-answer process in the pursuit of adequate definitions. None of these descriptions, however, applies unconditionally to the bianzhe.

Paul Rakita Goldin, in attempting to identify the subject of Xunzi’s critiques, mistakenly conflates several distinct schools of thought:

There was a certain group of philosophers in Xunzi’s time known as the Dialecticians 辯者 (sometimes rendered “Sophists”), who delighted in constructing ludicrous paradoxes, such as, “A white horse is not a horse”; “Eggs have hair”; and the like.\(^{111}\)

\(^{110}\) *Comparative Rhetoric*, p. 143.

\(^{111}\) *Rituals of the Way*, p. 83. It is difficult to see how bianzhe could be translated either as “Dialectician” or “Sophist,” particularly given Plato's efforts to elevate the former and debase the latter.
To a layman, perhaps philosophers, dialecticians, sophists, and the bianzhe might seem more or less the same, insofar as they all are prone to argue about linguistic issues. On reflection, however, identifying the characteristics that distinguish one from another is an important enterprise that both Xunzi and Plato undoubtedly would have taken very seriously. Let us continue with Xunzi's efforts to explicate zhengming (and zhengming itself), and eventually the matter will be sorted out.

For Xunzi, names have a very clear and specific function—to demarcate reality, and thereby to situate each person in their proper place so that the community operates harmoniously: "The names ordained by rulers are normative standards seen as fundamental to the implementation and maintenance of social, political, and ethical objectives." His primary objection to the sort of linguistic conundrums quoted above stems directly from the fact that, from a Confucian perspective, they have no practical application and only serve to confuse: "The lowest category [of person], the philosopher of language and paradox, is characterized by volubility, rapidity of speech, and the relentless analysis of words. He represents the triumph of language for its own sake, detached from the concerns of human society." Under ideal conditions, the insightful or enlightened ruler (ming jun 明君) does not bian—he does not engage the bianzhe on their own terms, nor does he contend or argue. However, when circumstances are less than ideal, the junzi has no choice but to bian (22.8).

112 Makeham, Name and Actuality, p. 62.
113 Mark Edward Lewis, Writing and Authority, p. 93.
114 At times Burton Watson translates bian as "persuasive speaking," other times it is rendered "explanations." The former would further our discussion of rhetoric but at the expense of remaining in tune with the original Chinese.
Here Xunzi’s position becomes increasingly complex, and perhaps despite his commitment to zhengming he acknowledges the importance of linguistic style (wen文).115 Beyond the practical function of language, he argues in favor of the constructive application of an aesthetic (文) dimension. The person who successfully combines both the practical and aesthetic can be said truly to understand names. It has already been established that, under the auspices of zhengming, language is more than merely descriptive. According to 22.8, it is more than prescriptive as well. Or rather, its descriptive and prescriptive functions are more efficacious when spoken with a sense of style.

Immediately after making this claim, however, Xunzi reiterates that the purpose of names (名) is to differentiate reality (事). He then incorporates the astute application of bian and shui/shuo 説, terms typically associated with competing ideologies, under the rubric of accord with “the way” (道). This, in turn, is said to serve the end of good governance. During Xunzi’s time, you shui 游說 (traveling persuaders) journeyed from state to state serving as political advisers and consultants wherever their skills were required. Xing Lu explains their activity in contrast with jian 諫士, official advisers:

Despite the fact that both jian and shui made ample use of analogies and metaphors, the emphasis on the techniques of persuasion varied. Persuasive techniques employed by jian shi relied primarily upon quotations or citations from the antiquities and classics; while the shui technique featured an analysis of advantages and disadvantages for the persuadee and his state. While jian relied on ethical appeal, shui appealed to the persuadee with utilitarian considerations and an analysis of practical benefits. The goal of jian was to give advice in order

115 Here Watson translates wen as “pleasing forms,” while Knoblock opts for “good form.”
to correct the past wrongdoings of the king, while the purpose of shui was to provide a concrete plan or clever scheme regarding military and foreign affairs for the future benefit of the state.... A you shui could be likened to a freelance political consultant, while a jian shi was more akin to an in-house political adviser.  

Both activities demanded skill in remonstrance—presenting an otherwise objectionable proposal in a manner that is more amenable to the ruler in question. As such, they could very well be considered ancient Chinese rhetoricians.

By using the terms bian and shui/shuo in a novel fashion, Xunzi is making an ingenious attempt to both subvert and subsume the vocabulary of his ideological opponents in order to re-present it as serving his own philosophical agenda. This represents an inventive application of zhengming. Lu explains:

...Xunzi delineated three functions or purposes of bian and shuo 說 (explanation). First, they are used to explain right from wrong, connecting concepts with reality. Second, they serve the function of defining and naming for purposes of clarity and explanation. Third, they are expressions of ren and li from the heart (22.274). Xunzi argued that junzi have a moral obligation to advocate and defend the principles of ren when encountering jian yan (treacherous speech), i.e., speech that is not modeled after sage kings and does not conform to ritual and moral principles. He repeatedly emphasizes junzi bi bian 君子必辯 (a gentleman must argue and distinguish) (5.41). 

In essence, Xunzi is attempting to assimilate the philosophical territory occupied by those whom he considers to be lacking the proper measure of concern for societal harmony and stability. Whereas he begins with what seems to be an uncompromising rejection of anything associated with the bianzhe, as his argument unfolds his tone softens somewhat and becomes increasingly accommodating. Much like Aristotle, Xunzi recognizes that

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116 Rhetoric, p. 81.
117 Ibid., p. 191.
argumentation and persuasive language (bian and shuo), when judiciously practiced, render the state more harmonious. His quarrel, then, is not with these specific practices, but with those who would use them for less than noble purposes.

Xunzi makes this evident with the following explanation:

[The exemplary person] speaks [shuo] with a humane heart/mind; listens with a learned heart/mind; and makes distinctions [bian] with an impartial heart/mind. He is not moved by the praise or censure of the masses. He does not enthrall the eyes and ears of those who observe him. He does not grovel before the power and authority of eminent men. He does not feign delight at the words of rulers. Therefore, he can abide by dao without serving two masters, endure hardship without squalor, and flourish without running wild. He values fairness and appropriateness (zheng) while despising vulgarity and contentiousness. In this manner, the exemplary scholar practices argumentation (bian) and persuasion (shuo). (22.8)

In other words, we must look to the character and intentions of those who speak in order best to assess their quality and persuasive power. Again, it is important to recognize how Xunzi has proceeded first to reject the "sophisms" of the bianzhe, then to illustrate how certain aspects of their practice can be put to good use. In a novel turn of zhengming, bian and shuo have been redefined in terms that make them amenable to his social and moral program. It is also worth noting that Xunzi is concerned here with more than just the activity of speaking—the proper way to listen is indicated as well. In other words, he is advancing a theory of optimum human communication. As with Confucius, authenticity is a significant concern, as is dignity, in both speaking and listening or reacting to what is spoken.

118 Or "Discourse and explanation," per Watson's translation.
A. S. Cua, in his preliminary analysis of Xunzi's particular method of argumentation, reveals the assumptions that underlie his advocacy of zhengming. Bearing the present comparison with rhetoric in mind, these remarks take on added significance:

Argumentation is an activity of reasonable persuasion addressed to a particular rather than a universal audience. In such a discourse, aiming primarily at the alteration of the attitude of the audience, the value-claims are not presented as claims to context-independent truth or validity.119

Like rhetoric, zhengming is a strategy for dealing with particular problems in particular situations—not for enforcing a kind of uniform linguistic code. Cua then has this to say about normative claims made in such contexts:

A normative claim, in argumentative context, is a claim that has a practical import in the sense that it is a claim on action and offers its hearer a solution to a problem of common interest. Argumentation is thus conducted in a context of common concern. It is a cooperative enterprise. Like any informative talk-exchange or conversation, it must satisfy a cooperative principle. Contentiousness betrays the lack of concern with a matter of common interest. Were contentiousness an appropriate attitude, argumentation would be more like a debate or an adversary proceeding rather than a serious undertaking among concerned and responsible participants...Although argumentation is a form of persuasive discourse, it is neither a contest nor a mere exhibition of dialectical skills. Given the shared concern, the participants must exemplify certain commendable attitudes or qualities. Non-contentiousness is such a desirable quality.120

We have seen how both Confucius and Xunzi emphasize the importance of engaging in communication earnestly and without selfishness or conceit. Cua effectively communicates why:

Since argumentation, unlike prudential reasoning, is a cooperative undertaking among concerned and responsible participants, it is not engaged in for the sake of

119 Ethical Argumentation, p. 6.
120 Ibid., p. 8.
personal gain. Being non-contentious is a way of preventing the discourse from degenerating into an adversary proceeding. Contention betrays a lack of concern with the matter of common interest that affects the life and conduct of the participants. For [Xunzi], only a person of inferior valor would “seek only to expect victory”… This does not mean that disputable issues will not arise in the process. Rather, when such issues arise, they must be taken in light of the governing ethical objective (dao). In this setting, the participants, instead of being obstinate in maintaining their proposals, must look for alternatives that are more likely to achieve consensus. Of course, deadlock may occur, but the point is to adhere to the cooperative spirit in an honest investigation of viable alternatives congenial to the pursuit of the common enterprise.121

We thus have a heuristic framework for distinguishing a kind of ennobled philosophical rhetoric—represented here by practitioners of zhengming—from its debased counterpart, represented by the yu zhe愚者: flatterers, disingenuous climbers, and those bianzhe who contentiously engage in debate only for the sake of some perceived personal gain.

Xunzi concludes his discussion of zhengming by contrasting exemplary persons with such yu zhe:

If the names used are sufficient to delineate reality (shi), and the phrases used sufficient to see the gist, then that is enough. To go beyond this is called laborious. The exemplary person rejects laborious discourse, but those who are crude seize upon it and make it their treasure. Hence the words of a crude person are hasty and vulgar, boisterous and not to the point, strident and agitated. He is inveigled by names, uses confused phrases, and his purposes lack depth. He struggles in vain to convey the gist, toils without merit, and is impoverished without insight. As for the words of a wise person, they are easy to understand in discussion, they are easy to accord with in conduct, and they are easy to grasp in taking your stand. Abide by them and surely one will achieve one’s desires and avoid one’s dislikes. It is the opposite with the words of a crude person. (22.8)

This passage resonates with the straightforward imperative of Confucius simply to “communicate effectively.” Yet, it goes much further in detailing the travails of those who do not heed the admonishment. So much so, in fact, that certain readers may find

121 Ibid., p. 9.
his conviction overbearing. In any case, the point is forcefully made that attention to $zhengming$ is an effective strategy for stabilizing communities and rendering them more harmonious.

Up to this point, the more salient aspects of Xunzi’s $Zhengming$ chapter have been the focus of the discussion. However, passages that bear on rhetoric and related issues occur throughout the text, and several are worthy of attention here. Chapter 2, “Self-Cultivation,” begins by echoing a Confucian notion in the Analects: “One who censures me is my teacher; one who upbraids me is my friend; but one who flatters me is my enemy.” Both the emphasis on speaking directly and an interest in self-improvement are core Confucian values. Likewise, the opposition to persuasion clothed in sycophancy.

The idea that language is one regulative discourse among several in Confucian society appears in Chapter 20, “Discussing Music”: “Exemplary persons do not allow their ears to hear licentious music, their eyes to gawk at seductive beauty; nor their mouth to speak wicked words.” The point is that there are ways of being in the world that do not contribute to community welfare, and there are ways of being that do. Music, like the ritualized roles and relations of $li$, provides a context within which human drives and impulses can be channeled toward greater mutual benefit: “Music embodies a constant harmony; the rites represent a continuous pattern. Music unites similarity; the rites distinguish difference. Together, the rites and music govern the $xin$.” Language, like the rites and music, affords the opportunity to bring harmonious order to the world. When

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122 The remainder of Chapter 22 is a discussion of desire. Numerous scholars have argued convincingly that it has been misplaced and belongs in a different section of the text.
employed without this noble purpose in mind, language, like music and rites, can become a corruptive influence.

The next chapter, "Dispelling Obsession," contains perhaps the most vitriolic attack on those who fail to value and embrace zhengming. After acknowledging that there are those in the world who do not consider the ways of antiquity and sage-kings to be authoritative, he asks rhetorically:

Are they able to distinguish what is from what is not, or the perverse from the upright? Being unable to distinguish these, they cannot distinguish order from chaos, nor discern the dao of man. Although they may have [other] abilities, it will benefit no one; if lacking ability, it will be no one's loss. Instead, they merely promulgate bizarre sayings and play with unusual phrases in order to vex and confound others. Aggressive and facile-tongued, brazen-faced and bearing reproach, improper (wu zheng) and audacious, arguing falsly while feigning benefit, they do not enjoy the language of deference, nor do they honor the particulars of ritual propriety, but rather enjoy antagonizing and upsetting others. The discourses of such corrupt men bring chaos to the age, and among those who discourse today, their numbers are great indeed. It is said: "The exemplary person loathes those who consider perspicacity to consist merely in inventing new phrases, or distinguishing (bian) to consist merely in putting words to things. The exemplary person loathes those of broad learning and strong sense of purpose but who do not heed the king's decrees."

The source of Xunzi's quotation is not indicated, but it certainly bears Confucian overtones. Interestingly enough, this criticism could well be applied to modern-day analytic philosophers—the point being the mere analysis of words and linguistic operations is empty unless attention is paid to how these analyses can manifest tangible improvement in the quality of our character and lives.

In keeping with prevailing themes, the overarching criterion employed by Xunzi in his analysis of competing philosophies is an evaluation of their pragmatic value. Of course, with both Confucius and Xunzi, pragmatic value is determined on a social, not
individual basis. In other words, it is not an adequate justification to say, “It works for me.” It must work for the community at large while conforming with the models provided by revered authorities. In some sense, it is incredibly difficult to argue that this specific theory is preferable to all others (e.g., the utilitarian calculus advocated by the Mohists). Benjamin Schwartz comments,

...In dealing with the “fallacies” of the Mohists and the “sophisms” of Hui Shih and Kung-sun Lung-tzu, [Xunzi] does not really engage in argument. He simply indicates how their propositions diverge from the true picture of reality provided by the sage-kings.\textsuperscript{123}

Of course, the “true picture of reality” is more a prescription than a description. Xunzi also, as we have seen, disparages his intellectual adversaries with powerful rhetorical flourishes.

Clearly, Xunzi considers it necessary to argue his position vigorously—although, admittedly, occasionally his style comes across as something less like argumentation and more like pronouncement. More than anything, what he objects to vis-à-vis the bianzhe is what he perceives as disregard for pragmatic concerns. Xunzi witnessed a land and its people in turmoil, desperately in need of structure and order, and wrote accordingly.
Meanwhile the bianzhe not only seemed oblivious to the demands of the day, but they exacerbate the situation by throwing language, an important community regulative practice, into confusion. In turning to the Greeks, it will be shown how comparable concerns stimulated Plato to take a similar stand against the rhetoricians and sophists of

\textsuperscript{123} World of Thought, p. 313.
his day—and how both he and Aristotle ultimately restored rhetoric to a serviceable role in the *polis*.

**Plato on Rhetoric: *Technē, Knowledge, and Aretē***

“Socrates’ question was a new one, i.e., the question of *what* something is. It was based on the suspicion and the experience that he who says something does not always know what he is saying and that it was precisely the art of rhetoric and the general acceptance of mere opinions which made this ignorance dangerous. Thus there had to be a new art which would promise deliverance from this danger…”

It might be considered a historical irony that Plato is credited as being the first to use the term *rhētōrikē* (rhetoric) in writing—leading some to conclude that, in fact, he coined the term. This is ironic, of course, because Plato’s relationship with rhetoric, and the sophists who made it a way of life, is generally considered to have been ambivalent at best, antagonistic at worst. Given that I am approaching Plato from a different perspective than the many exceptional Western scholars who have studied this relationship, it is perhaps not surprising that this relationship will appear in a somewhat different light. Without doubt, Plato’s writing contains what are often construed as trenchant critiques of rhetoric. However, in keeping with the present effort to approach Plato from a Confucian perspective, we are prompted to understand these as context-specific and deliberate efforts on the part of Socrates to engage his interlocutors dialectically while bearing certain rhetorical considerations in mind. Plato knowingly depicts Socrates employing rhetorical techniques in an intelligent effort to demonstrate the indispensability of rhetoric to philosophy, and vice-versa. In other words, Plato
recognized, not without some misgivings, that rhetoric and philosophy are mutually
dependent and supportive practices.

Unlike dialectic, which is discussed in a number of different dialogues throughout
Plato’s career as author, rhetoric is mentioned primarily in only two: the *Phaedrus*, and
the scintillating (though hardly conclusive) *Gorgias*. The beginning of this latter
dialogue leads the reader to expect a discussion of rhetoric between Gorgias and Socrates,
but this topic fills only the first part of three. When Polus and then Callicles engage
Socrates in the subsequent two parts, rhetoric (or the profession of sophistry) remains
only tangentially related to the conversation, as it moves on to fundamental ethical issues.
As Socrates puts it, “the questions in dispute are by no means trivial, but are, one might
say, matters wherein knowledge is noblest and ignorance most shameful—the sum and
substance of them being knowledge or ignorance of who is happy and who is not” (472c).
Despite the absence of any mention of rhetoric at this later juncture, both the content and
the form of Socrates’ disputes with his three interlocutors have much to say about Plato’s
sophisticated understanding of the relationship between language, character, and
community.

The part of Socrates’ conversation with Gorgias that merits closer consideration is
their discussion whether rhetoric can rightly be considered a *techne*, and if so, about
what. This is because the sophists must contend that rhetoric is a *techne* in order to

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126 In addition to the work on *techne* by David Roochnik, the principal references employed for this
discussion are (in no specific order): James Boyd White’s chapter “The Reconstituting of Language and
Self in a Community of Two: Plato’s *Gorgias*” from *When Words Lose Their Meaning*; John M. Cooper’s
uphold their self-professed status as teachers. If it cannot be demonstrated that rhetoric is a techne, then they suffer the humiliation of claiming to teach something they cannot, and serious questions are raised about rhetoric's role in the community. The outcome of this conversation will also bear on the question of whether virtue, or character, is likewise teachable. Socrates deftly uses this line of inquiry to maneuver the sophists into reluctantly adopting uncomfortable positions, and, one could argue, ultimately to beat them at their own game.

Looking at how techne is used in other dialogues, it is typically translated "art" or sometimes "craft," although neither term fully conveys the meaning intended by Plato. From the Ion, where Socrates discusses the nature of poetry with Ion, an "expert" on Homeric poetry, we gather that a techne is knowledge of a particular subject whereby its possessor can correctly assess all knowledge claims in that subject, and can further explain (e.g. provide a logos) what makes a given claim in that subject valid or invalid. A techne is also teachable. Since Ion can rhapsodize about Homer but no other poet, he lacks techne: "it is plain to everyone that not from art [techne] and knowledge comes your power to speak concerning Homer. If it were art [techne] that gave you power, then you could speak about all the other poets as well" (532c). Ion is not an "artist" (technites), but rather he is described (somewhat dismissively) as the recipient of some form of divine inspiration.

From the *Laches* we learn that possession of a *techne* has no bearing on one’s character, and therefore virtue or moral excellence (*aretē*) is independent of (and, according to Plato, more desirable than) *techne*. Since the interlocutors cannot figure out a way to discuss *aretē* as a whole, being generals, they choose to discuss courage as an example or part of it. Courage (and, by analogy, *aretē* as a whole) is not a *techne* because courage is not value-neutral, while *technai* are value-neutral—meaning that they can be put to base or noble purposes. As Nicias, encouraged by Socrates, says in rebuttal to Laches: “[Laches] thinks that the physician’s knowledge of illness extends beyond the nature of health and disease. But in fact the physician knows no more than this” (195d). Here “know” involves “knowing courage”—being aware of the grounds for courage in the face of illness. In other words, mastery of a particular *techne* does not necessarily entail *aretē*.

Socrates mentions *techne* in the *Protagoras*, named after the famous sophist. When Hippocrates comes to fetch Socrates for an appearance by Protagoras, Socrates seizes the opportunity to inquire as to the nature of his profession as follows. If one were to approach Hippocrates’ namesake, the famous physician, for instruction, one could well hope to learn the *techne* of the physician. If one were to seek the tutelage of Polykleitos or Pheidias, one would expect to learn the *techne* of sculpting. What is it, then, one can hope to learn from Protagoras? Hippocrates reluctantly responds “sophistry.” David Roochnik explains the significance of this conversation:

Socrates’ method of questioning here is one he uses often. He employs what I will call the “*techne*-analogy.” He places Protagoras’ claimed field of knowledge (or, Hippocrates’ perception of that field) into an analogy with very typical *technai* such as medicine or sculpture...A *techne* has a determinate subject matter.
Medicine is about something very specific: the workings of the human body. Sculpture is about the formation of images from stone. Both are relatively precise in their methods, capable of being mastered and then taught, and easy to identify as noncontroversial examples of knowledge. By using the tekhne-analogy, Socrates forces Hippocrates to locate Protagoras' sophistry into the following analogical pattern: As the doctor is to medicine, and the sculptor is to sculpture, so Protagoras is to X. What is the X, the presumed field of expertise, Protagoras is able to communicate? Who is the Sophist?27

The analogy can be illustrated thus:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doctor</th>
<th>Sculptor</th>
<th>Sophist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>Sculpture</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The answer given by Hippocrates is sophistry, or "making clever speakers" (312d).

Once Socrates engages Protagoras himself, this notion is subjected to rigorous analysis, albeit indirectly, with the ever-vigilant Socrates steering the conversation through moral considerations. Roochnik explains:

Since [tekhne’s] subject matter is determinate, someone who professes to have a tekhne can easily be checked: His claim can be measured against the subject matter. If someone professes to be able to play the flute, he can be tested by putting a flute into his hands. Because of this, tekhne is a very useful device in refuting those who profess to know something. It forces them to disclose their professed expertise. It is especially useful in refuting those who, like Protagoras or Ion, claim knowledge about an unusual or atypical field, one that is not obviously determinate. (In Protagoras’ case, this is political arete; in Ion’s, the whole range of human discourse.) The tekhne-analogy reveals the inappropriateness of their claims.128

The question remains whether sophists are in fact obligated to defend rhetoric as being analogous to medicine or sculpture—an issue taken up by Socrates and Gorgias.

Mastery of a tekhne does not involve embodiment of a coherent or comprehensive moral position. In other words, tekhne is located on a scale of knowledge that is superior

127 The Tragedy of Reason, pp. 51-52.
to ignorance (i.e., it can produce verifiable results) but inferior to moral knowledge (i.e., the results can be either good or bad). Roochnik summarizes his view of how the technē-analogy bears on moral knowledge (or rather, fails to do so) as follows:

The technē-analogy [TA] is not used in order to present a conceptual model of moral knowledge. Instead, its function is dialectical. Armed with his analogy, Socrates exhorts those interlocutors who are not committed to the active search for knowledge, and refutes those who believe they have already found their answers. The first term of the analogy, "technē," does not refer to a specific kind of knowledge: most important, it does not refer exclusively to productive knowledge. Thus, it should not be translated as "craft," but simply as "knowledge." The TA, then, does not describe the nature of moral knowledge; it makes it clear that such knowledge is desirable and should be sought, but it does not, of itself, obviate the difficulty of determining what Plato thought moral knowledge really was.12

While Roochnik is correct in pointing out that the technē-analogy does not proffer direct access to Plato’s moral views, the manner in which it is employed offers us indirect insights into them. In fact, it is difficult to discuss Plato’s understanding of knowledge without simultaneously considering his understanding of virtue. This will become evident as we look at how the technē-analogy operates in the Gorgias.

Socrates begins his dialectical engagement with Gorgias by asking the specific field which rhetoric pertains to. As weaving corresponds to the making of garments, and music corresponds to melodies, rhetoric corresponds to what? (449d). This is a perfect example of the technē-analogy in action. Gorgias responds, “Words” [logoi]. This is easily refuted as an inadequate response, because most (if not all) technē involve the use of words—a doctor can discuss disease, a physical trainer can discuss bodily

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130 Ibid., p. 193.
conditioning, and so on. Gorgias must be more specific. Note that Socrates is pressing for an answer to the question "peri ti" (about what?), so again it can be inferred that a techne must be able to give a coherent account (and, by extension, can be taught). This is interesting because Plato undoubtedly struggled to determine to what extent arete is teachable, if at all. Both Confucius and Xunzi proceed as if good character can be learned at least to some extent, and yet they also clearly recognize that certain people are beyond redemption in this regard.

Gorgias then claims that rhetoric is concerned with "the greatest and noblest of human affairs" (451d). This is somewhat dubiously refuted by suggesting that each possessor of a techne, be it a physical trainer (who is capable of making people strong and beautiful), a doctor (who is capable of making people healthy), or a merchant (who produces wealth and related goods), would each claim their field to be the most important. Here it can also be inferred there is a definite distinction between techne-mastery and wisdom about which techne is in fact most beneficial—techne does not necessarily involve an understanding of arete.

Gorgias, whose patience is beginning to wear thin, then claims that rhetoric is

...The power to convince by your words the judges in court, the senators in Council, the people in the Assembly, or in any other gathering or a citizen body. And yet possessed of such power you will make the doctor, you will make the trainer your slave, and your businessman will prove to be making money, not for himself, but for another, for you who can speak and persuade multitudes. (452e)

Gorgias has asserted the superiority of rhetoric, as he claims it can be used to dominate and manipulate those who possess other forms of techne. Socrates at first acts as if Gorgias has finally delivered what he is after, and he sums up by saying that "you assert
that rhetoric is a creator of persuasion” (453a). In some sense this characterization casts a more neutral light on the matter than Gorgias' own words, as Gorgias has made rhetoric out to be something that appeals to baser human instincts (using words like “power,” “slave,” and “making money”), rather than those more noble. That is, no mention is made of areté, or even happiness (eudaimonia).

Still not satisfied, Socrates responds that other technai produce “persuasion” in the form of knowledge about their particular field (e.g., arithmetic produces “persuasion” about number): “then rhetoric is not the only producer of persuasion” (454a). At this juncture, Socrates may be deliberately conflating knowledge and persuasive power in order to steer the conversation in the desired direction. Finally, Gorgias refines his answer by saying that rhetoric deals with “the kind of persuasion employed in the law courts and other gatherings...and [is] concerned with right and wrong” (454b). Socrates will have plenty to say about this final assertion later. At this point, he introduces the distinction between two kinds of persuasion: one that produces genuine knowledge, and the other that produces mere belief. This distinction is crucial for understanding why Plato feels compelled to take issue with rhetoric at all. Socrates here suggests that rhetoric belongs to the latter category, and is “not instructive about right and wrong” (455a). Gorgias, surprisingly enough, agrees that rhetoric does not illuminate the speaker or listener about moral matters. Charles H. Kahn observes: “There is no conceptual contradiction in Gorgias’ view of rhetoric as a value-free instrument of political power. But there is a personal and social incompatibility between the public expression of this
view and Gorgias' position as an elite educator. This sets up the first part of the contradiction Socrates is about to shame him into accepting. So far, there are no indications that rhetoric is not a *techne*. At this point, rather, it would seem rhetoric is a *techne*, particularly in light of the following considerations.

Gorgias claims that the accomplished rhetorician can speak better than the doctor even when it comes to the practice of medicine, pointing out that he is better able to persuade patients to submit to prescribed treatment than his brother, a physician (456b). He compares rhetoric to boxing (interesting that his analogy is based on such a combative, and potentially harmful, practice), and he further contends that in similar fashion it can be employed toward both good and bad ends: “the craft [*techne*] is not...evil or to blame, but rather, in my opinion, those who make improper use of it. And the same argument also applies to rhetoric” (457a). One would expect Socrates to agree with one aspect of this argument, as elsewhere he has proceeded as if *technai* are considered value-neutral. What this does, however, is prioritize (according to Plato) the development of *aretē* over the acquisition of *technai*, since it is the former that will enable us to make proper use—and avoid abuse—of the latter.

Seizing Gorgias' claim that he is better able to persuade others than those who have mastered a specific *techne*, Socrates questions the relationship between this persuasive ability and the possession of knowledge. In other words, if the rhetorician is more successful than the doctor when it comes to persuading the patient to take his medicine, does this mean that the rhetorician also grasps the doctor's *techne*? Clearly, he

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130 *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, p. 135.
does not, and, analogically speaking, the same can be said with regard to all persuasive endeavors: despite their success, they do not require a genuine understanding of the issues involved. Perhaps an even greater source of consternation for Plato is that possession of the kind of genuine knowledge involved with mastery of a *techne* nonetheless finds itself subordinate to rhetoric when it comes to matters of persuasion—knowledge alone does not always carry adequate persuasive power. This rather surprising acknowledgement is reflected in the fact that the dialogue soon abandons the dialectic format and concludes with Socrates delivering, of all things, an impassioned speech.

Once Socrates induces Gorgias to acknowledge the value-neutral status of *technai*, he then proceeds to inquire whether his students of rhetoric are trained merely to *appear* to be good men, or actually to *be* good men. In so doing, Socrates is able to shame Gorgias into conceding that one can learn what is right and wrong, noble and base, just and unjust, and so on from him as well: “Well, Socrates, I suppose that if [a pupil] does not possess this knowledge, he can learn these things also from me” (460a). This is the value-laden claim that Socrates has been maneuvering to elicit, and Gorgias is dialectically refuted (and, more importantly, made to realize the contradiction between what he believes and what he does) in light of the fact that he earlier claimed rhetoric, like boxing, is value-neutral.

Of course, the most significant reason Socrates—and, by association, Plato—raise trenchant questions with regard to rhetoric is that, to their eyes at least, its persuasive power derives not from genuine, morally-grounded knowledge but from manipulation
and (mis-)representation of probabilities and appearances, and flattery. In addition, at the risk of redundancy, it must be pointed out that the exchange between Socrates and Gorgias is a context-specific conversation between two persons bearing more or less good will towards each other. We must be careful not to take any of Socrates’ particular arguments out of context as if they are Plato’s final word on the subject. The first third of the dialogue is but a prolegomenon for the ensuing engagement—and, one might suppose, a demonstration of how a dialectical inquiry of rhetoric might be pursued with a relatively intelligent, agreeable interlocutor.

Socrates’ modest success here is made possible principally by Gorgias’ capacity for shame. His next two interlocutors, Polus and especially Callicles, are less susceptible (though still succumb) to it. As a result, their conversations are both more animated and more vitriolic. A related consequence is that Socrates is able to achieve both greater and lesser degrees of success with them. Greater success is achieved insofar as the reader is better able to discern the gaping chasm between Socrates’ zealously-defended way of life and the selfish, amoral way of life advocated by Polus and Callicles. Lesser success is achieved insofar as Polus and Callicles do not appear in any way moved toward embracing (or even understanding) Socrates’ ethical position; rather, they remain firmly committed to their own Machiavellian approach to life. It is quite significant, however, that Socrates abandons the dialectic format and instead concludes the conversation with a lengthy, rousing fable (523a-527e) intended to dissuade readers from adopting the way of life advocated by Polus and Callicles. This says much about Plato’s understanding that
rhetoric can and, in fact, should be used for noble ends. In constructing a community through language, philosophy cannot do the requisite work alone.

In order to function properly dialectic requires that the participants engage the issues with rigorous honesty. Socrates praises Callicles for little else, although even Callicles resorts to a feigned, mocking compliance near the end of his conversation with Socrates. By reluctantly conceding out of shame that his students learn right and wrong from him, when it is apparent to all who witness the conversation that he does not want to make this claim wholeheartedly, Gorgias nonetheless emerges as a somewhat more sympathetic character than the power-hungry interlocutors to follow. That is, he evinces some understanding of the ethical implications of the conversation, and he at least wants to appear to be saying the right thing. This amounts to Plato’s indirect concession that rhetoric is not wholly culpable for corrupting society, nor those who teach it. Rather, the real targets of Plato’s critique are those who employ rhetoric merely for self-aggrandizement without recognizing the value of aretē.

Recently, some academics (many, but not all, being comparative philosophers) have raised legitimate questions about this Platonic ontology, where truth is upheld as the ideal philosophic endeavor and manipulation of appearances is disparaged as the work of mere flatterers. Such efforts generally prop up figures like Gorgias as a representative of an alternative ontology—one that questions the accessibility of a “God’s-eye view.” Truth is thus believed to be contingent on a variety of mitigating factors, including cultural origins and the orientation of individual, personal perspectives. Danny Coyle represents this view as well as anyone:
As a traveling persuader, Gorgias believes truth and falsehood is contingent on cultural situations; and in this sense, he is an early "comparative philosopher." Gorgias argues that an ontology of "reality" misses the point, rather, his focus is communication. He celebrates the problem of language by giving *logos* more importance than it has in its Homeric or epic sense, which translates more on the lines of "prattle" or "discussion" rather than persuasive "argument." Gorgias understands *logos* as argument or persuasion that impacts the soul. It is argument from "possibility" based on opinion which shifts from culture to culture. Gorgias, like Isocrates, has been relinquished to the margins of the dominant (Platonic) tradition.  

Coyle says much that seems reasonable, although in fact Gorgias escapes relatively unscathed when the way he is portrayed is contrasted with Plato's portrayal of Polus and Callicles. In fairness to Gorgias, of course, we should not take Plato's characterization of him as a historically accurate depiction. We must be wary, however, of strong revisionist claims, such as the assertion that Gorgias believed *logos* "impacts the soul." Given that Gorgias is known to have believed that "man is the measure of all things," it is far from certain that Gorgias believed in the existence of the soul at all, let alone how it may or may not be "impacted" by *logos*. What matters, however, is not whether Plato or Coyle is truer to the historical Gorgias. Rather, it is more interesting to consider why Gorgias' associates, Polus and Callicles, are subject to such belittling portrayals. It is true that certain aspects of Platonic thought—particularly the truth versus appearance ontology—have been dominant within the Western tradition, but one primary purpose of this investigation is to de-emphasize this understanding of Plato in favor of a renewed emphasis on dialectical engagement between persons.

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While we never will be able to massage away the significant ontological differences between Plato and Gorgias (nor should we try), any honest effort to analyze the Platonic dialogues with an interest in reviving their contemporaneous alternatives needs to attend to the most significant difference between them: character. As was the case with both Confucius and Xunzi, character is ultimately what determines whether what one says, and how one says it, should be given credence. Gorgias is a conventionalist, and as such his character is malleable—he just says what he has to say to get along, such as when he acquiesces that those students lacking a foundation in aretē learn that from him in the process of learning persuasive ability. Of course, he does not really believe that. Socrates lets him off easily compared to the excoriation he would have received from Confucius for essentially disregarding the importance of developing character, and then glibly conceding a pupil “can learn these things also from me.” As one who purports to be an educator, and in fact is a famous one at that, no one is in a position to do more harm or good than Gorgias. Socrates simply demonstrates that Gorgias has yet to do some serious reflection about how his activities influence his students, and how they, in turn, affect the wider polis. Polus and Callicles, as we shall see, are ardent amoralists, who will say or do almost anything if it is within their power and if it increases what they perceive to be their own selfish advantage. Socrates, quite the contrary, approaches his interlocutors with a principled objective. He in fact will say anything, even going so far as to introduce the rather embarrassing (for Callicles) example of the catamite. His only purpose is to induce his interlocutors to adopt a more reflective posture with regard to their own lives and the things they think they know.
When Polus enters the fray, it is with great bluster that he challenges Socrates’
(mock) confusion as to whether rhetoric is in fact a value-neutral activity, and to what
extent it offers instruction with regard to moral matters. Curiously, Socrates offers Polus
the opportunity to choose whether he would like to pursue the matter as questioner or
respondent. Socrates, of course, typically assumes the role of the former. Polus
immediately demands, “Answer me, Socrates. Since Gorgias seems to you at a loss
regarding the nature of rhetoric, what do you say it is?” (462b). Socrates rather
uncharacteristically seizes the opportunity to expound a provocative position and asserts
that rhetoric, far from being a technē, is a “kind of routine” that “produces gratification
and pleasure” (462c), and he compares it with cooking.132 Although it may not seem so to
contemporary readers, this ought to be construed as an insult, and Polus certainly deems
it as such.

Socrates further denigrates rhetoric by saying that “the activity as a whole...is not
an art [technē], but the occupation of a shrewd and enterprising spirit, and of one
naturally skilled in its dealings with men, and in sum and substance I call it ‘flattery,’”
(463a). Here we observe, in his resistance to flattery, a sentiment quite similar to that of
Confucius. Plato is both more complex and more comprehensive in his use of the term,
however, as there are many forms of what Socrates refers to as “flattery,” including
cookery (or seasoning), beautification (or cosmetics), and sophistic—the common
element among them being that they produce a palliative, superficial effect without

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132 I hesitate to say Socrates expounds his provocative position, insofar as his comments should be
construed as one attempt to offer a clear alternative to Gorgias’ muddled views. In other words, we must
remain cognizant of the fact that his remarks appear in a particular context with particular individuals.
concern for genuine results. Socrates later refines his definition of rhetoric to being “a part of flattery” (466a)—with the other activities mentioned above representing the other parts.

In response to Polus’ impertinent badgering, Socrates says “Rhetoric, in my opinion, is the semblance of a part of politics...[It is] bad—for evil things I call bad—if I must answer you as though you already understood what I mean” (463d). This latter qualification is important, since it suggests Socrates has pondered these matters at length and possesses a depth of understanding that is difficult to achieve. Since Polus is young and brash, he is not interested in (or capable of) taking the necessary dialectic steps to understand Socrates’ position. In short, Socrates is reluctantly delivering the conclusion to what should be a lengthy dialectic inquiry. It is rather unusual for Socrates to abandon his normal dialectic approach to conversation—which serves as another indication that Plato is beginning to acknowledge that other forms of mutual inquiry and communication occasionally are required.

Even though Socrates has just labeled rhetoric evil or bad, we shall soon see that it has an analogue, difficult to distinguish from rhetoric, that nonetheless plays a crucial role in the ideal polis. Regardless, however, here as always we must refrain from becoming overly-attached to Socrates’ words extracted from context. James Boyd White is equally reluctant to take this or any other Socratic claim as Plato’s final word on the subject. Instead, he argues that the dialogue is quite deliberately crafted to engage the reader dialectically:

Like the interlocutor, the reader is broken out of his culture, out of the language and activities that define him; he is thus prevented from defining himself by
simply repeating established forms of speech or conduct. He is forced to function on his own: to take and define positions of his own creation and to respond to those, valid and invalid, asserted by Socrates. It is in this way that the dialogue defines and makes meaningful its central subject, the nature of self and of community. For nothing less than this is at stake in the choice between “rhetoric” and “dialectic”; and the apparently distinct subjects of the dialogue, the nature of rhetoric and dialectic and the nature of the happy and unhappy life, are really one. Rhetoric and dialectic are forms both of life and of statesmanship.\(^{133}\)

In other words, occasionally Plato has Socrates make calculated claims, and less-than-valid arguments, in order to provoke the reader into engaging the issues dialectically.

This notion seems even more compelling when we consider how poorly Polus conducts the investigation when given the opportunity, and how unwilling he is to reflect on what Socrates has to say in response. At this point, Gorgias feels compelled to re-enter the conversation, for at least he is interested in hearing Socrates’ lengthy explanation. On the whole, flattery is an unseemly and immoral activity, Socrates explains,

...Because it aims at what is pleasant, ignoring the good, and I insist that it is not an art \([technē]\) but a routine, because it can produce no principle in virtue of which it offers what it does, nor explain the nature thereof, and consequently is unable to point to the cause of each thing it offers. And I refuse the name of art \([technē]\) to anything irrational. (465a)

To further illustrate, Socrates postulates the following scheme of analogies already hinted at above, summarizing that “rhetoric...is the counterpart in the soul of what cookery is to the body” (465b-e):

\(^{133}\) *When Words Lose Their Meaning*, p. 109.
BODY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Simulacrum of Health</th>
<th>Cookery/Seasoning</th>
<th>Beautification/Cosmetics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genuine Health</td>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>Gymnastics/Exercise</td>
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SOUL

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Simulacrum of Health</th>
<th>Rhetoric</th>
<th>Sophistic</th>
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<td>Genuine Health</td>
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One might wonder why cooking is set in opposition to medicine—after all, is it not the case that both influence the health of the body? Socrates must be referring to the use of seasoning and spices. Such practices mask unappealing flavors and can enhance the taste of bland or even rotten food such that it becomes pleasing to the palate, just as rhetoric, according to Socrates, can produce pleasure and belief in the audience without producing genuine knowledge. Seasoning and rhetoric are not harmful *per se*, but they aim to produce pleasure and gratification rather than to be truly beneficial. Medicine, on the other hand, is devoted to the genuine health of the body, where certain treatments may be discomforting or unpleasant, yet ultimately of benefit to the body. Similarly, cosmetics aim to improve merely the appearance of the body while gymnastics (or physical training in general) develops genuine health.

Socrates offers little elaboration as to how his analogies relate to the psyche or soul, although some explanation is certainly required. Rhetoric is construed as the glib manipulation of an audience, often with a view toward accomplishing less-than-noble goals. Justice, on the other hand, must be a kind of communication that delineates and fosters genuine health in the *polis*. As a quality of character, justice is impartial and pays no heed to the compelling fictions and clever turns of phrase that embellish rhetorical
practice. It is interesting that dialectic is not mentioned by Socrates in this context, although perhaps it might be substituted where “justice” appears above. Sophistry, as a sub-field or school of rhetoric, is the simulacrum of legislation, which ideally is the product of reasonable and just institutions. Arete, then, could be equated with political technē, and true health in the soul—a talent that builds genuine relationships of mutual trust and admiration, as opposed to an insincere ability to ingratiate oneself to others through flattery.

The lingering question, however, is to what extent can arete be taught? Clearly, it cannot be taught in the same fashion as shipbuilding or sculpture—otherwise, the Gorgias would conclude with Polus and Callicles recanting their brazenly amoral way of life and taking up philosophy. According to Alexander Nehemas:

[Socrates] was not a teacher of virtue, as Protagoras claimed to be, of rhetoric, which was the province of Gorgias, of grammar, in which Prodicus specialized, or of any other technē—disclaiming, naturally, Hippias’ polymathy. As he is made to say by Aeschines the Socratic in connection with Alcibiades, “If I thought that it was by some craft (technē) that I was able to benefit him, I would find myself guilty of great folly.”...[We] can distinguish between Socrates and the sophists by means of his refusal to present himself as a teacher of others (leaving open, all the while, the question whether he actually did or did not succeed in teaching). The difference between Socrates and the people with whom he was often and not so unreasonably confused is ultimately a difference in purpose, in the sort of life he chose to follow.134

Although Socrates may have avoided claiming mastery of any single technē, we also should consider the extent to which his claims of ignorance are at least partially ironic. In light of the Apology, where he speaks about his way of life in a more straightforward fashion than in other dialogues, we see that he has taken it upon himself if not to educate
his fellow Athenians, then at least to expose their ignorance and thus motivate them to live a more reflective life. Similarly, taken together, the Platonic dialogues might be considered Plato's best attempt to, if not teach *aretē*, then at least inspire his readers to pursue it in conversation with others. Nehemas, making a stronger claim for Plato than I would care to, writes: “Plato became convinced that, in contrast to Socrates, he *did* know what virtue was and undertook to teach it to others: he came to the conclusion that virtue and happiness consist in the life of philosophy itself.”135 I would stop just short of attributing this degree of conviction to Plato. Although he did establish a university (presumably to educate others), his dialogues remain too provocatively packed with possibility and ambiguity to attribute one conclusive position of absolute certainty to him.

The preceding analogical scheme formulated by Socrates, then, may not be intended as Plato’s final word on the viability of rhetoric. Rather, it serves as an invitation to the reader to reflect on it, challenge it, and in so doing develop an understanding and appreciation of the faculty of language that extends much deeper than the self-serving employment of rhetoric envisioned by Polus or Callicles. Bearing in mind the context in which they appear, the crucial determining factor behind each of these analogies is a matter of similitude versus authenticity. Socrates challenges the former because it tends to impede, inhibit, or counter outright our pursuit of the latter. Rhetoric, then, is able to produce persuasion in others without being firmly rooted in (or conveying) genuine knowledge. As such, it threatens the health and stability of the

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134 *Virtues of Authenticity*, p. 116-117.
polis—particularly a polis that is comprised of less-than-knowledgeable (and less-than-virtuous) individuals, as those who are capable of pleasing and winning over the masses ultimately hold the keys to power and domination. Discerning judgment is required in order to distinguish the apparent from the authentic, and to understand that the degraded aspect of each analogical pair is merely a mask.

The Allegory of the Cave in the Republic involves a similar analogical scheme. Just as the cave and the shadows on the wall relate to the realm of belief (or that which is merely apparent), so the outside world corresponds to that which is really real. By analogy, the rhetorician busies himself with the manipulation of the shadows while remaining ignorant of the daylight. In doing so, the populace remains in a state of deluded ignorance as well. Thus, Plato argues, it is only the genuine philosopher or dialectician that can lead us into the daylight. While this is an imaginative story forcefully told, it nonetheless is a story, not an accurate or true depiction of reality. As such, it seems vulnerable to the same critique that Socrates levels against rhetoric.

Stories such as these, which can be found in abundance throughout the Platonic dialogues, beg a number of challenging interpretive questions. If Plato had serious doubts as to the viability of rhetoric, which aims at persuasion rather than the transmission of or inspiration towards genuine knowledge, why does he unabashedly employ a variety of non-literal illustrative devices himself, as opposed to literal language that purports to inform us of the true nature of reality? Plato’s theory of dialectic evinces an awareness of the limitations of language, so it would seem that any attempt to paint a literal picture of reality would be as distorted, and potentially more misleading, than an
analogical one. In addition, story-telling should not be equated with rhetoric, since the latter was pursued primarily for the sake of influencing audiences and acquiring political power, while story-telling may aim to please, inform, and/or convey a moral lesson.

On another level, we ought to distinguish rhetoric from the fables and myths scattered throughout Plato’s dialogues on the following grounds: the manner in which these stories are employed. Or rather, what they aim to accomplish. The rhetoric of the sophists is simply a means to an end and, importantly, does not inform us as to whether we ought to pursue that end. The Platonic fables, on the other hand, serve a purportedly more noble purpose: to induce us to strive for the good life—a life which, ironically enough, aims at the kind of genuine knowledge (and areté) which Plato is unable to elucidate adequately through his written works.

Perhaps, then, Plato would be comfortable with a kind of persuasive speech grounded in knowledge, stemming from areté, and open to dialectical engagement. Yet could that still be considered rhetoric? If the Gorgias represents Plato’s most trenchant critique of rhetoric as practiced by the sophists, then the Phaedrus represents his best attempt at reconciliation and incorporation. Somewhat like Xunzi’s efforts to assimilate the vocabulary and techniques of his ideological opponents, in the Phaedrus Plato sets out to develop a theory of rhetoric that would contribute to the welfare of the polis as a whole, rather than the special interests of a few individuals. Here is how Sinaiko summarizes Socrates’ view of rhetoric in the Phaedrus:

Rhetoric, which Socrates later defines (261a) as “the art of leading the soul by means of arguments,” is thus an essential aspect of dialectic. But rhetoric so conceived is not the same as the “art” professed by Lysias, Gorgias, and the other sophists. True rhetoric is devoted not to mere persuasion as such but to the task of
revealing the truth; the ability of rhetoric to influence the soul through arguments is derived from the compelling nature of the truth itself.\textsuperscript{136}

The problem, as we have already seen, is that at times truth is \textit{not} as compelling as Plato would prefer it to be—Socrates’ failure to convert Polus and Callicles to the philosophical life being a prime example. Still, rhetoric—as Plato would have us see it—can only achieve optimum success in persuasion when it \textit{is} grounded in truth.

Although Socrates and Phaedrus set out to expound on the nature of \textit{erōs}, Plato uses this most unusual occasion (with Socrates quite uncharacteristically straying beyond the city walls) to provide a framework within which rhetoric, the art of persuasive speech-making, can be examined. Nehemas, in a provocative chapter on the \textit{Phaedrus}, writes:

\begin{quote}
Socrates makes a great effort to get Phaedrus to realize that rhetoric must be pursued with a regard for the truth of what one is talking about. And since truth is what we get to know through philosophy, Socrates argues that philosophy is a necessary element in the rhetorician’s art. In addition, Socrates wants him to understand that rhetoric and philosophy, whether in oral or written form, are not simply urbane means of entertainment but efforts to establish views according to which life can be led.\textsuperscript{137}
\end{quote}

As we saw in the \textit{Gorgias}, Plato believes that the “debate” between philosophy and rhetoric amounts to a debate between ways of life. The difference here, however, is that rhetoric is no longer marginalized as a simulacrum, a part of flattery; rather, Phaedrus affords Socrates the opportunity to deliver his views on how one can attain “the art of the true rhetorician, the real master of persuasion” (269d). In other words, Plato is about to extend his vision of the ideal \textit{polis} such that rhetoric, properly construed, plays a significant and valuable role.

\textsuperscript{136}Love, Knowledge, and Discourse, p. 45.
Of course, what Socrates has to say about becoming a true rhetorician is anything but easily accomplished. Socrates begins by making the surprisingly simple yet credible argument that, if one is to persuade others based on probabilities, then one is most probable to succeed if one, in fact, understands the truth of the matter. Once the importance of truth is established, Socrates then details the kind of knowledge required:

Since the function of oratory is in fact to influence men’s souls, the intending orator must know what types of soul there are. Now these are of a determinate number, and their variety results in a variety of individuals. To the types of soul thus discriminated there corresponds a determinate number of types of discourse. Hence a certain type of hearer will be easy to persuade by a certain type of speech to take such and such action for such and such reason, while another type will be hard to persuade. All this the orator must fully understand, and next he must watch it actually occurring, exemplified in men’s conduct, and must cultivate a keenness of perception in following it. And when he is competent to say what type of man is susceptible to what kind of discourse; when, further, he can, on catching sight of so-and-so, tell himself, “That is the man... and in order to persuade him of so-and-so I have to apply these arguments in this fashion”; and when, on top of all this, he has further grasped the right occasions for speaking and for keeping quiet, and has come to recognize the right and the wrong time for the brachylogy, the pathetic passage, the exacerbation, and all the rest of his accomplishments—then and not till then has he well and truly achieved the art.

Phaedrus is, not surprisingly, rather astonished by the tremendous difficulty involved with Socrates’ proposal, and so Socrates temporarily adopts the position of devil’s advocate, which might seem familiar in light of certain positions that appear in the Gorgias:

There is no need to make such a solemn business of it... there is... absolutely no need for the budding orator to concern himself with the truth about what is just or good conduct, nor indeed about who are just and good men whether by nature or education. In the law courts nobody cares a rap for the truth about these matters, but only about what is plausible. And that is the same as what is probable, and is

137 Virtues of Authenticity, p. 332.
what must occupy the attention of the would-be master of the art of speech. Even actual facts ought sometimes not be stated, if they don’t tally with probability; they should be replaced by what is probable, whether in prosecution or defense; whatever you say, you simply must pursue this probability...and can say good-bye to the truth forever. (272d-273a)

Phaedrus, rather easily swayed, says that this is precisely the view endorsed by “those who claim to be experts in the art of speech.” Of course, Socrates cannot leave the discussion here, but rather returns to the first position outlined and endorses it once again, however difficult it might be, “because the goal is glorious, though not the goal you think of” (274a).

Socrates suggests that, if one sets out to become a master of rhetoric and investigates the matter rigorously and honestly, one will, in some sense, modify one’s ambition. The closer one comes to a mastery of rhetoric, the closer one will be to, of all things, embracing philosophy. Nehemas explains:

Since knowledge of the truth is necessary for the ability to treat rhetoric systematically, and since Plato believes that the search for truth is philosophy, the main (and surprising) implication of Socrates’ controversial argument is that finally only philosophers can be adequate rhetoricians.138

I would amend this claim only so much as to suggest that the reverse might also be considered true: as one becomes more engaged with philosophy, one also develops a greater appreciation for rhetorical talents. Julias A. Elias proffers a similar perspective:

[The purpose of the last part] of the Phaedrus is to point up the difference between eristic and sophistic rhetoric on the one hand, and philosophical rhetoric on the other....The first is designed to win the argument at all costs, to play on popular opinion: its approach stresses the etymology of rhetor, the flow, the mellifluous stream of eloquence which carries all before it, relying on its appeal to the lowest common denominator of emotion and to the ostensible interest of the

138 Ibid., p. 343.
audience to conceal its logical flaws and factual errors. Philosophical rhetoric, however, while it shares the function of exhorting and persuading its hearers, is primarily concerned with the truth. This claim is specifically rejected as a function of rhetoric by the Sophists (Gorgias and Thrasyarmachus, for example), on the grounds that the art of rhetoric is manifested by the ability to persuade anybody of anything.139

The notion of “truth” tends to be particularly unsettling for those who resist the Platonic ontology, fearing that any acknowledgment of the validity of truth (as either a philosophical or rhetorical pursuit) leads inexorably to a full-blown theory of Forms, an immortal soul, and so on. I submit, however, that truth is not only the primary province of philosophical rhetoric as construed by Plato, but it also was the fundamental concern of Confucius and Xunzi, who set out to establish optimum conditions for human flourishing within pre-existing textual traditions and social paradigms. To be sure, their arguments were not couched in terms such as “truth,” “validity,” and so on, but at the end of the day (and often much sooner) their positions needed to produce positive results in order to have any persuasive ability at all. That is all that is meant by “truth”—concrete, verifiable results. Surely, that is what any pragmatic agenda aims for as well. Plato still stands apart from his Chinese counterparts, however, in suggesting an ontology that upholds a vital distinction between appearance and reality (as exemplified in the Allegory of the Cave).

Ultimately Plato recognizes, and effectively demonstrates in the *Phaedrus*, that philosophy benefits from exemplifying a rhetorical sensibility because, in so doing, it becomes more amenable to persons not otherwise predisposed to philosophical inquiry.

139 Plato’s Defence, pp. 29-30.
Rhetoric, properly employed, is a philosophical palliative. Just as Gorgias defends the rhetorician as able to persuade the sick patient to take his medicine when the doctor cannot, so the philosophically inclined rhetorician can persuade the community to engage questions of philosophical import it otherwise would not. Given its pragmatic focus, however, rhetoric equally needs philosophy, or dialectic, to interrogate chosen ends, and to provide criteria for effective application. Philosophy also provides an awareness of ethical issues that rhetoric, left alone, neglects. In attuning oneself to broader philosophical concerns, the philosophical rhetorician becomes more persuasive. The closer s/he is to understanding the complexities of a given issue, and how the issue in question bears on other problems, the better equipped s/he will be to steer the audience in a mutually favorable direction.

Philosophy also empowers us to distinguish genuine persuasion from mere flattery. Rhetoric can persuade us to take our medicine, or to construct a fleet of sailing vessels, but it is philosophy that allows us to understand why we should take our medicine, and how constructing a fleet of sailing vessels will result in prestige, military might, and economic prosperity.¹⁴⁰ Plato’s dialogues demonstrate that without philosophy (and, by association, without aretē), rhetoric is a pragmatic pursuit of the worst kind, serving the unscrupulous interests of any capable of abusing its power, and ultimately causing harm both to those swayed by it and to those who wield it irresponsibly. Yet they also make evident that, without rhetoric, philosophy—especially

¹⁴⁰ I have chosen to use the construction of a fleet of sailing vessels as an illuminating example because it was Pericles, often hailed as a master of persuasion in ancient Greece, who persuaded his fellow Athenians to do so, and they enjoyed great prosperity as a result.
when construed as dialectic—is a tedious, abstract enterprise that has difficulty engaging all but the most serious minds.

**Aristotle on Rhetoric and Dialectic: The Art of Persuasion**

"There is nothing in the world like a persuasive speech to fuddle the mental apparatus and upset the convictions and debauch the emotions of an audience not practiced in the tricks and delusions of oratory." ¹⁴¹

Whether intentional or not, Twain’s passing comment on the power of oratory implicitly reflects the three means of persuasion—logical, ethical, and emotional—identified by Aristotle. Rather than framing a particular mode as preferable or superior to another (as, we shall see, Aristotle is wont to do), Twain seemingly disdains all facets of rhetorical prowess as specious. It has already been shown how Confucius, Xunzi, and Plato salvage a noble purpose for rhetoric in their own unique ways, and Aristotle does the same. Indeed, Aristotle’s *On Rhetoric* has been one of the most, if not the most, historically influential guides to the art of persuasion. This is an impressive feat considering the text is “esoteric,” an in-house work in progress, and was not intended for widespread dissemination.¹⁴² The work is divided into three books, each of which is subdivided into many chapters.¹⁴³ This portion of the investigation is primarily concerned with only the first three chapters of the first book, where Aristotle defines rhetoric in contrast with dialectic, and further argues for its utility in fostering a flourishing community.

¹⁴¹ Mark Twain, “The Man that Corrupted Hadleyburg,” in *Great Short Works of Mark Twain*, p. 260.
¹⁴² As reported by George A. Kennedy in *Comparative Rhetoric*. This might help to explain certain tensions within the work, although it does not resolve them.
As a student at Plato's Academy, Aristotle distinguished himself as an eminent thinker with a keen analytical mind. Nonetheless, he harbored serious doubts about certain aspects of Plato's thought. For example, on numerous occasions in his writing he raises thoughtful challenges to the theory of Forms. Aristotle also did not share what he perceived to be Plato's resistance to rhetoric as presented in the Gorgias. Instead, On Rhetoric adopts a more conciliatory position and tone found similar to that found in the Phaedrus. It further aims to develop reliable, well-reasoned practical guidelines for the art of persuasion. At the same time, Aristotle is critical of his contemporary rhetorical theorists who, to his mind, over-emphasize the importance of emotional appeals (pathos) while disregarding the importance of formulating a cogent argument (logos). Of related concern, particularly as the contrast with Confucius and Xunzi is developed, will be those passages where Aristotle assesses the role of character (ēthos) in persuasion. Although Aristotle does consider ēthos to be one of three primary means of persuasion (pistis, pl. pisteis), the language he uses primarily emphasizes seeming to be a person of good character, not necessarily actually being one. This would not sit well with his Chinese counterparts.

In an ironic twist, despite the fact that Aristotle sought to restore rhetoric to a serviceable role in the polis he, by virtue of his unwavering commitment to classification and categorization, unwittingly established a clear and lasting demarcation between philosophy and rhetoric. In arguing that pathos and ēthos—emotion and character—are viable pisteis within the field of rhetoric, by reverse logic Aristotle also effectively

143 These divisions, headings, and so on are added by later compilers and are not the work of Aristotle.

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excludes them from philosophy proper, where logos reigns supreme. In other words, Aristotle’s taxonomic efforts seem to have engendered the conviction among “philosophers” (self-professed pursuers of wisdom or truth) that rhetoric has no bearing on their pursuits. How else can we explain the dearth of rhetoric classes in academic philosophy departments? At best, there rhetoric is studied as a historical phenomenon, but not as a legitimate practice. Sadly, this in turn has a tendency to move philosophers away from participation in, or even relevance to, civic life. Approaching Aristotle from the perspective of Confucianism, however, affords a fresh opportunity to understand what he thought rhetoric—and more importantly, philosophy—can accomplish with respect to establishing and improving community.

I believe we can do this best by reflecting on the opening passage from On Rhetoric, where he asserts that rhetoric is the “counterpart” (antistrophos) of dialectic. But what, according to Aristotle, is dialectic? According to the Topics, “a syllogism [or argument] is dialectical when drawn from generally accepted opinions” (100a19-21). This is situated in contrast with apodeixis (logically valid demonstration), which “occurs whenever the syllogism is drawn from things that are true and primary” (100a27). In other words, dialectic is a kind of syllogistic reasoning based not on an archē (first principle) but rather on endoxa (generally accepted opinions). This means, not

144 Translations generally derive from the venerable work of Richard McKeon, although George A. Kennedy is regularly consulted as well. McKeon’s translations tend to be more readable though perhaps a bit less accurate; Kennedy takes great pains to be accurate but at the expense of readability.

145 Aristotle explains this as “those [opinions] that seem right to all people or most people or the wise—and in the latter case all the wise or most of them or those best known and generally accepted [as authorities]” (100b22). It is remarkable that Aristotle could lump all these disparate groups together, for not only is each group liable to hold competing views, but there could very well be competing views within each
surprisingly, that rhetoric also operates within the realm of *endoxa*. According to Aristotle, dialectic serves three distinct purposes: "for intellectual training, for conversation, and for the philosophical sciences ... [dialectic] leads the way to the first principles of all methods" (100b26-101b4). It is fascinating that an activity based on *endoxa* (which are tentative and subject to revision) could nonetheless be considered the source for all *archai*—and yet where else could the *archai* come from? The Confucians, by contrast, do not become entangled in conundrums stemming from the categorization of kinds of knowledge and methods of obtaining it; rather, they start *in media res* and proceed. While some may find this approach epistemologically untenable, it derives from a fundamentally different preconception about authority. Aristotle's method implicitly invests authority in the human capacity of reasoning and demonstration, and so feels compelled to think things through as thoroughly as possible. Occasionally this dogged pursuit of clarity leads to paradoxical (or even seemingly silly) conclusions. For Confucius and Xunzi, authority derives more from the quality of the person speaking, but one can certainly debate how we are to gauge the quality of persons.

Although Aristotle's understanding of dialectic was strongly influenced by Plato, the style with which his views are presented in writing is distinctly different. Plato employed the dialogue format to great effect, insofar as it enjoins readers to entertain a number of contrasting views simultaneously without forcing them to commit to any one wholeheartedly. At the same time, Plato is afforded the opportunity to exhibit dialectic in group. Here we begin to see a certain measure of absurdity that emerges as Aristotle struggles to establish clarity with regard to these matters.
action, and when the dialectic process breaks down, Socrates often delivers a myth or fable. Not so with Aristotle—the treatise format places considerable constraints upon how Aristotle can conduct his investigation, and at the same time it is reflective of the philosophical position under construction. Taken together, Aristotle’s writings represent a grand attempt to perform the dialectic functions of collection and division with regard to almost every conceivable topic. Yet, one cannot help but wonder how Plato would have viewed the project—perhaps as a spectacular failure? For all his brilliance and diligence, I suspect Aristotle embraced the overt objective of dialectic while sometimes overlooking the spirit behind it.

If rhetoric is the “counterpart” of dialectic, in what sense does Aristotle use the term? According to Kennedy, “in the public forum dialectic becomes rhetoric, as understood by Aristotle; and there ethical and pathetical means of persuasion are invoked, as well as logical argument.”146 The inclusion of considerations of character and emotional appeal ultimately render rhetoric significantly different from dialectic, however, as the latter depends solely on logos to determine legitimacy. Aristotle is dealing with matters of extreme complexity here. On one level, he wants to outline effective practical means for rhetorical success (regardless of the ethical or logical implications), but on the other hand he wants to argue what should constitute grounds for rhetorical success. There is an ongoing tension between the descriptive and prescriptive dimensions of the inquiry. For example, he asserts, “it is wrong to warp the jury by leading them into anger or envy or pity; that is the same as if someone made a
straightedge rule crooked before using it” (1354a24). This passage is noteworthy on several counts. First, here Aristotle deliberately asserts a certain ethical view (“it is wrong”), whereas much of his work is primarily descriptive and prescriptive only hypothetically: *if you want to practice rhetoric successfully then you must do this.* Here the claim is stronger. Second, Aristotle later acknowledges that moving the audience emotionally is legitimate—it is one of three main pisteis. In this context, he is objecting to those rhetorical handbooks that emphasize manipulation of pathos virtually to the exclusion of anything else. Finally, the analogy he uses (that of warping a straightedge) is worth noting because similar metaphors are employed by Confucius, such as when he states that effective rulership places the straight over the crooked in order to improve the latter. Here, Aristotle’s point is that a forensic case must be decided justly and impartially. Manipulation of a jury or judge’s emotions (or at least constructing a case entirely around such an approach) is tantamount to warping their ability to do so.

Even within the purview of rhetoric, being able to discern and present the truth is a fundamental concern for Aristotle. In order to be a successful rhetorician one must also be familiar with dialectic:

Rhetorical study, in its strict sense, is concerned with the modes of persuasion [pisteis]. Persuasion is clearly a sort of demonstration, since we are most fully persuaded when we consider a thing to have been demonstrated. The orator’s demonstration is an enthymeme, and this is, in general, the most effective of the modes of persuasion. The enthymeme is a sort of syllogism, and the consideration of syllogisms of all kinds, without distinction, is the business of dialectic, either of dialectic as a whole or of one of its branches. It follows plainly, therefore, that he who is best able to see how and from what elements a

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146 *On Rhetoric*, p. 292 fn.
147 Xunzi also frequently uses this metaphor.
syllogism is produced will also be best skilled in the enthymeme, when he has further learnt what its subject-matter is and in what respects it differs from the syllogism of strict logic. The true and the approximately true are apprehended by the same faculty; it may also be noted that men have a sufficient natural instinct for what is true, and usually do arrive at the truth. Hence the man who makes a good guess at truth is likely to make a good guess at probabilities. (1355a4-18)

One almost gets the sense that, if he could will it so, Aristotle would do away with rhetoric altogether, since, ideally speaking, dialectic is more firmly rooted in demonstrable truth and is seemingly impervious to extraneous manipulation. There is a strange tension at play here. He recognizes pragmatically that, at least under certain circumstances, there are means of persuasion superior to (i.e., more effective than) logical reasoning. At the same time, however, he yearns to subsume rhetorical demonstration under the purview of dialectic. What Aristotle does not seem to consider, however, is that truth may at times be less productive or persuasive than vagueness or ambiguity.

Implicit in his reasoning is the assumption that greater degrees of clarity or truth will achieve greater degrees of success, be it persuasive or otherwise. For Aristotle, then, apparently the truth never does hurt.

Aristotle argues that rhetoric is necessary because it enables those “with the truth” (or at least closer to it) to defeat those with unscrupulous motives without it:

Rhetoric is useful (1) because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites, so that if the decisions of judges are not what they ought to be, the defeat must be due to the speakers themselves, and they must be blamed accordingly. Moreover, (2) before some audiences not even the possession of the exactest knowledge will make it easy for what we say to produce conviction. For argument based on knowledge implies instruction, and there are people whom one cannot instruct. Here, then, we must use, as our modes of persuasion and argument, notions possessed by everybody....Further, (3) we must be able to employ persuasion, just as strict reasoning can be employed, on opposite sides of a question, not in order that we may in practice employ it both ways (for we must not make people believe what is wrong), but in
order that we may see clearly what the facts are, and that, if another man argues unfairly, we on our part may be able to confute him. No other of the arts draws opposite conclusions: dialectic and rhetoric alone do this. Both these arts draw opposite conclusions impartially. Nevertheless, the underlying facts do not lend themselves equally well to the contrary views. No; things that are true and things that are better are, by their nature, practically always easier to prove and easier to believe in. (1355a21-39)

Again, the assumption that truth is somehow inherently better and more accessible is debatable. Robert Wardy comments:

Nothing could be further removed than this benign vision from Gorgias’ proclamation that “a logos written with skill, not uttered in truth, pleases and persuades a great crowd.”...So, although for the Platonic Gorgias rhetoric is an ethically neutral tool or weapon, and much the same holds for Aristotle, he makes the significant addition that circumstances “naturally”—and so routinely—favor the morally upright use, not the corrupt abuse, of the instruments of persuasion. 148

Unfortunately, Aristotle’s optimism is betrayed often enough by real-world results. Occasionally, the truth wins out but not necessarily to anyone’s advantage or benefit. In addition, there are miscarriages of justice; legislative bodies draft misguided laws (sometimes even when their intentions may be noble); and we sometimes honor people who, in retrospect, are less than worthy of our praise. 149

In this regard, Aristotle does recognize that there are matters beyond the comprehension of certain audiences, and so rhetoric is necessary in order to make one’s position both more accessible and seemingly more plausible. This echoes the underlying theme of Plato’s Phaedrus, the “Myth of the Metals” in the Republic, and could even be compared with the Buddhist soteriological theory upaya, or “skillful means,” where deliberate manipulation of an audience is condoned when a higher purpose is the goal

(typically leading to greater degrees of enlightenment). Whatever one had hoped to gain at the outset is no longer desired once the real (and formerly obscured and/or unappreciated) objective is achieved. Given Aristotle's strong investment in the power and utility of truth, it may be going too far to suggest there is a proto-theory of skillful means under development here.

Having argued for the importance of rhetoric to attaining and conveying truth in a public context, Aristotle delivers this definition:

Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. This is not a function of any other art. Every other art can instruct or persuade about its own particular subject-matter; for instance, medicine about what is healthy and unhealthy, geometry about the properties of magnitudes, arithmetic about numbers, and the same is true of the other arts and sciences. But rhetoric we look upon as the power of observing the means of persuasion on almost any subject presented to us; and that is why we say that, in its technical character, it is not concerned with any special or definite class of subjects. (1355b26-36)

The references to medicine and other technē are almost certainly made with an interest in responding to Plato's Gorgias. Aristotle does not even bother to argue that rhetoric is a technē—he simply asserts that it is. The art of rhetoric consists in observing the available means of persuasion. Interestingly, no mention is made of delivery per se, although delivery has certainly come to be recognized as another important aspect of rhetorical practice. Aristotle is also careful not to assert that rhetoric is simply aimed at achieving persuasive success at all costs. There are circumstances, he says, when we must exercise discretion not to use a technique if it is overly specious or manipulative. In some sense,

149 These three examples of rhetoric gone awry correspond to the three kinds of rhetoric identified by Aristotle: forensic, legislative, and epideictic.
Aristotle is delivering a methodical, theoretical set of guidelines that corresponds roughly to what Confucius does in practice. The significant difference is that, for Aristotle, it seems primarily important to know it. For Confucius, the distinction is not so clear: knowing it automatically entails doing it—exemplary conduct provides its own justification.

As mentioned previously, Aristotle identifies three distinct *pisteis* specific to rhetoric. The first is *ethos*, and at times it seems this is the most important:

Persuasion is achieved by the speaker’s personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak. It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses. (1356a4-14)

Here we find the aspect of Aristotle’s theory of rhetoric that would be most interesting to Confucius and Xunzi. Surely they would applaud the emphasis Aristotle places on character in determining the effectiveness of one’s persuasive efforts, but is Aristotle emphasizing *being* a person of good character, or only *seeming* to be one? Is he saying character *is* the most effective means of persuasion, or *should be*? For no sooner does he assert the persuasive power that inheres to a person of good character than he insists that we should evaluate what he says not who he is. This differs importantly from the unwillingness of Confucius to separate the two. Of course, it is not always easy to
differentiate them, although Confucius certainly places much greater emphasis on the integral relationship between a person’s actions and a person’s words.

Aristotle develops his theory of *ethos* with regard to rhetoric at the beginning of Book 2:

There are three things which inspire confidence in the orator’s own character—the three, namely, that induce us to believe a thing apart from any proof of it: practical wisdom (*phronēsis*), good character (*aretē*), and good will (*eunoia*). False statements and bad advice are due to one or more of the following three causes. Men either form a false opinion through want of *phronēsis*, or they form a true opinion, but because of their moral badness they do not say what they really think; or finally, they are both sensible and upright, but not well disposed to their hearers, and may fail in consequence to recommend what they know to be the best course. These are the only possible cases. It follows that any one who is thought to have all three of these good qualities will inspire trust in his audience. The way to make ourselves thought to be [a person with *phronēsis* and *aretē*] must be gathered from the analysis of goodness already given: the way to establish your own goodness is the same as the way to establish that of others. (1378a6-18)

This last sentence is frustratingly cryptic, and yet it purports to answer the most significant question emerging from this discussion: How does a speaker win over an audience through *ethos*? Kennedy translates the same passage: “a person would present himself as being of a certain sort from the same sources that he would use to present another person” (p. 121). Again, this is beyond vague. Kennedy refers the reader to a prior discussion of the noble and desirable found at 1.9, but the primary aim of that discussion is to clarify the proper topics for praising others. It hardly seems suitable for one to deliver an epideictic speech about oneself in order to engender the audience’s reverence for one’s *ethos*.

Perhaps an even greater cause of consternation, Aristotle never explicitly discusses whether it is possible to project oneself as a person of *phronēsis* and *aretē*
without actually being one. On initial reflection, it would seem to be quite difficult only
to pretend to be such a person. If one truly knows what is involved, would not one also
want to be—if not actually be—such a person? Then again, accomplished thespians are
able to embody such personas on the stage—all they need is an adequate script and the
proper scenario in which to evince the requisite dimensions of character. Of course, here
Aristotle is primarily concerned with what will achieve success in an oratorical setting,
and the emphasis is on seeming, not being. Given that Aristotle writes *On Rhetoric* with
an eye toward persuading less-than-knowledgeable (or -perceptive) audiences in mind,
*seeming* may be enough in most cases. Ultimately Aristotle is writing with an eye toward
what will be successful, not so much what should or should not be.

Herein lies the rub: in the course of community life, we find ourselves in
situations where we want to persuade others to pursue a particular course of action. It
could be a matter of grave importance, or it could be something relatively trivial. Given
the motley assortment of intelligences and dispositions we are likely to find in our
community, what strategy is apt to be most successful? Shall we bombard them with
facts and data supporting our position? Shall we ply them with personal benefits they
might incur from pursuing our recommended course? Shall we hope our character comes
across as genuinely wise and good, or shall we employ potentially manipulative practices
to make them merely believe so? In the interest of expediency and efficacy, combined
with an optimism that truth tends to win the day and to the general benefit of those
involved, Aristotle here places the ability to project ethos over and above actually
developing it. Although Confucius and Xunzi recognize (and bemoan) that such short
cuts may have limited success in the short term, they maintain a more rigorous standard in matters of personal character. Good character, they contend, bears all the persuasive force that is required—perhaps due in part to the fact that “truth” and “reason” are not recognized as philosophical categories.

A related question that was of significant interest to Plato is whether rhetoric should be construed as an educative or ethically-enriching practice. According to Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, “Aristotle’s point about the ethical directions of rhetoric is not the overly strong claim that every successful rhetorician must be a phronimos; but it is also not the relatively weak claim that, like all crafts, rhetoric is directed to its best and most successful exercise.” In other words, Aristotle does place certain limits as to how rhetoric may be employed. It is not—and cannot aim to be and still be successful—a “win at all costs” enterprise. If winning the argument is not rhetoric’s sole proper objective, then what else can be asked of it? Rorty explains:

Should the rhetorician educate his audience as well as persuade them? Should he attempt to improve their characters—to draw them as close to phronēsis as their natural capacities allow—or should he rest content with addressing their immediate concerns as best he can? Or course Aristotle—refined contextualist that he is—has several answers to this question. As a master craftsman, the rhetorician has no political or educative responsibility. But the true politikos, who has—for the sake of exercising his own craft—acquired rhetorical skills, bears the responsibility of educating his citizens as well as satisfying their needs and constructing sound political institutions. While the rhetorician qua politikos must engage in deliberation, the politikos qua rhetorician takes the outcome of that deliberation as fixed. However he himself may have reached it, the rhetorician qua rhetorician starts with the conclusion—starts, that is, with what he wants the audience to accept—and is concerned with constructing the arguments that will best bring his audience to the predetermined judgment. No general rule determines when the rhetorician should take on the responsibilities of a politikos:

150 “Structuring Rhetoric,” in Essays on Aristotle’s Rhetoric, p. 3.
like all ethically and politically decisive matters, that must be left to the judgment of the *phronimos*.\textsuperscript{151}

By implication, rhetoric is actually quite different from dialectic, insofar as the former has a pre-determined objective it aims to reason (or persuade) toward. The latter, by contrast, more freely explores a line of inquiry, ostensibly without such a pre-determined objective.

Viewed from this perspective, rhetoric, despite Aristotle’s intentions, comes across as dialectic’s dishonest cousin. John M. Cooper, however, aims to show how rhetoric relies heavily on dialectic for its legitimacy and in fact cannot succeed without it:

The expert dialectician (and, in the area of ethical-political questions, the rhetorician) is the person above all others who knows and has command over the *endoxa* on political matters….He acquires this, not by studying the truth—by learning from Aristotle or some other philosopher of ethics-politics the true system of ethics and political science—but by doing two other things. First, he attends in a relatively systematic way to the relevant common beliefs, and their grounds, insofar as they have any, in other common beliefs or concepts. But second, he collects and reflects informally upon the opinions of those with a reputation for high intelligence who have thought hard about and investigated these matters closely. Notice that this second task does not require being able to explain or defend the “opinions of the wise” in the same terms as the wise themselves could presumably do, or understanding the philosophical or other “technical” grounds there might be for believing them, or yet for doubting them. Nonetheless…Aristotle says that the dialectician/rhetorician has, as such, the ability to discern the truth itself.\textsuperscript{152}

The problem not addressed by Cooper is that having access to the truth in this regard does not necessarily enable one to argue persuasively for it (the rhetorician’s complaint), nor does it obligate one to do so (the ethical or Confucian complaint). It is intriguing to consider how dependent Aristotle’s dialectician/rhetorician is on public opinion (*endoxa*)

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., p. 26.

\textsuperscript{152}
for the foundational legitimacy of his own views. This would seem to place him at the mercy of any number of unusual and—to our modern minds—problematic localized cultural practices. Aristotle’s response, and in fact his last line of defense to any criticism of rhetoric as outlined in his work, is the fuzzy assertion that truth has a propensity to prevail and tends toward overall benefit. It is doubtful that Confucius, Xunzi, or even Plato—who saw his mentor, Socrates, sentenced to death by the very polis he sought to improve—would share Aristotle’s optimism in either regard.

This issue takes on even greater significance and relevance when viewed from a historical perspective. Although Adolf Hitler’s ideas were put to unspeakably nefarious ends, he nonetheless (or—dare I say—therefore) must be considered one of the most powerful orators of the modern era, if not recorded history. His rhetorical prowess roused millions of Germans into complicity with the Holocaust, believed by many to be the single most horrific atrocity ever perpetrated by humankind. In Mein Kampf, he argues convincingly for the efficacy of the spoken word over and above the theoretical limitations of the written word (quoted at length due to particular relevance):

All the formidable events which have changed the aspect of the world were carried through, not by the written but by the spoken word...

An orator receives continuous guidance from the people before whom he speaks. This helps him to correct the direction of his speech; for he can always gauge, by the faces of his hearers, how far they follow and understand him, and whether his words are producing the desired effect. But the writer does not know his reader at all. Therefore, from the outset he does not address himself to a definite human group of persons which he has before his eyes but must write in a general way. Hence, up to a certain extent he must fail in psychological finesse and flexibility. Therefore, in general it may be said that a brilliant orator writes better than a

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162 Reason and Emotion, p. 403.
brilliant writer can speak, unless the latter has continual practice in public speaking. One must also remember that of itself the multitude is mentally inert, that it remains attached to its old habits and that it is not naturally prone to read something which does not conform with its own pre-established beliefs when such writing does not contain what the multitude hopes to find there. Therefore, some piece of writing which has a particular tendency is for the most part read only by those who are in sympathy with it. Only a leaflet or a placard, on account of its brevity, can hope to arouse a momentary interest in those whose opinions differ from it...

The most important consideration, however, is that one never knows into what hands a piece of written material comes and yet the form in which its subject is presented must remain the same. In general the effect is greater when the form of treatment corresponds to the mental level of the reader and suits his nature. Therefore, a book which is meant for the broad masses of the people must try from the very start to gain its effects through a style and level of ideas which would be quite different from a book intended to be read by the higher intellectual classes.

Only through his capacity for adaptability does the force of the written word approach that of oral speech. The orator may deal with the same subject as a book deals with; but if he has the genius of a great and popular orator he will scarcely ever repeat the same argument or the same material in the same form on two consecutive occasions. He will always follow the lead of the great mass in such a way that from the living emotion of his hearers the apt word which he needs will be suggested to him and in its turn this will go straight to the hearts of his hearers. Should he make even a slight mistake he has the living correction before him. As I have already said, he can read the play of expression on the faces of his hearers, first to see if they understand what he says, secondly to see if they take in the whole of his argument, and, thirdly, in how far they are convinced of the justice of what has been placed before them. Should he observe, first, that his hearers do not understand him he will make his explanation so elementary and clear that they will be able to grasp it, even to the last individual. Secondly, if he feels that they are not capable of following him he will make one idea follow another carefully and slowly until the most slow-witted hearer no longer lags behind. Thirdly, as soon as he has the feeling that they do not seem convinced that he is right in the way he has put things to them he will repeat his argument over and over again, always giving fresh illustrations, and he himself will state their unspoken objection. He will repeat these objections, dissecting them and refuting them, until the last group of the opposition show him by their behaviour and play of expression that they have capitulated before his exposition of the case.

Not infrequently it is a case of overcoming ingrained prejudices which are mostly unconscious and are supported by sentiment rather than reason. It is a thousand
times more difficult to overcome this barrier of instinctive aversion, emotional hatred and preventive dissent than to correct opinions which are founded on defective or erroneous knowledge. False ideas and ignorance may be set aside by means of instruction, but emotional resistance never can. Nothing but an appeal to these hidden forces will be effective here. And that appeal can be made by scarcely any writer. Only the orator can hope to make it...

For one must never judge the speech of a statesman to his people by the impression which it leaves on the mind of a university professor but by the effect it produces on the people. And this is the sole criterion of the orator's genius.155

In a rather cruel irony, Hitler here argues that only through emotional appeals can one hope to overcome deep, emotional prejudices—reason alone cannot conquer such deeply ingrained resistances. A more enlightened reader might think that he sought to capitalize on such prejudices, rather than overcome them.

Though tainted by their evil application, when extracted from that context it is of some value to compare Hitler’s rhetorical theory with both Plato and Aristotle. First, Hitler’s doubt about the efficacy of the written word is remarkably similar to the well-rehearsed misgivings expressed by Plato in Letter VII. Hitler points out that an orator is apt to be more successful with an audience than a treatise because an orator can tailor his argument in media res based on his perception of the audience’s understanding of and response to it. If necessary, he can lead them step-by-step to his desired conclusion. He also can continue to provide new illustrations until his point is successfully conveyed.

An author, by contrast, does not enjoy these opportunities. The fact that Plato refrained from writing treatises and instead sought to engage his readers dialectically reinforces the notion that philosophy can, and in fact should, be fruitfully practiced in a civic context. If

155 Mein Kampf, Volume 2, Chapter 6.
nothing else, this might be considered a corrective to the written (theoretical) format in which philosophy is primarily practiced today.

Second, and more importantly, Hitler’s overwhelming emphasis on emotional appeal would surely be disputed by Aristotle, who established *logos* and *ēthos* as counterparts of (if not preferable to) *pathos*. When we consider how effective Hitler’s *pathos*-based appeals were despite the scarcity of *logos* and *ēthos* in his speeches, however, it might be construed as a potent counterargument against Aristotle’s more balanced position. Why bother to employ *logos* and *ēthos* when *pathos* alone can move a nation to complicity with the unthinkable? Yet, Hitler’s sinister success might also serve as a potent argument in favor of infusing philosophy with a rhetorical sensibility, much as Aristotle contended that rhetoric is necessary lest the weaker argument defeat the stronger. If a skilled orator, equipped with all three of Aristotle’s *pisteis* (and perhaps a good deal of courage), had risen up to contend with Hitler, it is at least plausible that the modern history of Europe might have taken a decidedly more peaceful turn.

One further thought comes to the fore when reflecting on Hitler’s undeniable rhetorical prowess. The analysis up to this point has focused almost exclusively on the persuasive strategies available to the *speaker*. The role of the *listener* in rhetorical contexts has yet to be considered. It may be that the efficacy of rhetoric depends as much on the quality of the listener as the quality of the speaker and what is spoken. This helps explain why Confucius is so dismissive of Zaiwo—sympathetic remonstration is no use in such cases.
It also helps explain why Plato is such a vigorous proponent of dialectic contra sophistic rhetoric. As demonstrated in the *Meno*, when carried out by a skilled practitioner, dialectic can elicit a kind of internal knowledge where seemingly none existed before. Once properly drawn out, the conviction instilled by such knowledge should not be vulnerable to persuasive speech. Of course, Plato’s discussants in the *Meno* only reach a tentative conclusion about the source of human virtue. Socrates says: “On our present reasoning, then, whoever has virtue gets it by divine dispensation. But we shall not understand the truth of the matter until, before asking how men get virtue, we try to discover what virtue is in and by itself.” These questions—the origin of virtue, what it is, and whether it can be taught—permeate the bulk of the Platonic corpus, and not by accident. If nothing else, the point is to prompt the reader to reflect on these issues in earnest. Failing to do so—whether by ignorance or by design—leaves one more susceptible to rhetoric that is lacking in ἐθικός. While Hitler is the primary culprit in the diabolical outcome of his hate-mongering speeches, those listeners swayed by him would seem to be partly responsible as well.

In any case, Confucius, Xunzi, Plato, and Aristotle each developed an understanding of community-enriching linguistic practice that involves rhetorical aspects of some kind or another. The question, then, is not which of our four thinkers condoned rhetoric, and which condemned it. Rather, they all recognized that, at least at times, the way in which something is said is at least as important (in terms of persuasive effect, or lack thereof) as what is said. Where they really differ, then, is in what they highlight as

\[^{154} \text{Meno, 100b.} \]
having greatest persuasive effect. Whereas Aristotle weighs *logos* more heavily than other considerations, and Plato’s emphasis on dialectic must be viewed in balance with his propensity to craft myths, Confucius and Xunzi place the greatest philosophical emphasis on *ēthos*. In order to more adequately explore how they considered character an important part of philosophical expression, and how this contrasts with Platonic and Aristotelian emphases, I now turn to a discussion of authority.
CHAPTER 4
AUTHORITY AND AUTHENTICITY

Philosophical disputes and differences of opinion in general often involve competing conceptions of authority. For example, abortion opponents assert the authority of religious doctrine and/or their conception of God—and corresponding claims about the sanctity of unborn life—in declaring the immorality of abortion. Those who consider abortion a viable form of family planning, on the other hand, usually offer rational arguments—about overpopulation, the importance of individual freedom, and so on—implicitly asserting the authority of reasoned discourse, in favor of their view. As is, the dispute is irresolvable: armed with competing conceptions of authority, each side fails to engage the other in any meaningful way. By tracing the authoritative roots of any particular view, we become better able to understand that view and, where necessary or desirable, explore viable alternatives. According to James Boyd White,

To say that the choice is either to resist or submit to the authorities we find in the world is too simple, partly because the authorities to which we respond often have a purchase in our own minds, partly because as we grow we find ourselves making authorities of our own: in reworking the languages we have inherited, from early childhood on, in making claims for the rightness of our conduct, or in arguing for the cogency of our reasons. Every speech act is a way of being and acting in the world that makes a claim for its own rightness, which we ask others to respect. Our life with language and each other involves the perpetual creation of authorities, good and bad, successful and unsuccessful.155

Recognizing the various conceptions of authority behind any given dispute leads us to wonder what makes an authority authoritative, and to ponder how we might mitigate between fundamentally disparate sources of, or claims to, authority.

155 Acts of Hope, pp. x-xi.
The primary objective of this chapter is to understand and contrast the underlying conceptions of authority through which the philosophical views of Confucius, Xunzi, Plato, and Aristotle emerge. In essence, then, what I intend to pursue here is how these thinkers construed persuasive authority: what is considered most persuasive when deciding between alternative views or courses of action, and why. Is it the dialectic process? A logical argument? An authoritative text? Perhaps the moral character of a person? Or even a myth?

One way of proceeding with the analysis is to identify these specific manifestations of authority—political, moral, religious, textual, rational/logical, and so on. This task ought to be straightforward enough. Once such demarcations are made, however, we may not be in any better position to negotiate between them. We can anticipate each philosopher differing, of course, in degrees of emphasis. As will be shown, each of these thinkers recognized, implicitly if not explicitly, that there is no simple algorithm that can definitively determine how we ought to proceed in every potential circumstance.

Once specific forms of authority have been identified, a related, albeit more difficult question arises: how do we proceed when two of the same kind of recognized authority (e.g., two different authoritative texts, or two equally valid rational arguments) proffer competing advice? How do we decide between them? Perhaps in such cases we are best served by enlisting the assistance of alternative forms of authority. Often, a thoughtful integration of authorities will prove most persuasive and effective.
The inquiry becomes even more complicated when we begin to interrogate the reasons any given authority should be construed as superior to any other. Can an authoritative text effectively validate the authority of authoritative texts? Can a logical argument defend the supremacy of logical argument? Can a person of character exemplify the persuasive power of character? These are questions of the most complicated sort, and I do not pretend to answer all of them thoroughly or even adequately. Nonetheless, they are worth bearing in mind as the present inquiry unfolds.

The previous two chapters, first dealing with dialogue and dialectic, then rhetoric, began to answer some such questions while raising still others. Confucius, as will be shown, considered the accumulated wisdom of inherited tradition as authoritative, particularly as recorded in texts such as the *Book of Songs (Shijing)* and *Book of Documents (Shujing)*. He also imaginatively employs the notion of the *junzi* to suggest a worthy, authoritative model of human conduct. By emphasizing these themes together with the importance of authenticity in human interactions, he established himself as an authority that, over centuries, grew to unparalleled magnitude within the Chinese tradition.

Xunzi heeded this example while also adopting and adapting the techniques of argumentation employed by his intellectual adversaries, creating an innovative mélange of authority through inherited tradition (featuring the wisdom of Confucius himself) combined with borrowed strategies of reasoning and demonstration.

Much as Confucius was authoritative for Xunzi, Socrates was an authority in Plato’s eyes—not for who he was in any generic sense, but because of how he lived and
what he stood for. One need only read the *Apology* to understand that Socrates was, for Plato anyway, a deeply principled person. Dialectic, Socrates’ preferred conversational technique, gradually assumes the mantle of Platonic authority. The purpose of dialectic, as was shown in the first chapter, is to establish shared views and values among participants. Plato, quite unlike Confucius and Xunzi, had serious grievances with the values of his own inherited tradition. Despite (or perhaps because of) such reservations, Plato crafted his own myths, which are scattered throughout the dialogues. These myths, as well as provocative comments in *Letter VII*, must be viewed in balance with the explicit emphasis on dialectic.

One such myth involves the tripartite division of the human soul, from which we can garner much about how Plato construed the proper relations of authority within individual human agents. Furthermore, on a political level, one might draw a tentative comparison between the authority Plato invests in the Guardians of the *Republic* and the Confucian aristocracy of character, although Confucius and Xunzi both theorized within the bounds of inherited monarchy and did not go so far as to advocate rule based purely on merit. Instead, their primary aim was to provide a program whereby sociopolitical responsibility and character development were mutually entailing. A principal part of this curriculum involved praising rulers in the historical record who were successful in both regards. Plato, then, might be considered a more original thinker, while Confucius and Xunzi were upholding and re-presenting a pre-existing model that they believed could—and did, if the historical record that predates Confucius is accurate—genuinely work to the benefit of all.
Aristotle is a definitive champion of *logos*, but we should be sensitive to the multifaceted meaning of the term that often incorporates some sense of “word” or “language” in addition to “reason” or “account.” Aristotle’s detached, systematic reasoning of *epistēmē* in scientific and theoretical fields of inquiry is rather foreign to Confucius and Xunzi. With regard to concrete human behavior, however, Aristotle’s *phronimos*—the person with *phronēsis*—resembles the *junzi* in important ways. Aristotle, of course, linked intellect with the ability to articulate and be persuaded by rational arguments. He was wary of the power of emotion and emotional appeals within the purview of oral persuasion. Notwithstanding such reservations, he nonetheless considered the emotions to play an important role in structuring our moral lives. By contrast, within the Confucian worldview, which lacks an intellect/emotion dichotomy (recall Xunzi’s analysis how thoughts/feelings form together in the *xin*), the means of persuasion are inherently different. This involves a fundamentally dissimilar model of persuasive authority: one based primarily on character as expressed through authoritative conduct. Character or *ēthos* is the third of three *pisteis* identified by Aristotle, although he does not emphasize the persuasive power of conduct to the same extent as Confucius and Xunzi.

My purpose here is not to hail any particular conception of authority as superior, nor to discredit another as inferior. Rather, I aim to explore how these notions of authority operate within their greater philosophical schemes, particularly with regard to issues of language and community, and how these different notions might interact with each other.
Confucian Authority: Text and the Junzi

It would be difficult to identify a particular term in the Analects conceptually identical with “authority.” Nonetheless, the text as a whole indirectly serves to reinforce the particular notions of authority outlined above. And yet, one of the more well-known passages is 7.1, where Confucius humbly proclaims, "Conveying and not innovating, trusting (xin) and enjoying the ways of antiquity—in these respects I might be compared with Old Peng.” Scholars have aptly pointed out that, despite his protest to the contrary, Confucius in fact did *zuo* (literally “make,” here “create” or “innovate”)—an activity typically associated with sages, the highest embodiment of human achievement. In other words, he did introduce new ways of being in and conceiving the world, albeit often channeled through references to inherited authoritative texts. The most obvious innovation is the emphasis Confucius places on *ren* (仁), and discussions of the term might be best construed as discussions of authoritative conduct.

Another example of Confucian innovation is his use of the term *junzi* (literally “Lord’s son,” hence “Prince”) to denote more than a mere title of royalty. Set in stark contrast with the *xiao ren* (小人, petty/small-minded person), the *junzi* becomes a model of exemplary behavior, regardless of inherited or bestowed title. In translating the Analects, many scholars have abandoned the royal connotations of *junzi* altogether and instead opt for terms such as “gentleman” (Lau) or “exemplary person” (Ames and Rosemont). For example, at 13.23 Confucius says, "The *junzi* aspires to harmony, not sameness; the *xiao ren* aspires to sameness, not..."
harmony.” In other words, it is preferable to aspire towards a pattern of social interaction that honors complementary differences, rather than striving to be the same and merely echo what others say and do. This passage provides an important corrective against those who are prone to read Confucius as sternly authoritarian or rigid in his advocacy of a particular narrow ideology.

At 13.26, he employs the same parallel pattern in stating 君子泰而不驕，小人驕而不泰 “The junzi is impressive and not arrogant; the xiao ren is arrogant and not impressive.” These passages, and numerous others in the Analects, employ junzi as a moral category of person rather than a title of royalty. Together they strongly suggest that Confucius did zuo through his innovative use of key terminology. At first thought, this might seem to contravene the spirit of zhengming. Confucius would not doubt respond, however, that he is not using the term in an entirely new way, but he is reinvigorating the inherited sense of the term, where, at least ideally speaking, nobles were not only noble by birth or by title, but in character as well. By reinvesting the junzi with moral authority, Confucius reveals one of his pivotal notions of authority in general. Indirectly, he also establishes himself as a kind of authority, insofar as one would have difficulty challenging his conviction that the worthy sage-kings of antiquity effectively embodied the broader meaning of the term. There can be no disputing the impact he had on Xunzi in this regard.

In trying to identify people who, analogously, might be considered junzi within the Western tradition, historical figures such as Jesus Christ and Socrates come to mind. Hall and Ames, however, argue that
Both Socrates and Jesus were characterized by lives lived in reference to a norm, standard, ideal, or principle that transcended this world... The imitation of Socrates is the imitation of a life lived in pursuit of knowledge, a life lived without compromising the values and ideals which together have come to define the philosophic spirit. Socrates, as a historical personage, however, is shrouded in obscurity. And Plato's literary invention is more often than not employed by the later tradition as illustrative of Platonic principles (eros, the dialectic, intuiting the Form of the Good) than as a model for actual imitation. Here again, as in the case of Christ, it is the eternal, immutable world beyond this actual world that is the true object of "imitation." That is, both Jesus and Socrates are mediatiorial and, to that degree, instrumental. Confucius was a sage. As such, he serves as an object of imitation in his own right.156

It can be questioned whether Hall and Ames do Socrates justice. They may be simply echoing the intellectual sedimentation of history at the expense of what in fact was a more concretely grounded historical personage, worthy of imitation much like Confucius. The above characterization—of a life devoted to an ideal that transcends this world—seems more accurate in the case of Jesus. His words and deeds come to us through disciples that claim transcendental status for their beliefs. Jesus is said to have died to save us from our sins. This is not something the ordinary person, or even an exceptional person, can possibly emulate.157

Confucius generally deflected attention away from himself and toward other models for conduct such as the li and historical personalities honored in canonical texts. The point made by Hall and Ames, however, is that these models were emergent in the
culture and a product of it, not spurring us toward something above or beyond it. By aspiring to model himself after worthy historical exemplars, Confucius both embodies the value of such modeling and becomes a model himself. Hall and Ames explain the significance of models and modeling:

...First, the model is not only a means of maintaining continuity with the sages of the past, he is a means of stimulating novelty, as well. The imitation of the model does not involve replication, but is rather an example of introducing novel meaning into one's social circumstances...[second,] models may, indirectly, take the form of institutions (li) as well as persons. Thus Confucius' appeal to the Chou institutions is an appeal to appropriate models of human behavior....The fundamental sense of model is grounded in exemplary persons who serve, for Confucius, as instances of authoritative humanity.158

In other words, Confucian modeling is not mimicking—it does not involve merely copying exemplars. Nor does it involve aspiring to any sort of permanent, eternal pattern of belief or behavior. The sage-kings of old were novel persons responding to novel circumstances. We can learn much by studying their words and ways, but ultimately we, too, are novel persons in novel circumstances. At 15.36, Confucius says, "In pursuit of authoritative conduct (ren 亙), do not defer even to your teacher." We are encouraged to heed available examples, but not at the expense of responding creatively and harmoniously to present conditions.

Authority, in turn, is conferred on those most adept in this regard, and over time such persons gradually become embraced by the tradition in similar terms:

The primary meaning of authority is discovered in the individual acts of self-actualization associated with creative experiencing. "Authority" means, ultimately, to be the author of oneself. There is no justifiable sense in which one ought to author or to be authored by another.

158 Thinking Through Confucius, pp. 179-180.
In authoring oneself, one also authors an ambience, an order, within which one finds one’s environmental resources for life and activity... In the authoritative act of self-creativity one lays claim to excellence. And the offering of self and world for the enjoyment of others involves the anticipation of others’ deference.  

However wonderful it might sound, this dimension of Confucian authority is not without its potential problems. Perhaps the greatest problem is that of recognition: how do we identify worthy models—by mere popularity? Or by fiat? By whom? This raises serious questions about persons such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and other figures who, despite garnering a substantial following and fighting for righteous causes, nonetheless did not enjoy widespread popularity, particularly among their contemporary political authorities. Conversely, popular icons abound in modern society—actors/actresses, musicians, athletes, and so on. Many could claim to be “authors of themselves,” and yet their character and conduct are far from exemplary.

Confucius is aware of this problem and offers his perspective in 17.13 when he says, “The ‘village worthy’ is a sham of excellence.” By “village worthy” Confucius means a local hero—a popular icon. With this simple claim, Confucius makes two related, significant points. First, he questions the ability of common people to distinguish those who are genuinely worthy from those who are merely pleasing. What makes people common, of course, is not socioeconomic class but rather a disinclination to pursue the Confucian character- and community-building program. Second, those they esteem may effectively simulate and/or replicate laudable conduct but ultimately lack the genuinely creative, authentic spirit required to forge ahead through ever-evolving
circumstances. This kind of modeling leads to more mimicry and even less novelty. Thus if popularity alone is not to be an adequate measure of authority, some alternative means of discriminating between competing models needs to be identified. Historical remembrance and cultural reverence certainly is involved, but the long time involved to achieve such status—often at least a generation—raises questions about near-term efficacy.

Even when we accurately identify appropriate exemplars, the program can still go awry. As Hall and Ames observe,

Even in the most fortunate of circumstances, claims to excellence and the exercise of deference will doubtless involve error. We continually risk mistaking our own or others' excellences as distinctively relevant to a given situation. In addition, authoritative actions can involve us in risks of status, convenience, well-being—even our lives. These kinds of risk are part and parcel of the types of social interactions we are describing. Such failures will inevitably lead to the loss of value. Some freedom will be forfeited, some efficacy will be misdirected, some beauty will suffer decay, some truths will slip away, some importances will be trivialized, some things sacred will be ruined. Finitude, ignorance, insensitivity, and perversity are among the more important of the contingencies of our individual and social existence.

That we risk failure in order to author our own existence is obvious. We ought to expect suffering, the proof of risk, as a consequence of such authority. We might seem to carry Confucius' thinking to extremes to say that it enjoins the practice of risk and suggests that one ought to learn how to suffer. But these are indeed implications entailed by the vision of authoritative action at the center of Confucius' philosophy.160

Authority through authentic modeling is not foolproof or free of potential abuses and misconceptions. Countless strategies for ways of being in the world with each other have been formulated and put into practice, yet none has stood and endured without failures of

159 Ibid., p. 180.
various kinds. The contention, then, is that Confucius offers one such way that proved more or less effective for many generations prior to his time, and many succeeding generations as well. Life itself involves a measure of risk, but ultimately the greatest risk is not taking any at all, for then one is resigned to an uninspired life of dullness, drudgery, and rote behavior. This can hardly be considered the vision Confucius had in mind.

No discussion of Confucian sources of authority would be adequate without due consideration of the *Shijing*. Within the text of the *Analects*, Confucius explicitly mentions the esteemed source of Chinese lyric tradition in a dozen or so different chapters, and refers to it indirectly in numerous others. Chapter 2.2 may be the most straightforward application of the *Shijing*, where Confucius says: "Although there are 300 *Songs*, one saying comprises them all: 'proceed diligently without deviation.'" Here Confucius refines the essence of the *Shijing* as an admonition to apply oneself fully to whatever human endeavors are at hand. The citation in question, however, seems to be a more or less straightforward celebration of superior horses, so even this passage involves a measure of creative application.

Often, however, citations from the *Songs* that appear in the *Analects* are quite cryptic and require a large measure of imaginative, analogical thinking in order to glean their intended (or prospective) relevance. Such ambiguity should not be taken as a sign of failure to exhibit clarity of thought. Quite the contrary, it reflects an understanding of the complexity involved in navigating the human world in all its diversity and the inherent limitations of language and discursive thought. The pursuit of clarity in such

cases tends toward a kind of strained, and ultimately ineffectual, homogeneity.

Embracing a degree of vagueness, on the other hand, allows for creativity of application through disparate circumstances.

One example, 3.8, should illustrate the point:

Zixia inquires: "'Her beguiling smile entrancing, beautiful eyes glancing, it is the unadorned (si 素) that brings out the variegation.' How would you explain these lines?" Confucius responds: "The pattern follows from the unadorned." Zixia follows: "Do the li follow in like manner?" Confucius then thanks him, saying "You have given rise to new insight for me, Shang! Only with the likes of you can one fruitfully discuss the Songs."

Here we have the poetic expression of praise for a woman's beauty, and how its sheer purity gives rise to multiple avenues of appreciation. Analogically, we might consider how, when refracted through a prism, all colors emerge from white light, and yet without light we see no colors. Somehow, in the course of conversation Confucius and Zixia manage to construe the quotation creatively as a commentary on how the complementary social patterns of li arise out of, and are dependent upon, authenticity. Just as brighter light allows us to see more effectively, so authenticity in the practice of li renders it more successful. It would seem to be in keeping with the spirit of Confucius' inventive application of the Shijing to approach the Analects in a similar fashion. In other words, we should apply them creatively toward the resolution of current problems rather than adhere to them verbatim as symbolic of some eternal truth.

What did Confucius value about the Shijing, and why? Was it more the specific historical content of the document, or was the content less relevant than the fact that it

161 The first two lines are from the current version of the Songs, while the third is not.

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was a vibrant source of insight from a prior era? Most relevant here are those passages where Confucius implies the reasons behind his repeated emphasis on the value of the text. For example, in 8.8 Confucius says, “Find inspiration [xìng 興] through the Songs, place through the rites, fulfillment through music.” Here the Songs are located in context with two complementary cultural authorities, the rites and music. They should serve as a source of xìng—inspiration or arousal. According to Bernhard Karlgren, xìng depicts four hands and a sail, perhaps suggesting a joyful beginning or celebration. This makes sense particularly in light of the remainder of the passage, where it is suggested that the rites provide guidance as to where and how we take our place, and then music provides a kind of culmination. The Songs, then, provide the initial motivating force behind participation in social ritual. Another way of looking at the complementary relationship between the Songs and other cultural authorities is that the Songs stimulate the intellectual and emotional dimensions of human character, the rites provide guidance as to the proper physical stance and orientation, and the music is pleasing to the senses. Together, these three cultural authorities operate harmoniously to furnish human beings with a meaningful context, a community, in which to live and interact. We shall see that Xunzi, following Confucius’ lead, offers a comparable argument.

The most direct explanation as to why Confucius considers the Songs authoritative is found in 17.9. He says:

Why, my young friends, do you not study the Songs? The Songs can inspire (xìng 興), enhance your powers of observation (guān 觀), render you more amenable to the company of others (qún 羣), and sharpen your powers of discrimination (yuàn 恽). At home it enables you to serve your father; abroad, it enables you to serve
your lord. It imparts a vocabulary for making distinctions in the birds, beasts, grasses and trees.\textsuperscript{162}

Studying and reciting the \textit{Songs} furnishes a wellspring of inherited history, culture, and taxonomy. This provides an ever-abundant resource for navigating both the human and natural worlds. The cultural and linguistic vocabulary endowed by a document such as the \textit{Songs} enhances one’s life experience, just as the ability to make subtle distinctions with regard to art and music enables one to appreciate them more profoundly. Familiarity with the \textit{Songs} also enables one to think and engage the world metaphorically, further enhancing the quality of life experience. In the absence of such an edifying foundation, life will more often seem mundanely monochromatic.

It is worth noting that in some sense \textit{qun} and \textit{yuan} might be considered opposite abilities. The former has more to do with getting along and not causing dissention; the latter tends to involve criticism or remonstration. By sharpening one’s powers of observation and discrimination, one realizes there are times when it is appropriate to pursue the former, and there are times when it is appropriate to do the latter. From this perspective, \textit{qun} and \textit{yuan} emerge more as complementary rather than contradictory forms of conduct. To some degree, they could be compared with praise and blame. Familiarity with the \textit{Songs}—which are, importantly, anonymously authored, and hence shared throughout the culture—equips a person to be more reflectively and dynamically engaged with the world. This is accomplished by growing familiar with the occasionally esoteric vocabulary, and often opaque meaning, of the \textit{Songs}.

\textsuperscript{162} One might substitute “the environment” for “birds, beasts, grasses and trees,” since I believe that is the
Finally, 11.6 indirectly indicates the degree to which Confucius reveres the *Songs*. It bears particular relevance to the overarching argument under development here: that the ways we communicate with each other, as shaped by the vocabularies we use, have a profound impact on the nature and quality of our communities. The passage reads:

“Nanrong often recited the White Jade Scepter [passage from the *Songs*]. Confucius allowed him to wed his elder brother’s daughter.” In other words, Confucius was pleased with Nanrong’s familiarity with canonical literature broadly, and this passage specifically. The passage Nanrong was fond of repeating, drawn from the Dang (湯) Decade, Book 3, Ode 2, Part 5, reads:

Be cautious in speech,
Comport yourself with reverence,
In all things be mild and good.
A flaw in a scepter of white jade may be polished away,
But a flaw in your words cannot.\footnote{The translation is my own, with assistance from those of James Legge and Ames and Rosemont.}

The ode in question continues with further encouragement to exercise thoughtful caution in speech—a notion we have seen Confucius frequently emphasize himself, perhaps even in large measure due to his familiarity with the *Songs*. Although the passage was probably not intended to be taken literally, the point is still worthy of reflection: damaged physical objects can be repaired, but damage caused by careless, hasty, or thoughtless words is not so easily mended. Because Nanrong valued the authority of the *Songs* and this theme in particular, Confucius deemed him worthy to marry the daughter of his elder brother.
One feature of the *Shijing* that modern readers may struggle to appreciate is that the compositions therein were often verbalized through song, not infrequently in conjunction with performance of a specific cultural ritual. The very tone, pronunciation, and delivery of each syllable had as much an impact in performance as the meaning of the words themselves. The aesthetic structure of the songs set to music was designed to transform the participants from individuals into a harmonious, collective whole. In stark contrast, our default modern conception of language is relatively one-dimensional: words are generally construed as vehicles for the conveyance of information. Writing serves as the primary model, rather than a performance, ritual or conversation. Little emphasis is placed on delivery, the sounds of the words themselves, nor the structure of the overall composition, in determining how they are construed.

One possible modern analogue to the role of the *shi* could be the singing of hymns of worship as practiced in a number of religious congregations. This tradition resembles what might be considered the sacred dimension of *li*, but it does not entail the more political or historical dimension. What might we say, then, about the singing of a national anthem, or, as is done in the United States, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance? The converse is true: doing so involves a certain commemoration of one’s political heritage, but for most people it lacks a sacred dimension. Sadly, such activities have become rather routine, and they are usually performed so perfunctorily that one could hardly consider them adequate analogues to the *li* or the *shi*.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁴ In the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and other locations, many Americans claim to experience a deeper appreciation of such activities.
The reason could stem from the very nature of American political genesis. One of the founding principles of the United States, the separation of church and state, is intended to insure that public governmental power does not interfere with the private practice of religion, or the spiritual dimension of life. For the ancient Chinese, such a separation would be as ludicrous as it would be impossible. It is important to remember, however, that Confucius’ emphasis on the authority of the shi and the li is not tantamount to advocating the wholesale importation and application of the ways of life of antiquity. His point, rather, is that the Shijing contains valuable lessons that can be applied analogically and creatively to the problems of the present day. In similar fashion, United States Supreme Court Justices interpret the original wording of the Constitution in order to adjudicate complicated modern matters before them.

Although Confucius surely advocates maintaining the authority of social hierarchies, Benjamin Schwartz astutely points out that Confucius, in fact, seems to be well aware of all the pathologies of hierarchy and authority, although he is just as aware in his own time of the pathologies of the subversion of authority. History teaches him that both are fatal.\textsuperscript{165}

We have already seen how one way he sought to combat these pathologies was through zhengming, thereby reinvigorating awareness of the moral connotations embedded in language. Another was through emphasizing the social necessity and authority of li.

Herbert Fingarette’s treatment of the subject in \textit{Confucius—The Secular as Sacred} augments our understanding of how li works within the Confucian world. Rather

\textsuperscript{165} \textit{The World of Thought in Ancient China}, p. 68.
than construe *li* as a rote pattern of social interaction that blunts or inhibits the uniqueness of personal character, Fingarette suggests that

Rite brings out forcefully not only the harmony and beauty of social forms, the inherent and ultimate dignity of human intercourse; it brings out also the moral perfection implicit in achieving one's ends by dealing with others as beings of equal dignity, as free coparticipants in *li*. Furthermore, to act by ceremony is to be completely open to the other; for ceremony is public, shared, transparent; to act otherwise is to be secret, obscure, and devious, or merely tyrannically coercive. It is in this beautiful and dignified, shared and open participation with others who are ultimately like oneself (12:2) that man realizes himself.\(^{166}\)

Viewed from this perspective, the authority of *li* derives from its ability to transform human interactions from mere expressions of will or coercion into voluntary, cooperative and mutual expressions of reverence—something Fingarette suggests may even be considered “magical” or “Divine.”

Casting a somewhat skeptical eye at Fingarette's more sanguine evaluation, Schwartz observes:

The Chinese commentaries stress again and again the function of *li* in teaching human beings to perform their *separate* roles well in a society whose harmony is maintained by the fact that every one plays his part as he should within the larger whole. This may be a “sacred community” in Fingarette's sense, but it is a sacred community that accepts unblinkingly what it regards as the need for hierarchy, status, and authority within a universal world order. While the ultimate end of *li* may be to humanize hierarchy and authority, it certainly also is meant to maintain and clarify its foundations.\(^{167}\)

Ideally, each of the Confucian authorities—the *li*, the *junzi* (or, even better, the sage), the *Shijing* and other canonical texts—operates in concert with the others to provide people with a framework in which to find their place and flourish. None of these authorities is so

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\(^{166}\) *The Secular as Sacred*, p. 16.

\(^{167}\) *World of Thought*, p. 68.
dominant, however, as to supplant or suppress individual initiative and judgment.

Despite Schwartz's point, *li* is distinguished from law by way of its personalization and participation. Laws forbid and deter certain kinds of behavior deemed to damage community; the *li* invite and encourage other kinds of behavior deemed to enhance community.

Chad Hansen highlights the important link between *zhengming*, the *li*, and community:

Word mastery thus underlies all acquired cultural refinement. We develop *abilities* to stage the rituals or play the games that constitute our *form of life*. We model others' speech as we model their ritual behavior. Learning and practice thus *realizes* our natural human potential. It creates our human nature; it does not constrict it. Learning to recite a verse, to shake hands, and to whistle a tune are alike. “Let a man be stimulated by poetry, established by *li*, and perfected by music” (8.8).

It has already been shown that one important message born by Confucian authorities is that ingenuity enables us to derive insight from disparate sources in order to apply them to novel situations. It cannot be overstated that the exemplary person harmonizes, the petty person mimics. These notions—of harmony and mimicry—apply both to how we integrate various conceptions of authority in our lives, and to how we interact with others in community. This emphasis on harmony that implicitly acknowledges there will be instances, in practice, where one must heed one authority over and above others, or even set aside recognized authorities in the exercise of personal discretion.

How, then, does one recognize such circumstances, and how is one to proceed?

Of course there is no straightforward calculus that can address any and all potential
situations. In chapter 9.3, Confucius makes these comments with regard to upholding certain specific practices prescribed by the li:

A hemp cap is prescribed by the li. Nowadays, silk is worn for the sake of frugality, and I follow current custom. Kowtowing before ascending the hall is prescribed by the li. Nowadays, kowtowing after ascending is done out of arrogance. Although it is not current custom, I kowtow before ascending.¹⁶⁹

Confucius, perhaps disinclined to extravagance, accords with the majority in opting for silk instead of hemp. By observing the motives behind changes in prevailing practice, his evaluative perspective is illuminated. The relevant issues, then, are why one chooses to do one or the other, and how one goes about it. The manner and disposition with which the li are performed are important; the specific manifestations, the trappings much less so. Authenticity is authoritative. It would almost seem to be enough to conduct oneself thoughtfully, engage others with reverence, and pursue endeavors with diligence.

Authorities are useful and should be heeded to the extent they develop such attributes of character.

There is an interesting dynamic at play between the way Confucius cites the authority of documents such as the Shijing and the somewhat different nature of the Analects itself. We generally consider the creative act of authoring a text to involve some implicit claim of authority with regard to the subject matter. However, as Mark Lewis points out concerning a number of classical Chinese texts including the Analects:

...Authorship was a sign not of authority but of subordination, while the master was in life the reader or responder and in death the topic or theme....As a consequence ‘authorship’ and ‘authority’ are separated, and the writer casts

¹⁶⁸ Daoist Theory, p. 75.
¹⁶⁹ This passage also illuminates a certain pluralistic dimension of Confucianism. See Ch. 5.
himself in the role of a secretary transcribing the speech of another.... Texts were written as collections of quotations because they derived their authority from the supposed wisdom of the master. The master in turn derived his authority from the presence of disciples. A simple exposition in essay form would have been the ungrounded assertions of an isolated individual. What made the words worth listening to was the fact of their having been heeded by others, and that fact was proven only in the re-enunciation of the teaching scene.  

This is why the "author(s)" of the *Analects* are not explicitly identified in conjunction with the text. There is an almost proto-democratic sense of authority emerging here, where the master in some sense depends upon the recognition afforded him by his disciples. Without such recognition, the master will fail to be preserved as an authority. The disciples, in turn, derive a measure of authority by honoring and conveying the wisdom of the master, and this imbues the text with its authority. The master, however, is ultimately responsible for the generation of his own authority, for it is his charisma combined with his memorable words and deeds that inspire the work of the disciples. Were it not for Confucius' captivating presence, and the unforgettable impression he clearly made, we would likely not be privy to (or heed) his insights today.

**Xunzi: The Authority of *Li***

The Confucian framework for the creation and conference of authority is adopted and modified through the work of Xunzi. The most notable difference, of course, is that the *Xunzi* is a text that has come to be known by the same name as its principal author—authorship has taken on some measure of authority. In many respects, however,

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170 *Writing and Authority*, p. 54-58.
171 Although Xunzi himself is believed to have authored the majority of the text, there are sections that suggest they were the later work of disciples.
Xunzi’s understanding of authority follows closely that of Confucius, if only more explicitly so. For example, Xunzi refers to the Songs in 20 of his 32 total chapters and, like Confucius, he cites this text more than any other. Historical figures revered by Confucius, such as the Duke of Zhou, figure prominently as well. Confucius is mentioned frequently, and Chapter 7 is titled Zhong Ni, after the given name of Confucius. Xunzi also titles a number of his chapters after important Confucian notions such as learning, the li, music, and of course zhengming. Absent consensus that zhengming should be upheld, it will be shown that Xunzi recognizes the need to employ other forms of authoritative persuasion.

One form of authority implicitly relied on by Xunzi much more so than Confucius is his method of argumentation or reasoning. In all likelihood, this has to do with the maturation of competing schools of thought who invested authority in alternative viewpoints. In other words, certain groups were not persuaded by the mere recitation of an ode or quotation from Confucius, and they were not predisposed to embrace the spirit of zhengming. Xunzi makes explicit his own theory of argumentation near the end of his Against Physiognomy (Fei Xiang) chapter:

The proper method of speech and persuasion (shuo): introduce the subject with dignity and reverence. Focus on it with propriety and sincerity. Grasp it with determination and vigor. Elucidate it using examples and making distinctions. Illuminate it by drawing comparisons. Present it with enthusiasm and relish. Treasure it, ennoble it, esteem it, spiritualize it. If you do these things, then your persuasive efforts (shuo) will rarely be poorly received. Even if you fail to persuade (shuo) others, they cannot help but esteem [it]. This can be called being able to bring esteem to what one esteems. Tradition says: “Only exemplary persons are able to bring esteem to what they esteem.” This is what I mean. (5.16)
This advice is geared specifically for oral argumentation, suggesting that, for Xunzi anyway, most important debates are likely to take place in conversation between persons, rather than, for example, in written form.\textsuperscript{172} Given the multifaceted meaning of the graph *shuo* 嘘, which can mean simply “to speak” and yet when pronounced *yue* also “pleased” or “pleasing,” we can infer an important connection between the ability to speak well or speak persuasively and the ability to *please*. The fact that it sometimes is difficult to determine a precise translation for the term suggests that pleasing and persuading are complementary acts. In keeping with the Confucian program, Xunzi would no doubt insist his prescribed meticulous preparation and presentation are responsible for persuasion and pleasure, rather than pleasure being the cause of the persuasive effect.

Above, Xunzi implicitly acknowledges that there are times when the audience may not be persuaded despite recognizing the speaker’s mastery of a given subject. In Aristotelian terms, this could be considered akin to *logos* mastery absent adequate *pathos* and/or *ethos*. How then should one proceed? Chapter 7.7 begins with the rather ambitious caption “The proper method of conduct for any occasion.” It then reads:

If you do this in service to your lord you will surely be successful (*tong* 沛). If you do so while pursuing authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁) you will surely be sage-like. Stand resolute with high standards (*long* 隆) and do not be divided. Once this is so, place them first with reverence and honor. Uphold them with diligence (*zhong* 忠) and sincerity (*xin* 信). Put them into practice with care and caution. Maintain them with honesty and earnestness. If down and out, still adhere to them, and reiterate them with all your might. Though your lord may not notice

\textsuperscript{172}Given that Xunzi was writing many centuries before the invention of the printing press and the advent of widespread literacy, perhaps this goes without saying. It would require another investigation entirely to trace the impact these developments have had on the practice of philosophy. The point, however, is in keeping with the main theme under development here: the notion that our understanding of philosophical debate should be re-invigorated with a renewed emphasis on conversation between persons coupled with a corresponding de-emphasis on the production and dissemination of written treatises.
you, do not harbor resentment in your heart. Though your merit may be great, do not make a show of your excellence (de 德). Seek less, merit more. Do not weary of showing love and honor. If you do this then you will rarely be unsuccessful (bu shun 不順). If you do this in service to your lord you will surely be successful (tong 通). If you do this while pursuing authoritative conduct you will surely be sage-like. This can be called the proper method of conduct for any occasion.

Though hardly a simple or straightforward algorithm, nonetheless there are several important themes woven together that can be unraveled. The initial advice is to serve one’s lord with circumspection, but then the primary focus switches to the ways of upholding one’s own high-set standards (long 隆), that are, somewhat curiously, to be one’s top priority once the former is accomplished. Then, however, the argument wraps back around to its starting point, re-establishing service to one’s lord and the pursuit of humaneness as the principal counsel. On closer inspection, Xunzi is identifying staggered tiers of achievement. One kind of success is achieved through service to one’s lord. Sagehood, however, is achieved by doing so authoritatively—that is, by being personally engaged in a creative sense.

It is worth noting the terms Xunzi uses to denote success. In the instances linked with service to one’s lord, tong 通 uses the path radical (as does dao 道) to suggest a connection made, an effect actualized. When combining all the elements—service to one’s lord, humaneness, and upholding one’s own standards—it is said one will rarely bu shun 不順, which is the same expression used by Confucius in 13.3 of the Analects when describing the ill effect on words of failing to zhengming. It seems likely, particularly in light of his own Zhengming chapter, that Xunzi would have been familiar enough with the Analects to be cognizant of the connection. Here, as in the Analects, the clause
implies a preference for smooth functioning—flowing through the world and gently making one’s way, just as water tends to flow through the path offering least resistance. Of course, neither Xunzi nor Confucius would advocate a way of life that could be construed as a hackneyed form of “go with the flow,” but the point, not unlike that made by the Daoists, is that some compromise and accommodation are inevitably necessary. One that blindly and stubbornly adheres to a particular doctrine or a particular course of action will ultimately be ineffectual.

The lingering question with regard to 7.7 is how one is to balance between the occasionally conflicting mandates to serve one’s lord, pursue humaneness, and uphold one’s own standards. Given a historical record replete with stories of those who sacrificed their own lives either in service to their lord or in defiance of their lord (upholding a personal standard instead), Xunzi must have been aware of these potentially conflicting demands. Part of the answer, albeit a vague one that requires reflective application, can be found in the final clause of the chapter in question: “Therefore the exemplary person bends if it is time to bend and extends if it is time to extend” (7.8).

What the situation calls for is determined partly by prescribed patterns (of li, history, context, and so on) and partly by the quality of personal judgment. Lest there be any question, however, that certain personal and contextual considerations inevitably weigh more heavily than the demands of one’s lord, Chapter 13, titled “The Way of the Minister” (Chen Dao 臣道), should dispel all doubt. Here Xunzi cites an unspecified tradition that says: “Follow the way, do not follow one’s lord” (13.2).
Curiously, Xunzi makes no mention whatever of the *li* in 7.7, “the proper method of conduct for any occasion.” Yet, Xunzi considers the *li*, perhaps more than any other candidate for authority, as a potent arbiter. Passages stressing the importance of the *li* and praising their efficacy abound. For example, 2.2 concludes,

Thus, people without *li* will not thrive. Affairs conducted without *li* will not succeed. A nation without *li* will not be tranquil. A Song says: “[Their] *li* and ceremonies precise and measured; [their] mirth and speech precise and penetrating.” This is what I mean.

The *li* provide a pattern or template through which human conduct and communication can be carried out effectively and in accordance with mutual expectations.

Chapter 27, the “Great Compendium,” is an amalgam of assorted odds and ends, 119 in all. Here we find several references to the *li* that reinforce their importance: “The *li* lead the government along. When governing without the *li*, government will not proceed” (27.24). The *li* are prior and necessary to the conduct of effective governance. “The *li* provide the footing for people to tread on. Without such footing, they surely stumble and fall, sink and drown. When small matters are neglected, great disorder results. Such is *li*” (27.42). This is a particularly significant point because it suggests that a failure to maintain strict ritual propriety is tantamount to abandoning the *li* altogether. One cannot selectively choose which rituals, or which portions of rituals, to uphold if their integrity and efficacy is to be preserved.

What makes the *li* authoritative? According to A. S. Cua,

The Confucian emphasis on the role of historical knowledge, given the backward character of analogical projection, is a useful reminder that any piece of ethical reasoning, if it is to claim interpersonal significance, though in itself occasioned by a present perplexity, must have some contact with the cultural-historical experience of the people. It is in culture and history that an analogical projection
finds its anchorage and not in rules and principles of *a priori* ratiocination. In this basic way, the prospective significance of analogical projection is rooted in retrospective ethical thinking. Pruned of its excesses owing to enthusiasm for the moral significance of history, the Classical Confucian’s frequent appeal to antiquity need not be regarded as a misguided search for mythological paradigms for ethical reasoning. The crucial role assigned to *li* in ethical thinking, particularly in [Xunzi], attests to its significance as an embodiment of an ethical tradition. Thus, even if *li* does not always provide direct guidance in ethical thinking, it expresses a cultural life-style, a background for ethical reasoning.¹⁷³

As discussed above in the context of Confucius, our lives today lack anything that might be considered directly analogous to the *li*, so it may not be easy to fathom the degree to which they permeated everyday life in ancient China. The important point is that they provided society as a whole with a richly detailed and mutually shared cultural vocabulary. In this respect, modern America, sometimes described as a “melting pot” of disparate cultures and belief systems, lies on the opposite end of the societal spectrum. Hence, it is tempting to characterize ancient Chinese and modern American culture as homogeneous and heterogeneous, respectively. The argument, however, is that Confucianism provides an important strategy for the accommodation and incorporation of difference—one that could in fact be considered more sophisticated than the modern American imperative merely to “tolerate” it.

When looking at Xunzi’s Chapter 19, devoted entirely to a discussion of *li*, it becomes evident that his understanding of their origin and authority is somewhat different from that of Confucius. In part this has to do with how their ideas have come down to us, with the sayings of Confucius recorded unsystematically in dialogue format, while Xunzi constructed long, argumentative treatises. This affords us the opportunity to

¹⁷³ *Ethical Argumentation*, pp. 96-97.
be meticulous in our analysis of Xunzi, whereas with Confucius we are obligated to be more creative. Still, I believe Xunzi situates the *li* on a more cosmic level than Confucius, who viewed them somewhat more conventionally. It is this cosmic orientation that, for Xunzi, imparts to the *li* their overarching authority.

Without engaging in a protracted analysis of the chapter in question, I will focus on several passages that bring this perspective to light. Xunzi begins by claiming that the *li* were first instigated by the Ancient Kings (*xian wang* 先王) in order to rein in the disorder that results from people pursuing their desires indiscriminately, and hence “to allocate things, to cultivate people’s desires, and to provide for their satisfaction” (19.1). The meaning of *li* then, according to Xunzi, is “to cultivate” (*yang* 糧) (19.2).174

Xunzi then argues for the cosmic framework of the *li* in 19.8. The crucial term here is *li* 理, sometimes misleadingly translated as “rational principle” or “rational order.”175 In order to avoid importing western philosophical jargon and associated misconceptions, the original term might be more generically rendered “pattern.” According to Karlgren, the *Guoci* uses the term to denote cutting jade according to its veins; the *Liji* uses it to denote muscle fibers.176 In essence, then, *li* 理 is used to refer to the pre-existent, persistent and dynamic natural order of things. We must be careful, of course, to refrain from immediately dubbing such order as “rational.” Xunzi writes:

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174 Watson translates *yang* as “satisfaction,” Knoblock “to nurture.” “Satisfaction” is unsatisfactory, particularly given the etymology of the term, which graphically depicts a sheep over foodsstuffs, suggesting the activities associated with farming. Knoblock’s rendering is more appropriate, although I have chosen “to cultivate” in order to evoke the related connotation of “culture” without abandoning the more rustic etymology of *yang*.
175 As Knoblock does at the beginning of 19.8.
176 Grammata, p. 258.
The *li* 理 of *li* 禮 is profoundly deep indeed. The discerning people who argue about "hard and white" and "identity and difference" are at a loss to understand it. This *li* 理 is profoundly great indeed. The persuaders (*shuo ren* 說人) who have statues erected and edicts issued under false pretenses are ruined by it. This *li* 理 is profoundly lofty indeed. The haughty people who deprecate custom, considering themselves above others, are brought down by it. (19.8)

Xunzi is apparently trying to establish a foundation for the *li* that transcends the narrow intellectual squabbles of his day. Paul Rakita Goldin observes, "...the rituals have a double function: they facilitate peaceful society by establishing conventions of interaction; and they ensure at the same time that these conventions are appropriate to the human situation—and to the Way." The point seems to be that there is a pattern at work behind the *li* 禮, reinforcing them and validating their authority despite any who would question or oppose them.

These questions remain: does this in fact implicate some sort of universal metaphysical principle, and is there a way for Xunzi’s linking of *li* 理 with *li* 禮 to bear some measure of practical relevance to us today? Schwartz writes:

Here the word *li* is elevated to the status of a principle of order governing both the cosmos and the human order. The Western idea of convention and contrivance suggests that what has been made might have easily been made in some other fashion. The Greek sophists looking at the variety of customs, "constitutions," and sociopolitical institutions available in the city-state world of their time might easily have conceived all of them as arbitrary inventions. To [Xunzi], however, the good order of society which he describes is the universal order of civilization. Hence, when we speak of the sages as “making it” or “forming it,” we find that what they actually do is *make manifest* the overall pattern appropriate to the end of harmonizing the centrifugal tendencies found in the individual human organism. It may not be innate in the individual but it seems to be latently present in the objective cosmic order. The *li* is in essence a kind of "natural law" in the stoic and medieval sense. Like natural law, it is not self-enacting. Yet it would appear that what the ancient sages did in bringing the order of society into

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177 *Rituals*, p. 74.
existence was not invent an arbitrary system of \textit{li} but "discover" it by a process of arduous reflection. Again, one need not imagine here a Platonic realm of eternal forms and yet in some sense the \textit{li} are part of the larger cosmic pattern and as such are much more than simply utilitarian devices. They are certainly not arbitrary conventions.\footnote{\textit{World of Thought}, pp. 301-302.}

Schwartz’s reading of Xunzi here is excessively conservative. If Xunzi’s emphasis on \textit{li} is to have the practical relevance he undoubtedly intended, then this perspective must be tempered somewhat. Assuming we, in our modern milieu, were convinced that the \textit{li} represent harmonious manifestations of human behavior within the cosmic order, it nonetheless would be impossible to restore them. Historically and culturally speaking, we are too far removed from the \textit{li} of Xunzi’s day. Either we totally disregard Xunzi’s emphasis on \textit{li} (and, given its pivotal role, likely the rest of Xunzi with it), or we find a way to interpret them more as evolving from localized received cultural norms—not, as Schwartz claims above, "the universal order of civilization."

Still, it does need to be acknowledged that Xunzi surely had the specific \textit{li} of his day in mind when formulating the argument above, particularly in light of his detailed discussions and defenses of specific ritual practices that appear frequently in Chapter 19. He comes across as an advocate of one specific set of cultural customs, not culture in general. The point, however, is that the \textit{li} 禮 reflects the \textit{li} 理, not the other way around. In order to prevent Xunzi being dismissed as a staunch conservative defending with futility what was an already waning set of cultural practices, we would do well to recall the beginning of Chapter 19, where his analysis of the origin and purpose of the \textit{li} indicates an understanding of the vital role they play in making human society possible.
Xunzi begins with a plausible theory about human nature and what human life is like in the absence of *li* and then delivers a compelling argument as to how the *li* channel our instincts and desires into a more harmonious cosmic pattern. By participating in the *li*, we are working with the cosmos, rather than against it. In our modern world, Xunzi’s vision might still be realized through formulation and participation in our own form of *li* in conjunction with the proper use of language.

Finally, it should not be overlooked that Xunzi, perhaps even more explicitly than Confucius, emphasizes the importance of pursuing learning and character development under the tutelage of a “master.” In his “Teachings of the *Ru*” (or “Confucian Teachings”) chapter, after reinforcing the Confucian point that harmonizing learning and practice represents the height of human achievement, he writes:

> Therefore if a person is without a master and a model yet is intelligent, he will surely turn to thievery. If brave, he will surely turn to larceny. If capable, he will surely cause disorder. If perceptive, he will surely focus on the bizarre. If given to argumentation (*bian* 論), he will surely do so brazenly. A person who has a master and a model and is intelligent will make rapid progress. If brave, he will quickly become fearsome. If capable, he will rapidly succeed. If perceptive, he will rapidly get to the bottom of things. If given to argumentation, he will rapidly master the art of discourse (*tun* 論). Therefore to have a master and a model is a person’s greatest treasure. To be without a master and a model is a person’s greatest calamity. (8.20)

Raw talent needs proper guidance or it is prone to cause personal aimlessness and social disruption. Putting one’s abilities to selfish ends, or no particular end at all, is wasteful. Authority lies not with those enjoying uncommon natural gifts, but rather with those who channel their abilities according to available exemplars and examples. It is noteworthy that Xunzi claims a person with an aptitude for argumentation, given a master and a
model to follow, is said to quickly master the art of discourse (lun 論). It is no accident that this term is borrowed from the Confucian Analects, or Lunyu 論語. Xunzi frequently reminds his readers that Confucius was a living model of the transforming, efficacious use of discourse that integrated historical and cultural exemplars with a reflective awareness of, and ability to apply them to, present circumstances. He was an embodiment of zhengming.

Xunzi merits no small measure of recognition for presenting Confucianism as an ideology that proved to be compatible with the wishes of Emperor Han Wudi, who adopted Confucianism as state ideology around 100 BCE. In fact, due in large part to Xunzi’s preliminary efforts, Confucianism was integrated into state policy for more than two millennia. In light of the preceding analysis, however, Xunzi can hardly be considered responsible for the authoritarian abuses of Confucianism that tarnish China’s colorful history. Despite Xunzi’s caution that one should follow the way and not one’s lord, historically more often than not the moral authority of the former was unjustly usurped by the political authority of the latter.

**Platonic Authority: From Dialectic to Myth, and Back Again**

"One cannot argue against logos without acceding to it."179

No government implemented Platonic political philosophy the way Confucianism was instituted in China. An aborted experiment in Syracuse was the closest Plato came to seeing his vision realized. This is not surprising given the way he depicts Socrates
questioning the prevailing cultural values of his day, and considering how radically different the societal vision in the Republic is from contemporaneous political structures. One standard reading of Plato is that authority should be accorded to those of greatest intellectual and philosophical merit. Such merit would be demonstrated primarily through familiarity with the dialectic method and how it applies to both practical and theoretical fields of inquiry. In other words, there is little in Plato that would make his philosophy immediately amenable to pragmatic application by political rulers of his day, although this reflects more poorly on those in power at the time than it does on Platonic philosophy.

Perhaps in an effort to make his philosophy more accessible to those with less than exemplary dialectical skills, Plato's dialogues are interspersed with a number of imaginative myths that vie for authority, particularly but not exclusively where dialectic breaks down. Certain myths may in fact serve as philosophical cornerstones where ideas extend beyond the range of dialectic altogether. Julius A. Elias argues as much in Plato's Defence of Poetry. A not altogether dissimilar conclusion is drawn by David Roochnik in The Tragedy of Reason: Toward a Platonic Conception of Logos. One objective here is to analyze the way specific myths are used in the dialogues, thereby exploring the complicated relationship between myth and dialectic. It will be shown that, for Plato, neither myth nor dialectic ultimately trumps the other. Rather, they mutually depend on each other, particularly when it comes to pragmatic application. Only together do they make Platonic philosophy the rich and intriguing system worthy of Plato's aspirations.

179 David Roochnik, Tragedy, p. 195.
I should begin with a word about the authority of writing in Plato—or rather, its lack of authority. Martha Nussbaum observes:

This historical Socrates did not write. He did not write (if we believe Plato’s report) because he believed that the real value of philosophizing lay in the responsive interaction of teacher and pupil, as the teacher guides the pupil by questioning (sometimes gentle and sometimes harsh, depending on the pupil’s character and degree of resistance) to become more aware of his own beliefs and their relationship to one another. Books (Socrates says in the *Phaedrus*) cannot perform this activity, for they are not ‘alive’ (275D). They can, at best, remind you of what it is like. At worst, they lull the soul into forgetfulness both of the content and of the manner of real philosophizing, teaching it to be passively reliant on the written word (275A). Worse still, in some readers books can induce the false conceit of wisdom, since they may mistake information about many things for true understanding (275A-B). Books, furthermore, lack the attentiveness and responsiveness of true philosophical teaching. They ‘roll around’ all over the place with a kind of inflexible inertness (275E), addressing very different people, always in the same way.\(^\text{180}\)

If Plato inherited Socrates’ concerns about the effects of writing on the maladroit reader, why then did he compose such a considerable body of work?

Nussbaum contends that Plato’s dialogues successfully escape his own criticism by adopting and adapting the techniques of theater:

Plato, borrowing the critical openness and many-sidedness of good theater, uses argument to show genuine communication taking place and to establish such communication with the reader. Dialogues, then, unlike all the books criticized by Socrates, might fairly claim that they awaken and enliven the soul, arousing it to rational activity rather than lulling it into drugged passivity. They owe this to their kinship with theater.\(^\text{181}\)

Some readers of Plato will object to Nussbaum’s charitable concession that Plato’s dialogues succeed where standard writing fails. A thoughtful reader could likely indicate numerous points within any given dialogue where they would have responded differently

\(^{180}\) *Fragility*, p. 125.

than Socrates' interlocutors, or lingered longer on a particular point, or pursued a
different avenue of inquiry altogether. The discord aroused by such a reading experience
prevents some readers from understanding what Plato is really doing. But does this mean
that Plato has failed? Quite the contrary, it is precisely such moments of hesitation, of
reflection, and even resistance, that Plato aims to spark in his readers.

Little needs to be said here of the authoritative role of dialectic in the dialogues.
The case was made in Chapter 2 and has been made by any number of worthy scholars.
One important point with respect to authority, however, is how significantly different
dialectic is from the kind of dialogue practiced by Confucius and advocated by Xunzi that
often serves to delineate and reinforce a social hierarchy. Dialectic, by comparison, tends
to be a more democratic process where all participants have an equal opportunity to share
their views and have them evaluated. As Richard Robinson observes:

...Dialectic recognizes no authority. Neither party may accept a proposition from
anyone else, however near or great. The only authority is what seems true to us
two here and now. 'The question is not who said it, but whether it is truly said or
not' (Charmides 161C). 'As long as we ourselves agree about it, we can say
good-bye to other men's opinions' (Statesman 260B, cf. Phaedrus 275BC). 'Let
us not consider him, since he is not here' (Meno 71D). Another man's dictum can
become an authority only by his being present and persuading us of its truth.182

Of course, a kind of authority tends to emerge in the course of dialectical investigation, as
one view or set of views emerges as more plausible than others. Such authority is derived
from their tenability in a particular conversation, however, and it does not automatically
carry over into other contexts. In other words, Plato seems to rely on the intellectual
capacity of each person to ascertain truth: "...there is in every soul an organ or an
instrument of knowledge that is purified and kindled afresh by such studies.” Given
the open-ended nature of dialectic, Plato does not ask that we defer to authorities, whether
they are moral, political, cultural, or otherwise. Quite the contrary, Socrates insists that
his interlocutors concur with an idea only if they genuinely believe it to be true. The
authority of dialectic ultimately depends on the intellectual ability, coupled with the
integrity and honesty, of those who practice it.

Alexander Nehemas makes a similar point with regard to the role of elenchus in
dialectic, hinting at what Plato understands as the continuity of moral character and
persuasive ability. On this particular point, Plato’s position resonates with that of
Confucius and Xunzi:

Experts, then, cannot be recognized unless you are convinced by their arguments.
But what does such conviction involve? It involves accepting the conclusions of
these arguments as well as the methods by which the arguments reach their
directions for how to act. And what, in turn, is this? Is it not a way of saying that
one has become, at least to that extent, a moral expert, a virtuous agent, oneself?
Is it not to say that only one virtuous person can recognize another?

But if this is the case, and if a moral expert must possess knowledge of the
definition of virtue (which is more than knowledge of a few formulae concerning
it), how can one become a moral agent? How can one learn to be good? The
elenchus could succeed in showing that someone did in fact know what virtue is
only if the questioner arrived at that knowledge himself during the questioning.
Socrates’ repeated willingness to continue his discussions indefinitely suggests
just this: the elenchus can succeed positively only if both parties reach the
relevant understanding together. The recognition of a moral expert, that is, a
virtuous agent, through the elenchus can ultimately only be mutual. It always
involves one of the participants becoming noncoercively convinced of the views,
and therefore of the ways, of the other.184

182 Plato’s Earlier Dialectic, p. 79.
183 Republic, 527c, emphasis added.
184 Virtues of Authenticity, p. 45.
Again, authority is earned through the dialectic process. It does not carry over from one conversation to another. Still, the ultimate objective seems to be an objective standard independent of any particular exemplar—one that will maintain persuasive force across multiple discourses. And yet it should also be noted that the ability to accrue authority via dialectic depends partly on the quality of those one is speaking with. Recall how Callicles disengages from Socrates toward the end of the Gorgias, offering only insincere assent in response to Socrates' persistent questioning. Socrates cannot win him over because Callicles is committed to a fundamentally different way of life.

Perhaps Plato intended to address this problem in one of his most famous myths: the myth of the metals, and a related notion, the tripartite division of the soul. Both appear in the Republic. Bearing in mind the qualification that no theory in the dialogues should be taken as Plato's final word on a given subject, the ideas in the Republic nonetheless are rather well developed. The primary stated goal of the discussion in the Republic is to determine the meaning of justice in the polis. Three types of people are identified: lovers of money and material gratification, lovers of honor, and lovers of knowledge. Socrates reluctantly delivers what he acknowledges to be a gennaios psuedos, a “noble lie,” intended to reinforce an understanding of these differences among the citizenry. After much further discussion, Socrates restates the tentative conclusion that justice in the state requires each type of person to perform their corresponding

\[\text{For example, Socrates says "in my opinion we shall never apprehend this matter accurately from such methods as we are now employing in discussion. For there is another longer and harder way that conducts to this. Yet we may perhaps discuss it on the level of our previous statements and inquiries" (435d). In other words, the conversation depicted in the \textit{Republic} is of the most sophisticated level accessible to all}\]
function: "The proper functioning of the money-makers, the helpers, and the guardians, each doing his own work in the state...would be justice and would render the city just" (434c).

Socrates then suggests that these three personality types are all present in each person: "we shall thus expect the individual also to have these same forms in his soul, and by reason of identical affections of these with those in the city to receive properly the same appellations" (435c). This point is illustrated using several examples of people experiencing internal conflicts, such as this story about Leontius: "becoming aware of dead bodies that lay at the place of public execution [he] at the same time felt a desire to see them and a repugnance and aversion..." (439c). Part of him wants to gaze at the scene, and part of him tells him it is inappropriate to do so, or part of him may feel indignant that others give in to such a desire, while part of him wants to hold the anger in check or channel it more productively.

It is natural, Socrates says, for a person to experience such conflicting drives. The critical challenge facing each person is to recognize the cause of such conflicts so that they may be managed with due care. In order for a person to exhibit the quality of justice, their character must be harmonized analogically like the just polis. Glaucon cannot help but agree with Socrates:

S: We must remember, then, that each of us also in whom the several parts within him perform each their own task—he will be a just man...Does it not belong to the rational part to rule, being wise and exercising forethought in behalf of the entire soul, and to the principle of high spirit to be subject to this and its ally?

participants. There is, however, another, more sophisticated way to analyze such matters—possibly dialectic in its most rarified form, or possibly through another method only hinted at by Plato in Letter VII.
G: Assuredly.
S: Then is it not, as we said, the blending of music and gymnastics that will render them concordant, intensifying and fostering the one with fair words and teachings and relaxing and soothing and making gentle the other by harmony and rhythm?
G: Quite so, said he.
S: And these two, thus reared and having learned and been educated to do their own work in the true sense of the phrase, will preside over the appetitive part which is the mass of the soul in each of us and the most insatiate by nature of wealth. They will keep watch upon it, lest, by being filled and infected with the so-called pleasures associated with the body and so waxing big and strong, it may not keep to its own work but may undertake to enslave and rule over the classes which it is not fitting that it should, and so overturn the entire life of all. (441e-442b)

Just as authority in the state should be maintained by those most fit to rule, so authority within each individual human agent should be maintained by the corresponding faculty in each of us. There is no accommodation here for addictions, overwhelming passions, or other forms of victimization. Plato would have us believe that we are always free to choose which faculty to heed but, as Nussbaum observes, "...it will be an appropriate choice only if it is made by the highest element in us, viz. intellect." Inner turmoil—and turmoil in the state—results when the appetitive or spirited drive in the soul gains sway.

Given the ongoing comparison with Confucianism, the emphasis placed above on the "harmony and rhythm" that is imbued through "music and gymnastics" is worth noting. This portion of the above passage reads much like Xunzi's argument for the importance of *li* and music as regulative human practices. Like Xunzi, Plato begins with a multi-tiered theory of human motivation and develops a corresponding ethical and

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186 *Fragility*, p. 134.
political theory designed to keep our base drives in check while developing our more
noble faculties.

The significant difference, of course, is that Xunzi advocated adherence to pre-
existing cultural rituals as reinforced through canonical texts, whereas Plato would have
preferred to replace prevailing Greek culture with his own ideological program. What
were prevailing Greek values during Plato’s time, and why did he find them problematic?

According to Nussbaum,

Before Plato’s time there was no distinction between ‘philosophical’ and ‘literary’
discussion of human practical problems. The whole idea of distinguishing
between texts that seriously pursue a search for truth and another group of texts
that exist primarily for entertainment would be foreign to this culture...

It is also important to bear in mind that, in the fifth and early fourth centuries, it
was the poets who were regarded as the most important ethical teachers. 187

Much the same could be said of the milieu in which Confucius lived. Confucius and
Xunzi often rely on quotations from historical texts such as the Shijing for inspiration,
illumination and validation of a particular point. The closest analogue to the Shijing in
Greek culture would be the famous mythological poems authored most notably by Homer
and Hesiod. Far from the deep sense of reverence Confucius and Xunzi felt for their own
inherited poetic tradition, Plato’s Republic evinces a stern distrust of popular Greek
poetry and mythology. The Republic instead proposes the adoption of an entirely new set
of myths designed to introduce and maintain a radically different social structure.

One attack on such mythical poetry occurs in Book II of the Republic, where it is
argued that tales involving war and strife between the gods must be censored or at least
modified greatly in order to teach children the nature of moral goodness. The conversation between Socrates and Adeimantus proceeds thus:

S: We must begin, then, it seems, by a censorship over our story-makers, and what they do well we must pass and what not, reject...

[Hesiod and Homer and the other poets related to us]...composed false stories which they told and still tell to mankind.
A: Of what sort? And with what in them do you find fault?
S: With that, which one ought first and chiefly to blame, especially if the lie is not a pretty one.
A: What is that?
S: When anyone images badly in his speech the true nature of gods and heroes, like a painter whose portraits bear no resemblance to his models.
A: It is certainly right to condemn things like that, but just what do we mean and what particular things?
S: There is, first of all, the greatest lie about the things of greatest concernment, which was no pretty invention of him who told how Uranus did what Hesiod says he did to Cronus, and how Cronus in turn took his revenge, and then there are the doings and sufferings of Cronus at the hands of his son. Even if they were true I should not think that they ought to be thus lightly told to thoughtless young persons. But the best way would be to bury them in silence, and if there were some necessity for relating them, only a very small audience should be admitted under pledge of secrecy...
A: Why, yes, such stories are hard sayings.
S: Yes, and they are not to be told, Adeimantus, in our city...
A: No, by heaven, I do not myself think that they are fit to be told.
S: Neither must we admit at all that gods war with gods and plot against one another and contend—for it is not true either—if we wish our future guardians to deem nothing more shameful than lightly to fall out with one another...But if there is any likelihood of our persuading them that no citizen ever quarreled with his fellow citizen and that the very idea of it is an impiety, that is the sort of thing that ought rather to be said by their elders, men and women, to children from the beginning and as they grow older, and we must compel the poets to keep close to this in their compositions. (377c-378d)

Socrates rejects the portrayal of gods exhibiting flaws of character that are human—all too human. Rather than exemplifying good and noble qualities, the gods as depicted by Homer and Hesiod evince all the petty enmities and jealousies of mere mortals. It is not

\[187\] Ibid., pp. 123-124.
so much the alleged dishonesty of such portrayals that concerns Plato, but rather the impact they will have on our moral development. If the gods give free reign to their passions, then such behavior is likely to be considered acceptable, or at least understandable, among humankind. Anything deemed liable to contribute to discord or strife—anything that fails to steer us toward the good—is susceptible to censorship.

Although censorship is a delicate issue in the free societies of today, we still practice it in a variety of ways. We criminalize certain manifestations of hate speech. We rate movies, television, and music for their content, hoping to prevent children from unsupervised exposure to them. Plato would simply go further in restricting the kinds of stories made available to society. Like Confucius and Xunzi, Plato recognizes the importance of a body of cultural literature that models and reinforces community-enhancing aspects of human character. Whereas the former found worthy examples in the available cultural literature, Plato did not. 188

The critique of poetic mythology continues in Book X of the Republic after the framework for the just polis—and human soul—are thoroughly investigated. According to Nehemas,

Plato’s attitude toward the poets is bald and uncompromising: He wants no part of them. And though he takes no pleasure in his attitude, for he takes pleasure in poetry, he takes the attitude seriously...though the action he advocates is, as usual, quite drastic, his motivation, as is also usual, is not half as perverse as we have been fearing. 189

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188 It is worth noting that Confucius condemns certain forms of music deemed licentious. He thus would seem to share Plato’s commitment to ban art forms believed to cause disharmony in the state. 189 Virtues of Authenticity, p. 251.
Plato’s objection to poetry depends on two related points. First, in the effort at imitation (mimesis) of human thought and action, the creation of dramatic tension depends on depicting a soul divided against itself. Socrates asks rhetorically:

Is a man, then, in all this of one mind with himself, or just as in the domain of sight there was faction and strife and he held within himself contrary opinions at the same time about the same things, so also in our actions there is division and strife of the man with himself? But I recall that there is no need now of our seeking agreement on this point, for in our former discussion we were sufficiently agreed that our soul at any one moment teems with countless such self-contradictions. (603c-d)

In this context, Socrates is plainly opposed to such internal strife. As Graham Parkes observes, “The effect of imitative poetry is to disrupt the unity of the individual, so that instead of being ‘of one mind’ there is ‘faction in him’ and he ‘does battle with himself’...[603c-d].” The rational faculty must prevail if the soul—and thus the state—is to be harmonious and just.

The second aspect of Plato’s critique is that the poet, through the performer of epic poetry and theater, exploits complications that arise from human frailty and weakness, magnifying them for all to see. Socrates asks:

And is it not obvious that the nature of the mimetic poet is not related to this better part of the soul and his cunning is not framed to please it, if he is to win favor with the multitude, but is devoted to the fretful and complicated type of character because it is easy to imitate? (605a)

Plato’s objection here, in other words, is that the poet imitates—or worse, magnifies—dimensions of character, or aspects of personality, that are of dubious merit. Not only is

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190 Composing the Soul, p. 76.
the performer often required to portray the inner conflicts of a soul divided against itself, but the very act of performance involves a kind of internal fracturing of self.

Most scholars of literature would probably disagree with Socrates' implication above that such imitation is "easy." Stories that successfully display and explore the conflicting drives of a complicated protagonist, such as Shakespeare's Hamlet, are widely considered among our best literature. However outrageous it may seem, such stories and characters would be forbidden by Plato because they fail to depict a human ideal toward which we are inspired to strive. As summarized by Nehemas:

Plato's argument against poetry thus involves, first, the opposition of reason to the irrational parts of the soul, which is involved in the subject matter of poetry and in what aspects of the personality it influences (cf. 606d1-7); second, it involves the opposition between two aspects of reasoning, which is involved in explaining why one can be tempted to act even on what one knows not to be correct. It is this opposition that accounts for our tendency to take as models for imitation what are merely products of imitation.¹⁹¹

Despite Plato's obvious concern with poets and poetry, his own dialogues are interspersed with a number of stories, fables, myths—in fact, it could be argued that many dialogues are infused with a kind of poetic sensibility. How do we make sense of this?

Julius A. Elias argues convincingly that myths are a necessary counterpart to dialectic in Plato's Defence of Poetry. Since Plato is widely recognized as an outspoken critic of poetry and poets, Elias has chosen a deliberately provocative title in order to serve as a corrective against what he sees as two prevailing yet questionable tendencies in Platonic scholarship. The first has already been discussed at some length: the tendency
to read Plato's dialogues and the arguments therein too literally—that is, without taking the dialogue format sufficiently into consideration.

The second questionable tendency is to overlook the foundational importance of myth, a trope employed on numerous occasions within the dialogues, often when normal discourse or dialectic fails to reach mutually satisfactory agreement and understanding vis-à-vis a key term. Elias argues that the limitations of dialectic set the stage for the great Platonic myths: "myth picks up where dialectic ends...The relationship between dialectic and myth...is complementary: to the demonstrable but negative certainty of dialectic is added the indemonstrable truths of myth."192 By "negative certainty," Elias means that dialectic primarily helps us discover what is not the case—it does not and cannot deliver permanent truths.

Elias contends that although the purported purpose of Platonic dialectic is a kind of scientific certainty, Plato recognized all along that it could not succeed where it matters most:

...What Plato primarily has in mind in speaking of dialectic is the kind of knowledge which is certain in the sense that it can be made common property, binding on all rational minds, because it is capable of verification by emperico-logical means such that the denial of it is impossible without self-contradiction. But this kind of knowledge is simply not attainable in those fields in which Plato's principal interest lies. He was fully aware of this and was much more skeptical than is generally believed about the areas, if any, in which certain knowledge can be attained.193

"Plato's principal interest" here refers to ethics and political philosophy—or, as mentioned previously, improving the human soul or character. Since dialectic cannot

191 Virtues of Authenticity, p. 268, emphasis added.
achieve success on a permanent basis and in all contexts, Plato employs the myths to
provide an alternative form of explanation with an alternative form of persuasive
authority.

It is important, however, not to overlook the inherent value of practicing dialectic.
In other words, while myths surely play an essential role in Platonic philosophy, and
dialectic exists in a complementary relationship with them, it is not clear that Plato was
convinced all along that dialectic could not achieve certainty with regard to ethical
vocabulary. It would be more accurate, I think, to suggest that he understood the inherent
limitation of dialectic to be that it provides the occasion for theêria without being theêria
itself.

In any case, the acknowledgment that dialectic may never achieve a kind of
scientific certainty does not detract from—and in fact may enhance—its value. Elias says
as much in analyzing the dialectical pursuit of definition:

The process founders, as it must, because every definition reached by the upward
path of induction remains necessarily tentative and subject to further correction
dictated by new experience and subtler ingenuity in organizing it.

But the exercise is not worthless. Merely as an exercise it is of great value,
sharpening the intellect and accustoming the mind to levels of thought that would
never be reached if it were not undertaken.  

As we continue to hone our definitions and they become increasingly precise, we
presumably come ever closer to attaining genuine knowledge of the Forms. The fact that
dialectic aims for a permanent, unchanging Form is what distinguishes it most noticeably

192 Plato’s Defence, p. 32.
193 Ibid., p. 33.
194 Ibid., p. 60.
from zhengming, which pursues a localized regularity that is rooted in historical precedent. Dialectic is a process of discovery; zhengming entails both recovery and creative application. As the accumulation of history continues to evolve and expand over time, so do the available historical examples, and therefore language use through zhengming will not remain manifestly permanent and unchanging, as the Forms presumably are.

In arguing for the inconclusiveness of dialectic, Elias points to the extreme skepticism of language that emerges out of the Cratylus:

...Names are an image or likeness of the things they stand for, and knowledge of the things cannot be derived from names (439B). The things we must study are the forms, beauty itself, not this or the other instance of beauty, still less its name (439D). At the end he introduces a new thought, even more disconcerting than the idea that things may be known without names (438E), and that is that perhaps they cannot be known at all: ‘Nor yet can they be known by anyone, for at the moment that the observer approaches, then they become other and of another nature, so that you cannot get any further in knowing their nature or state, for you cannot know that which has no state’ (440A). The dialogue closes on this sobering note, with the added suggestion that language applies to the Heracleitean flux from which true knowledge cannot derive (440C).

The discussion in the Cratylus presents a possible challenge to the argument under development here: that dialectic, or an effort to harmonize language use such as zhengming, is necessary for a healthy society. Still, our everyday efforts to communicate with one another seem to succeed more than they fail, and when they do fail, repeated efforts to clarify usually get the point across.

Matters become much more complicated and potentially controversial, however, once we embark on a discussion of fundamental ethical vocabulary—terms like justice, loyalty, love, and so on. Like Heraclitus, the Cratylus warns us of the misleading nature
of language. We tend to presume it presents an accurate and authoritative picture of the world, but its claims surpass its means. It lulls us into believing that we can delineate fixity where there ultimately is flux, as David Roochnik observes:

It takes great strength to admit that nothing abides. To believe, as Aristotle does, that there is something solid and dependable in the ocean of becoming is a consequence of weakness, of myopia. More specifically, to believe this is to be seduced by ordinary language (especially nouns). We think our names refer to beings, structures, islands. But, in fact, the name misleads for there is no being to correspond to that name. What is needed, therefore, is a different way of using language, one that will not mislead. And this is the Heraclitean aphorism. It plays. It changes. It contradicts itself. 195

So, it should be added, do the Platonic dialogues, and not by accident or inferior design.

As long as we remain cautiously aware of the reifying tendency of language, I believe—like Confucius, Xunzi, and Plato—that discussing crucial terms, while refraining from fixing them permanently, is conducive to a flourishing polis.

Hans-Georg Gadamer also questions the extent to which Plato posits dialectic as an instrument geared solely toward linguistic clarity. Referencing the infamous Letter VII, Gadamer summarizes:

Here we have four ways in which the thing known may be said to be “present” for us, and obviously, the reality itself, the knowledge of which is under consideration, is distinct from all of these. It is the fifth in this series. The four means of communicating the thing are as follows:

(1) name or word (onomá),
(2) explanation or conceptual determination (logos),
(3) appearance, illustrative image, example, figure (eidólon),
(4) the knowledge or insight itself.

195 Tragedy, pp. 162-163.
Now Plato asserts that all four of these provide no certainly \textit{[sic]} that in them the thing itself (\textit{die Sache selbst}) will come to be known as it truly is.\textsuperscript{196}

Despite identifying four distinct possibilities of clear and certain knowledge, Plato suggests that none is guaranteed to achieve certainty. Each retains an element of tentativeness, and they even tend to displace the knowledge to which we aspire:

\ldots Each of these four means has a tendency to bring a reality of a specific sort to the fore instead of the reality of the thing itself which was supposed to be displayed in word or discussion, intuition or insight. They all have an intrinsic distortion-tendency, so to speak. In the process of bringing something else into (presence) they would assert themselves as whatever particular thing they are instead of fading out of view. For they all are something besides the thing they are presenting.\textsuperscript{197}

Even if we somehow overcame the Herculean challenge of simultaneously entertaining all four methods, we still have not attained true and certain knowledge:

If one wants to describe the dialectical experience of thought, one may not just presuppose this systematic doctrine of classificatory concept formation. Instead one must display how the very procedure of conceptual definition itself contains something arbitrary and uncertain, for the genus under which a thing is to be subsumed obviously lack singleness of meaning.\textsuperscript{198}

Contrary to what some might protest, this does not render Plato a skeptic or a relativist.

On the contrary, it means dialectic is a much more subtle and sophisticated practice than is sometimes supposed. Genuine dialectic recognizes that it takes place in a particular place, at a particular time, among particular persons—there is no transcendental standpoint from which to conduct the investigation. It recognizes the ultimate instability and contingency of language, and in so doing does not dismiss these as shortcomings but rather employs them to productive advantage:

\textsuperscript{196} \textit{Dialogue and Dialectic}, p. 100.
In any event the dialectic to be experienced here is of exactly the same sort as the one demonstrated in the exercise in the *Parmenides*. It too results from the multiplicity of respects in which something may be interpreted in language. In this regard one might be reminded of the first hypothesis in the *Parmenides*. There that multiplicity was not a burdensome ambiguity to be eliminated but an entirety of interrelated aspects of meaning which articulate a field of knowing. The multiple valences of meaning which separate from one another in speaking about things contain a *productive* ambiguity...The productivity of this dialectic is the positive side of the ineradicable weakness from which the procedure of conceptual determination suffers...The whole basis of language and speaking, the very thing which makes it possible, is ambiguity or “metaphor,” as the grammar and rhetoric of a later time will call it.\(^{199}\)

The most important point is that the tentative and obfuscating nature of language does not condemn Plato to silence. Rather, it is embraced as representing a multiplicity of possibilities through which human experience and interaction can be mediated.

Hall and Ames introduce their own notion of productive vagueness while contrasting the foundations of Chinese thinking with their Greek counterparts:

In the search for meaningfulness, there is the vague notion of reason and its equally vague supplement—its *rhyme*. The rational thinker, at the end of reason’s rope, reaches out to metaphor. The poet, exhausting rhyme, descends by that same rope. The strictly nonrational, the rhyme of reason, is associated with myth, poetry, and rhetoric. A richly vague notion of rationality, untutored by the transcendental impulse, contains both rhyme and reason. This broader sense of “reasonableness” allows for the parity of myth and rational narrative, of metaphor and logic.

Reason finds its rhyme in Plato’s myth of Er, the imagery of the cave, the chariot, the analogies of the Sun and the Good. In a more extended sense, Plato is rhyme to Aristotle’s reason, and vice versa. And Democritus the rhyme of both. Rhyme is reason’s putatively meaningful other. A richly vague notion of rhyme or reason contains the senses of both. Together reason and rhyme offer the sum of meaningfulness and the tools for achieving it.\(^{200}\)

\(^{200}\) *Anticipating China*, p. 170.
Productive vagueness emerges out of the recognition that reason alone, given the way our language impels us to catalogue things and events, is an incomplete tool for furnishing meaning to the full breadth and depth of life's experiences. The complementary function of rhyme in some sense urges us in the other direction—toward ambiguity and wonder, rather than clarity and conviction. When Confucius cites passages from the Songs, he is both advocating and employing the virtuosity of rhyme. He is demonstrating the value of productive vagueness. Only together can rhyme and reason steer us toward what Hall and Ames call "reasonableness." This might very well be considered the object of the Platonic dialogue—a fusion of dialectic and myth. It could also be considered the object of zhengming.

The drive toward clarity in dialectic ultimately exposes its limitations. David Roochnik discusses this phenomenon at length in The Tragedy of Reason. He argues that, like the formula for classic Greek tragedy, logos in some sense carries with it the seeds of its own demise. This is evidenced by the fact that it is ultimately incapable of justifying—by its own rigorous standards—its own claim to authority:

Logos must presume that it is good in order to argue that it is good. Therefore, it cannot demonstrate that it is good because such a demonstration would have to assume what it purports to prove, namely that logos is good... As a result, the very project of logos now seems dependent upon a judgment that cannot itself be secured by argumentation. In other words, this project is initiated, and perhaps sustained, not by a demonstration of its value, but by protreptic.\textsuperscript{201}

By "protreptic," Roochnik means that logos encourages and exhorts us to practice it, rather than "proving" its value to us. What we find in the dialogues is not

\textsuperscript{201} Tragedy, pp. 106-107.
incontrovertible philosophical proofs of various kinds, nor proof of the value of the
philosophic life, nor even proof of the value of dialectic, but rather what amount to
brilliantly elaborate exhortations to a life of thoughtful reflection and engagement with
others.

Elias agrees that philosophical starting-points are incapable of justifying
themselves in their own terms and are therefore indefensible in a strong sense:

For there is no way out of the problem of the hypothetical status of first
premises, though there may be different ways of handling it, as indeed we find in
a number of other philosophers. Somewhere in every such system the primitives
are maintained on faith; they may be asserted dogmatically, or a cloud may be
drawn over their status: they can be bracketed or adopted heuristically, with one
degree or another of willingness to abandon them if something better shows up.
What Plato does is to flag them in his myths, surrounded by many expressions of
doubt and uncertainty, the doubt applying not to his own belief in them, but to the
possibility of asserting them in any more affirmative way. They mark the
transition between knowledge rationally demonstrable and true belief in Plato’s
system.202

The term “faith” may be somewhat unfortunate insofar as it typically suggests a kind of
religious devotion—unquestioning and often blind to alternatives. Dialectic, in its
commitment to reviewing and evaluating different positions—including its own status—
is highly resistant to such criticism. The point, however, seems valid enough: authority
is ultimately a matter of our own choosing. In the case of Plato, he recognized the
inherent limitations of dialectic and realized the need to supplement his philosophical
project with an alternative form of authority: myths.

The dialectic process, then, by Plato’s own admission via omission of proof, is
ultimately incapable of validating itself as a vehicle for inquiry. We cannot establish
dialectically the value of dialectic. What then does the *logos* of dialectic say about myth? We have already discussed Plato’s critique of conventional mythical poetry. Roochnik contends that, in the debate between *logos* and *muthos*, neither side ultimately is capable of defeating the other:

> In a debate as fundamental as that between the philosopher and the poet, there is no means of fair adjudication. We all have to begin somewhere. This means that we all have to decide, to take sides, and our doing so cannot be defended.²⁰³

Is the choice between philosophy and poetry merely an arbitrary one? More importantly, is the relationship between philosophy and poetry necessarily antithetical, or does Plato show us one way of philosophizing poetically? Hall and Ames have advanced their solution, a middle way, calling it “reasonableness.” In dialogues such as the *Phaedo* and *Meno*, Socrates tells myths detailing the immortality of the soul. He makes a related claim that knowledge involves a kind of recollection that *anyone* can attain. One purpose of these myths is to lend credence to the dialectic process—something the dialectic process itself cannot do outright. The way Socrates dialectically elicits a kind of knowledge from the slave boy in the *Meno* reinforces the myth, while the myth simultaneously endorses the process.

> Of course, the kind of authority attributable to myths is not logically sound. It is fundamentally different in kind. It is evocative and metaphorical. And yet it may be no less—and indeed possibly more—compelling than the *logos* that emerges through dialectic. As Roochnik observes:

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²⁰² *Plato’s Defence*, p. 233.
Far from being the simple-minded hater of poetry and the single-minded advocate of classical reason that the subversives typically take him to be, Plato appreciates the profound alternative poetry offers. Well-crafted and self-conscious poetry, that which invokes a muse, gives voice to a vision of a world not fully accessible to the rational workings of logos. There is no way of proving this poetical or sophistic worldview false, since attempting to do so begs the question, presupposes the very position in question.\(^{204}\)

Similarly, \textit{muthos} has no direct way of interrogating \textit{logos}, for as soon as it begins to do so it ceases to be myth and becomes a reasoned argument.

Far from conceding to an impasse, Plato attempts to harmonize the otherwise competing claims to authority of philosophy and poetry, of reason and rhyme, of \textit{logos} and \textit{muthos}. Much of his success is attributable to the dialogue format, but tremendous acumen is required in order to craft dialogues that bring these two otherwise mutually exclusive strategies into harmony. How is it accomplished? At its best,

Philosophical discourse, \textit{logos} in its Platonic variety, never reaches its desired terminus. It is forever the love, and not the possession, of wisdom. To reformulate this, and much of the above: \textit{Philosophical discourse is fundamentally interrogative}. Its paradigmatic sentence is the question, and not the assertion...

The Platonic version of \textit{logos} is not poetry. It seeks objective answers, it loves wisdom, it wants to speak about what is Good and Beautiful for all. For the very same reason, it is not Aristotelian. It is erotic, incomplete; it does not issue in an unambiguous, unclouded, theory. It is in between, interrogative, protreptic.\(^{205}\)

This would seem to be the message implicit in most of the early dialogues, which end in \textit{aporia}—indecision, and the acknowledgement that more discussion is required—rather than with a compelling conclusion. The same could be said of the \textit{Symposium}, a dialogue ostensibly designed in praise of \textit{erōs}, but which evokes more questions than it answers.

\(^{204}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 182.
Is it not fitting, then, to conclude that, for Plato, the very act of questioning is in some sense authoritative?

James Boyd White uses a novel interpretation of a short and seemingly simple dialogue, the Crito, to evoke the themes outlined above. White raises serious challenges to any straightforward, propositional reading, instead emphasizing the importance of being aware of precisely who is speaking to whom, and why. When Socrates speaks on behalf of the nomoi (laws), for example, White comments:

It is important to notice that Socrates speaks not of what the Nomoi “did say” or “do say,” nor even, for the most part what they “would say,” but of what they “might say.” He uses, that is, the optative mood, rather than the indicative and this is a way of marking the speech as hypothetical, tentative, or imagined.\(^{(206)}\)

It is also a way of indicating specifically how the nomoi might respond specifically to Crito—and not necessarily to anyone else—about his suggestion that Socrates escape from prison and flee Athens. Though Socrates’ concluding arguments may seem compelling (they certainly are to Crito), by now we know better than to construe them as Plato’s final word on the authority of the law.

Although the Crito is primarily an exploration of various claims of authority and about authority, White reminds us it would be a mistake to construe the conclusion of the dialogue as conclusive:

So what then is actually invoked as authority here? Not the laws; not the reasons for obeying the laws, for that topic is dropped when the argument is in a most unsatisfactory state indeed and transformed into another one; not even dialectic in its pure form; but another sort of conversation, another sort of philosophy, created

\(^{(205)}\) Ibid., pp. 200-201.
\(^{(206)}\) Acts of Hope, p. 20 fn.
by another sort of text, the *Crito* itself, defining its own idea of reason, its own way of being with language and with others.

What is this kind of reason? To start with the negative, the dialogue obviously rejects the mode of discourse offered by the Nomoi in their first speech, which is abstract, propositional, conclusory, and unreasoned in character—as authoritarian in performance as it is in its message—just as it rejects the methods of Crito’s first speech too...

The mode of thought performed in the dialogue as a whole is thus dramatic and literary, in contrast to Crito and the Nomoi alike, both of whom seek to argue from the top down, from general principle to particular conclusion, in a standard rationalist way. The kind of reason for which authority is claimed in the dialogue as a whole is very different in quality: its idea is not to make arguments good for all time, in all contexts and languages, but to carry on a conversation that is appropriate to this relation, with this person—or city—and this language, under these conditions of ignorance and uncertainty...

Despite what is sometimes claimed for the *Crito*, this kind of writing grants authority to no proposition, to no institution—not even to dialectic—but to the life of thought and imagination enacted here by which the questions of rightness and wrongness, authority and no authority, are addressed. It does not precipitate out into system or doctrine but is always a fresh demand upon the particular moment, the particular mind.

The dialogue at once stimulates and frustrates the reader’s own desire for an authority external to himself.207

This, I believe, was one of Plato’s primary interests not just with the *Crito*, but with most of his dialogues. Far from aiming to establish some sort of authoritative, propositional doctrine, the dialogues are specifically designed to inspire a keen interest in and appreciation for the kind of meaningful, reflective conversation depicted. Questions about authority—who or what has it, who or what *should* have it—are fundamentally relevant to the human experience. Plato does not insist that we all recognize and heed precisely the same authorities, he only asks that we discuss the issues with full heart and
open mind. He holds out hope that we may reach community consensus but ultimately relies upon the inherent value of the process.

The principal challenge that can be raised to White’s analysis of Plato is as follows. Let us assume that we are persuaded by the dialogue format, combined with the preceding perspectives on it, that the kind of straightforward, analytic philosophy Plato refrains from practicing is an impoverished, or at best incomplete, form of philosophy. If systematic approaches to philosophy are supplanted by conversational ones, where does this leave us? What, then, do we have to go on? The skeptic would suggest that the most Plato and White can offer us is something like “Talk about it.” How useful is that? And why did it take more than twenty sophisticated dialogues for Plato to say it? Surely, then, there must be more to Plato than this—just as there is more than a method, dialectic, for engaging issues of philosophical import.

The response is surely there is more to Plato than the admonition to “talk about it,” but the dialogue format serves as more than merely a vehicle for the conveyance of philosophical propositions. In addition, it will not suffice merely to acknowledge that Plato encourages us to talk things over, but then insist in the end Plato believes we all will—or at least should—have similar revelations or visions of reality (i.e., about the existence of Forms and so on). By investing authority in the dialectic method, Plato implicitly recognizes that no theoretical position is absolute and irrefutable. All propositions are constantly subject to interrogation and revision. This is for our sake, not

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207 Ibid., pp. 38-41.
for the sake of propositional validity. In other words, Plato believes that knowledge and truth are only meaningful insofar as they have a tangible impact on the quality of our lives. Plato's myths furnish meaning and value where dialectic cannot. Together, dialectic and myth point us toward reasonableness, providing formidable complementary strategies for the development of rich and robust community life.

Aristotle on Muthos, Logos, and the Authority of Appearance

Aristotle assigned philosophical authority to logos—a linguistic account. This is generally believed to involve some sort of thinking faculty that is often associated with our modern sense of reason or rationality. It will be shown to be more complicated than that, at times encompassing both the scientific reasoning capacity of epistêmē and the more flexible, context-sensitive phronēsis, or practical wisdom.

More than any explicit reference he makes, Aristotle's investment in logos is evidenced by his straightforward and methodical analytic strategy. We have already seen how he prioritizes logos in his treatment of rhetoric. This unflagging commitment to logos may seem somewhat philosophically unsophisticated in light of Plato's creative combination of dialectic and his own invented muthos, as well as the integrated matrix of authority advocated by Confucius and Xunzi. In the end, however, we should remember Roochnik's observation that authorities are ultimately a matter of choice. Some make their choices seemingly arbitrarily; others do so with a great deal of care. In the case of

208 It should come as no surprise that I find White's perspective on Plato quite compelling. It resonates
Aristotle, the selection of *logos* is made with utmost seriousness. The purpose here is to develop his case for and about *logos* while exploring potential avenues of integration with other sources of authority. For example, when it comes to the practical challenges of human affairs, Aristotle was remarkably sensitive to the complicated particularities that attend human decision-making. Here the emphasis on *logos* is not nearly as monochromatic as his writings themselves tend to be.

Aristotle establishes his view of *logos* and how it provides a universally transparent medium through which we access and describe the world in *De Interpretatione*:

> Spoken words are symbols of the affections of the soul, and written words are symbols of spoken words. And just as written words are not the same for all men, so spoken words are not the same for all. However, those first things of which these spoken words are signs, namely the affections of the soul, are the same for all, and the things of which these are likenesses are also the same.\(^{209}\)

This view—a kind of realism—is vaguely similar to that propounded by Xunzi in his analysis and defense of *zhengming*, although Xunzi places less emphasis on the *accuracy* of language in describing the world and is more interested in evoking language that is *effective*. For Aristotle, words neatly and accurately convey our sensory impressions, and that information is the same for all. Or is it? There is a certain tension between the view Aristotle propounds above and his claim, to be discussed at length below, about the authority of appearances. If human perception is the same for everyone, then would we not tend to hold identical and verifiable views—not just with regard to “scientific” fields quite well with the views of Elias, Gadamer and Sinaiko. The ongoing challenge is to refrain from the kind of univocal, theoretical advocacy White believes Plato to have so carefully avoided.\(^{209}\) This is Roochnik’s translation of 16a3-8, taken from *The Tragedy of Reason* p. 124.
of inquiry, but with regard to political and ethical issues as well? Perhaps not, but the problem of heterogeneity in human thought and action seems more difficult to account for if we hold that “the affections of the soul, are the same for all.” We can anticipate such heterogeneity being explained as a result of differences in innate disposition as well as life experience and training, but the question remains to what extent and in what regard appearances are, in fact, authoritative.

One fundamental claim put forward by Aristotle is that humanity is a “political animal” by virtue of the fact that we alone are capable of speech (logos)—the instrument whereby we communicate our evaluations of the experienced world to each other:

But obviously man is a political animal in a sense in which a bee is not, or any other gregarious animal. Nature, as we say, does nothing without some purpose; and she has endowed man alone among the animals with the power of speech (logos). Speech is something different from voice, which is possessed by other animals also and used by them to express pain or pleasure; for their nature does indeed enable them not only to feel pleasure and pain but to communicate these feelings to each other. Speech, on the other hand serves to indicate what is useful and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust. For the real difference between man and other animals is that humans alone have perception of good and evil, just and unjust, etc. It is the sharing of a common view in these matters that makes a household and a state.\(^\text{210}\)

It is disappointing that Aristotle apparently did not deem it necessary to argue for the validity of this particular view, as he makes a number of intriguing assumptions that may not hold up under scrutiny. His uncompromising teleological outlook, for example, famously pervades his writings, and this passage is no exception. He claims nature does nothing without a purpose and identifies an extraordinary one for logos.

\(^{210}\) *Politics*, 1253a7-17.
It is remarkable, too, that he situates humanity alongside the animal kingdom first for comparison and then in order to identify precisely what differentiates us. Aristotle predates Darwin by more than 2,000 years. Other attempts to explain the nature of humanity (Christianity, for example) set us apart from the rest of creation rather than, as Aristotle does, comparing us with animals. Today, it is a fundamental scientific belief that humans belong to the animal kingdom, so Aristotle’s approach may not strike us as particularly interesting today. During Aristotle’s time, however, it seems to have been a thoughtfully innovative strategy.

Perhaps the most interesting and controversial claim above, however, is that the purpose of speech is to delineate the useful and harmful, the just and unjust, and so on. Roochnik summarizes Aristotle thus:

Our capacity, therefore, to discuss rationally (with the hope of attaining knowledge) questions of value is our unique function. By actualizing it we flourish, for it constitutes our eudaimonia and what is best about us.

Logos is good; we are “meant” to discuss, to try to understand. Even further, logos is unconditionally good. Because it figures so prominently in the very composition of our lives, there is no condition, no external fact or situation, that can qualify or conditionalize its goodness. It just is good. We reason, talk together, and so become who we best can be.  

Communication of value-assessment is a possible function of speech, but it is far from certain speech is intended or designed for such a purpose, as Aristotle seems to imply at 1253a12. Still, if this is in fact what Aristotle is claiming, then he could be considered an even stronger affiliate of zhengming than previously supposed, insofar as he recognizes

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211 Tragedy, p. 34.
that the language we use—whether we are consciously aware of it or not—implicitly reveals our evaluations of the world.

Aristotle’s final claim—that sharing a common view about such matters constitutes a kind of community—is provocative but also debatable. What kind or degree of commonality is necessary to constitute a community? Is homogeneity or heterogeneity more likely to promote a flourishing community? The people of ancient Athens may have shared a vague sense of agreement about these fundamental issues, but even among such a relatively small and homogeneous population there must have been many and significant differences of opinion with regard to details. We get a sense of this through the disparate viewpoints that appear in Plato’s dialogues. The heralded Assembly of Athens provided a forum for the airing of such competing views. And yet even where the members of a community disagree in an open forum, there must be some kind of underlying mutual understanding that enables them to do so. This is likely Aristotle’s principal point. Of course, the people of many modern communities would have to be considered significantly more heterogeneous than ancient Athens, though they are no less a community if they share a commitment to open discourse. Aristotle may in fact be offering a surprisingly forward-looking analysis of what constitutes a household and state. Still, if he had meant “sharing their views” rather than “sharing a common view,” his position would have to be construed as progressive indeed.

The frequent absence of much argument in the writings of Aristotle can be frustrating, but it is nonetheless in keeping with his overall philosophical approach.
David Roochnik offers a simple but nonetheless reasonable explanation as to why this is the case:

[According to Aristotle,] language can in principle provide us with a window to nature. By speaking carefully, knowledgably, we can see clearly objects in the world.

This is precisely the object of Aristotelian prose: it aims to let be seen those objects of which it speaks. This is also why Aristotle so often seems assertive rather than argumentative. Often he is not trying to prove anything, he is attempting to tell his readers what is before their eyes.\textsuperscript{212}

Aristotle believes in the authority of appearances. There is no need to offer argument when he (believes he) is simply describing what is the case. In some sense this is reminiscent of the difficulty one encounters in reading a number of ancient Chinese texts, albeit for different reasons. Are they descriptive enterprises, or prescriptive? We have already considered how the distinction may not be particularly meaningful in a Confucian context, but Aristotle surely was attuned to the difference. It is made evident in his claims about the proper purpose of philosophy and implied through the language he uses.

In fact, the language employed by Aristotle in many respects determines, or at least influences, his philosophical agenda. Jean-Pierre Vernant observes:

\ldots Aristotle's logic is linked to the language in which he thinks; but then, as a philosopher, he thinks in the language used in philosophical writing. It is in and through written literature that this type of discourse becomes established; where it is concerned the logos is no longer simply speech but has come to imply demonstrative rationality and, as such, it is set in opposition, both in form and in fundamental significance, to the speech of muthos.\textsuperscript{213}

\textsuperscript{212} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 29.
\textsuperscript{213} \textit{Myth and Society}, p. 206.
One question worth pondering: Why did Aristotle choose to identify humankind as the “animal with logos” rather than the “animal with muthos?” Both seem to be unique and distinguishing attributes of humanity. Aristotle would answer that his conception of logos is broader and more inclusive, and that we would be incapable of muthos without logos in this broad sense.

For the sake of contrast, it is worthwhile to identify muthos-oriented philosophies. Heraclitus, with his brief and often tautological maxims, could very well be considered a representative figure of philosophical perspectives expressed through muthos. On the Chinese side, the parables of Zhuangzi offer a marvelous fusion of reasonableness and rhyme. In modern philosophy, the ever-challenging and multifaceted writings of Friedrich Nietzsche are steeped in muthos, particularly when contrasted with the German rationalists and idealists that preceded him. Insofar as humanity seems equally capable of exercising reason through language and exercising the imagination through language, these are not positions that can be dismissed out of hand. Modern commentators such as James Boyd White and Martha Nussbaum have put forward compelling arguments for the important philosophical lessons available both through literature directly and by considering its method of delivery.214

Despite such alternate views, Aristotle seems to finalize the rift between muthos and logos, as pointed out by Vernant, in his Metaphysics:

Posing the question, in Metaphysics, of whether the principles of corruptible and incorruptible beings are the same or different, he refers to the tradition of Hesiod

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214 See, for example, White’s When Words Lose Their Meaning. Nussbaum’s Love’s Knowledge is entirely devoted to this topic.
and those whom he calls the “theologians,” that is to say, the authors of myths about the gods, with the purpose of emphasizing that the distance that separates him from them is not so much temporal as intellectual:

The school of Hesiod and all the theologians considered only what was convincing to themselves and gave no consideration to us. For they make the first principles Gods or generated from Gods and say that whatever did not taste of the nectar and ambrosia became mortal—clearly using these terms in a sense significant to themselves; but, as regards the actual application of these causes, their statements are beyond our comprehension.

This apparently modest statement is in reality an outright condemnation of myth. Aristotle goes on to say: “However, it is not worthwhile to consider seriously the subtleties of mythologists. Let us turn to those who reason by means of demonstration” (III, 1000a 11-20). The fact is that the difficulties raised by Aristotle in connection with the food of the immortals do not, in the excessively logical form of a choice in which he expresses them, make any sense at all once the myths are seen as accounts that do not set out to pose this type of question and furthermore do not formulate in these terms the problems that they do tackle. Aristotle reads the myth as if it were a philosophical text. Either the gods take these foods for pure enjoyment, in which case they do not constitute the causes of their immortal nature; or they really are the causes for their being and, if this is so and the gods need to take food, how can they possibly be immortal? For a historian of religion the interest lies in the misplaced, not to say misguided, character of Aristotle’s remarks where myth is concerned. There is now such a gap between mythos and logos that communication between the two breaks down; dialogue becomes impossible since the break is complete.

Vernant concludes, based on Aristotle’s discussion, that mythos and logos “remain mutually impenetrable.”215 Is this really the case? Vernant here is offering an implicit criticism of Aristotle’s philosophical approach, not issuing a definitive pronouncement. We have already seen how Plato attempted to employ both, although it could be argued that he subordinates mythos to logos, insofar as the myths seem generally intended to augment a particular philosophical position rather than standing on their own and illuminating an alternative worldview.
Admittedly, the example chosen by Aristotle to dismiss muthos is particularly vulnerable to such a critique, especially given Aristotle’s commitment to the Principle of Non-Contradiction. Most sophisticated mythologies or other attempts at creative, non-rational expression have a complicated internal consistency of their own, as Vernant points out:

Myth is not only characterized by its polysemy and by the interlocking of its many different codes. In the unfolding of its narrative and the selection of the semantic fields it uses, it brings into play shifts, slides, tensions, and oscillations between the very terms that are distinguished or opposed in its categorical framework; it is as if, while being mutually exclusive these terms at the same time in some way imply one another. Thus myth brings into operation a form of logic that we may describe, in contrast to the logic of non-contradiction of the philosophers, as a logic of the ambiguous, the equivocal, a logic of polarity.

From this perspective, the complete text of the Analects might be considered to have mythical dimensions. The same could be said of many of Plato’s dialogues—not only do they incorporate myths, but in some sense entire dialogues have mythical properties by Vernant’s account. Viewed from the perspective of logos, both are laced with contradictory perspectives, ambiguity, misdirection, and confusion. As we trace eddies and currents of discourse, however, they make available a certain internal, emerging sense of order. This is less so with the Xunzi, which at times is ploddingly deliberate in pursuit of a particular point. Still, the document as a whole presents a challenge to logos, and the reader benefits by approaching the text with an appreciation for muthos. Reading Aristotle is, of course, different from reading either Plato or the Analects. For the most part, we find dogged efforts to convey information via straightforward prose that

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215 Myth and Society, pp. 210-211.
sometimes result in a confusion of their own—a confusion of the overly-literal, unimaginative, and humorless. His analysis of the relationship between the gods and ambrosia is one such example. The only humor to be found is in how stiffly Aristotle comes off. ²¹⁸

How might we contrast Aristotle’s conception of *logos* with Confucius and Xunzi? Let us consider carefully Roochnik’s commentary about Aristotelian *logos*:

For Aristotle, then, *logos* is a capacity to see and then to bring to voice what really exists in nature; to make clear the truth of an entity. It is also the ability to clarify what is right and wrong, to speak rationally about values. In an important sense, however, these two sides of *logos* are connected. Since that which is right and wrong is measured by a natural telos, *logos* can achieve the truth about what is right and wrong...

*Logos* is definitive of who we are: rational beings, living together in a common world to which we have good access (if only we see and talk straight). ²¹⁹

Roochnik’s language here is rather provocative because it bears comparison with *zhengming*, particularly the admonition to “talk straight.” Roochnik also establishes an important link between describing the world and inherently making value judgments. This is reminiscent of A. C. Graham’s “absence of the fact-value distinction.”

Where this account contrasts with Confucian thought, however, is its emphasis on teleology and rationality. According to Chad Hansen,

Chinese thinking is non-contrastively rational. Chinese thinkers certainly are rational. But no classical Chinese theorist is either a rationalist or an anti-

²¹⁶ See, for example, Martha Nussbaum’s treatment of the subject in *The Fragility of Goodness*.
²¹⁸ In fairness to Aristotle, it should be pointed out that most, if not all, of his extant works are believed to be the modern equivalent of lecture notes and were not intended for broad distribution. His finished works are, unfortunately, lost to the ages.
²¹⁹ *Tragedy*, p. 32.
rationalist. There are excellent reasons for their philosophical views. However, these views do not concern the core concept of reason—pro or con. By "non-contrastively," Hansen means that, since there were no explicit proponents of a rational philosophy, there were no opponents either. The ancient Chinese nonetheless had lively philosophical debates. It would be a mistake, however, to construe these debates as being between proponents of logos and muthos. Rather, differences can be found more in degree of emphasis one way or the other. They all aspired to the mantle of reasonableness—the pragmatic fusion of logos and muthos.

If we de-emphasize the connection between logos and rationality and instead become re-attuned to its Aristotelian notion of "reasonable speech," we find further fruitful grounds for comparison. In fact, what we find in the Analects are quite a number of logoi. Whenever a disciple or government official asks Confucius to explain a key term, he offers a kind of logos. To be sure, many of his answers may not be considered satisfactory according to Aristotelian standards, and this is the appreciable difference. Aristotle generally aspires to a kind of comprehensive conceptual clarity, whereas Confucius chooses to be more evocative and provocative. Xunzi is closer to meeting the Aristotelian standard, although Aristotle would have been suspicious of Xunzi's commitment to upholding a Confucian authoritative model, rather than to providing a logos of the phainomena.

Despite Aristotle's obvious discomfort with muthos, and despite the occasional tedium of his writings as available to us, he shows remarkable deftness and sophistication

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220 "Should the Ancient Masters Value Reason?" in Henry Rosemont Jr., ed., Chinese Texts and
in grounding his theory of ethics in the *phainomena*, or "appearances," as carefully argued by Martha Nussbaum.\(^{221}\) Nussbaum makes the striking observation that, for Aristotle, all forms of philosophy ultimately rely on the appearances for their validity. He thus avoids certain philosophical problems such as those posed by, for example, Kant's synthetic *a priori* propositions:

There is no reason to posit two philosophical methods here, one dealing with appearances, one resting on the *a priori*; dialectic and first philosophy have, as Aristotle insists in *Metaphysics* IV.2 exactly the same subject matter. The appearances, then, can go all the way down.\(^{222}\)

This seems carefully to avoid the problem of how "pure" rational thought impacts or relates to the real, messy world. Everything is resolved through *logos*, which is both immersed in the world and a re-presentation of it.

Another point Nussbaum stresses is that Aristotle constructs his theory of authority through appearances in part as a corrective against what he found to be defective in Platonic epistemology. He specifically opposes the appearance/reality dichotomy as it appears, for example, in the Allegory of the Cave from the *Republic*:

*Aristotelian reason is not so much in bonds, cut off from something that we can, nonetheless, describe or point to, as it is committed to something, to language and thought, and the limits of these. appearances and truth are not opposed, as Plato believed they were. we can have truth only inside the circle of the appearances, because only there can we communicate, even refer, at all.\(^{223}\)

It remains an open question, of course, whether Aristotle (and Nussbaum) are reading Plato as he had hoped to be read. To be sure, the dialogue of the *Republic* strongly

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\(^{221}\) This is a view emphasized by Martha Nussbaum in "An Aristotelian Conception of Rationality" from *Love's Knowledge* and in Chapters 8-10 from *The Fragility of Goodness.*

\(^{222}\) *Fragility*, p. 251.
suggests the kind of epistemological framework Aristotle opposes, but it would be prudent to reserve at least a modicum of doubt about Plato’s degree of commitment to such a framework.

Nussbaum also emphasizes Aristotle’s strong reluctance to posit any kind of overarching theory:

The moment we begin to theorize we are, as Aristotle again and again illustrates, in acute danger of oversimplifying. His historical and critical chapters show the variety of the dangers: materialist reductionism in the philosophy of mind, mechanism in scientific explanation, dominant-end hedonism in ethics, Socratism in talk about language and definition. By returning us, in each case, to the ‘appearances’, he reminds us that our language and our ways of life are richer and more complex than much of philosophy acknowledges.224

A similar line of thought was explored in the preceding discussion of Plato. It seems likely that one principal reason Plato wrote dialogues rather than treatises was his awareness of the limitations of theory. This is also why his writings implicitly encourage us to reflect and talk amongst ourselves rather than presenting the reader with a sequence of rational arguments. It has been shown, too, how Confucius and Xunzi refrain from postulating overarching theory in favor of a more context-specific approach to persuasion and problem resolution.

In fact, if any of the four philosophers is in jeopardy of relying too heavily on theory, it would be Aristotle—despite Nussbaum’s protests to the contrary. Even she has difficulty maintaining Aristotle’s emphasis on the unique and particular when, for

223 Ibid., p. 257.
224 Ibid., p. 259.
example, she discusses how his theory of human action relies in part on observations of other animals as they appear in *De Anima* and *De Motu*:

The inquiry into human action is carried out as a part of a larger inquiry into the movements of animals. Human action is very little singled out; instead we find a discussion of sweeping generality that ranges over the entire animal kingdom. It is this generality that we must seek to understand if we are to understand the distinctive contribution this account makes to ethics.

The *De Motu* begins by telling us that we need to consider *in general* the common explanation (*aitia*) for moving with *any movement whatever* (698a4-7).225 Aristotle here seems to be thinking in very broad, theoretical terms. He seeks an overarching teleological theory of motion. This is very different from what Nussbaum asserted about Aristotle above. In fairness to both Nussbaum and Aristotle, Nussbaum immediately points out that Aristotle seems to question the ambitious goal of *De Motu* at *De Anima* 414b25-8. Even here, however, Nussbaum acknowledges that her translation is controversial. Richard McKeon's translation of the same passage reads:

Hence it is absurd in this and similar cases to demand an absolutely general definition, which will fail to express the peculiar nature of anything that is, or again, omitting this, to look for separate definitions corresponding to each *infima species*.

I believe what we are dealing with here actually occurs rather frequently in Aristotle. On an intellectual level, he is acutely aware of the limitations of general theory: it tends to become too broad and unwieldy to have much practical value, and it remains blind to uniqueness and novelty. At the same time, however, he is almost incapable of resisting the temptation to advance such general theories, or at least search for them, in nearly every field of inquiry.
This is no better evidenced than in one of the crowning jewels of his writings on ethics, the so-called Doctrine of the Mean:

But to have [appropriate] feelings at the right times on the right grounds towards the right people for the right motive and in the right way is to feel them to an intermediate, that is to the best, degree; and this is the mark of virtue (aretē).226

Here it seems we have the most general of theories to attend to the most particular of situations. In one sense the theory could not be more general, since it clearly is meant to apply to any and all circumstances. In another sense, however, Aristotle masterfully refrains from injecting too much theoretical content. It is open to interpretation and can be thoughtfully applied in a number of different ways. In this regard, Aristotle’s theory of ethics is similar to Confucianism.

Aristotle’s emphasis on phronēsis, or practical wisdom, differs notably from the received Plato while sharing much in common with Confucianism. Nussbaum observes:

Aristotle says two anti-Platonic things about practical deliberation. First, that it is not and cannot be scientific: “That practical wisdom is not scientific understanding (epistēmē) is obvious” (Nicomachean Ethics 1142a23-4). Second, that the appropriate criterion of correct choice is a thoroughly human being, the person of practical wisdom. This person does not attempt to take up a stand outside of the conditions of human life, but bases his or her judgment on long and broad experience of these conditions.227

In other words, the phronimos is not motivated by some external, universal theory of conduct nor for the quest for definition. Instead, practical wisdom decides and acts from accumulated personal experience, including, but not limited to, one’s own past successes and failures, model exemplars, cultural cues, and so on. This, combined with an

225 ibid., p.265, emphasis added.
226 Nicomachean Ethics, 1106b20-23.
227 Fragility, p. 290.
informed understanding of the situation at hand, gives us some indication of Aristotle’s complicated strategy for appropriate human conduct.

Of course, the account would not be complete without some reference to *logos*, and Nussbaum cites an appropriate passage:

[Aristotle] defines excellence in general with reference to the notion of a *logos*, a rule or account: “Excellence is a state of character (*hexas*) concerned with choice, lying in a mean, the mean relative to us, this being determined by a *logos*, the one by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b36-7a2). So the person whose choices are paradigms for ours is depicted as using a rule or account; and elsewhere, too, Aristotle speaks of the role in practical wisdom of the *orthos logos*, the ‘right rule’ or ‘correct account.’

Appropriate conduct includes the ability to explain why—give an account, a *logos*—such conduct is in fact appropriate. I believe this is a significant element of Aristotle’s ethical theory because it emphasizes the importance of thoughtful and purposeful communication between persons. It also establishes a connection between thought, speech and action.

Authority inheres to the person that coherently weaves all three together.

Finally, Nussbaum recognizes that an astute critic will point out that this theory of authority is not firmly grounded, but circular:

As with Plato’s conception of ‘god’s-eye’ deliberation, so too with this more immersed and vulnerable human conception we have, it seems, a problem of circularity. The standpoint of the person of practical wisdom is criterial of correct choice. In Aristotle’s conception, unlike Plato’s, this standpoint is not just heuristic towards a value that would be valuable without this person and his choices; it is definitive of value, and this value would not be value but for its relation to this human person. This makes the circularity even more urgent. For if this person is our standard and his or her judgments and procedures are going to be normative for ours, how do we characterize this person and his procedures in a way that does not already make reference to the good content of his choices?

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Confucius and Xunzi also rely on exemplars in articulating their theory of authority. The problem of circularity, however, did not concern them. Some might take this as an indication that they were less sophisticated in their philosophical approach. Instead, I take it to mean that they were more interested in wrestling with pressing practical problems than in trying to establish an intellectual foundation for thought. In the end Nussbaum, much like Roochnik in our discussion of Plato, allows: “Circularity by itself need not dismay us. An element of circularity is probably bound to be present in any complex moral theory.”230 Once again it seems authority is ultimately a matter of our choosing. One can still choose thoughtfully, however, and doing so will distinguish authorities worth heeding from empty claims to authority.

John M. Cooper raises some thoughtful questions about Nussbaum’s emphasis on the *phainomena* in “Aristotle on the Authority of ‘Appearances.’”231 Cooper begins by reminding us that, for Aristotle, the opinions of “the many and the wise” are both worth considering. He then challenges Nussbaum’s treatment of *akrasia* (weakness of will) from Book VII of *Nicomachean Ethics*:

On Nussbaum’s view...Aristotle, as philosopher of and for the human truth—“our” truth—should be interpreted when speaking on philosophical subjects as a self-consciously engaged thinker, one engaged with the world as we experience it and speaking to others likewise, and self-consciously, so engaged. So in referring to and translating this passage Nussbaum makes Aristotle quite explicit in adopting just this attitude of attachment and solidarity. In fact, however, the original Greek marks Aristotle as detached and neutral. Here (1145b2-7), in explaining the procedures he will follow in investigating the nature of weakness of will, Aristotle says we must set down the appearances (*phainomena*), work

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230 Ibid., p. 312.
231 This article appears in *Reason and Emotion*, pp. 281-291.
through the puzzles, and thus show the truth of all, or most and the most authoritative, of the *endoxa* on the subject at hand. Nussbaum translates *ta endoxa* as “the beliefs we hold” (and she follows this up by translating *ta legomena* at 1145b20 as “the things we say”). But neither Greek expression has any explicit reference to *us* in it...So the “things said” are things *people* say, either people generally or some people otherwise unspecified, and in reporting them Aristotle describes these people in the third person, and stands neutrally apart, without in any way saying or implying that he speaks as one of a “we.”

Cooper may seem to be quibbling, but he makes an important point that pertains to the Aristotelian view of authority under development. Nussbaum sees Aristotle investing more authority in the *endoxa* or opinions—the pre-existing views on the subject, the “appearances.” Cooper sees Aristotle more interested in cataloguing them but refraining from taking them as authoritative. In this, Cooper would seem to be more accurate, since Aristotle unquestionably develops his own novel and sophisticated ethical theory.

Cooper observes: “[Aristotle’s] account of *akrasia* is a genuinely new one that is not found already stated or even adumbrated [by the many or the wise].”

This leads to one final, significant point about Aristotle’s conception of authority. Quite unlike Confucius and Xunzi, Aristotle did not hesitate to go beyond the views of his cultural and philosophical antecedents and advance entirely new ideas where he saw fit. For example, it was shown how he unceremoniously dismisses Hesiod in the *Metaphysics*. The ideas of his mentor, Plato, are shown no more deference when at odds with his philosophical method: “The Forms we can dispense with, for they are mere sound without sense.” He makes an effort to be more diplomatic in this well-known

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233 Ibid., p. 288.
234 *Posterior Analytics*, 83a33.
passage from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but the end result is the same—dispensing with the Platonic Forms:

This inquiry is an uphill task, since men who are dear to us have introduced the Forms. But it would seem to be better, in fact to be necessary, to uproot even what is one’s own for the sake of preserving the truth—both as a general principle and because we are philosophers. For when both the people and the truth are dear to us, it is fitting to put the truth first.  

Plato, given his philosophical commitment to dialectic, surely would endorse Aristotle’s preference for truth over the ideas of those considered “dear to us.” This highlights the two Greeks’ greatest distinction from the two Chinese. The fact that Aristotle and Plato delineate a conception of truth that can stand outside and above the views of received authority figures would be distinctive enough. To then prioritize that conception of truth over and above pre-existing authoritative views would be unconscionable for Confucius and Xunzi. Of course, they are not beyond offering harsh criticism and censure where they find competing ideas lacking. To attempt to manufacture a worldview absent the influence of any kind of mentor or exemplar, however, would be considered a fool’s errand.

François Jullien explains the contrast in these terms:

It is therefore hardly surprising that Chinese thought is so *conformist*. It does not seek to distance itself from the “world,” does not question reality, is not even surprised by it. It has no need of myths...to save reality from absurdity and confer meaning on it. Instead of inventing *myths* that attempt to explain the enigma of the world through fabulous flights of fancy, the Chinese devised *rites* to embody and express by signs, at the level of human behavior, the functioning inherent in the world’s disposition. Reality was not regarded as a problem but presented itself from the beginning as a credible process. It did not need to be deciphered like a mystery but simply to be understood in its *functioning*. There

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235 This is Nussbaum’s deft translation of 1096a12-17.
was no need to project a “meaning” onto the world or to satisfy the expectations of a subject/individual, for its meaning stemmed in its entirety, without requiring any act of faith, from the propensity of things.  

Terms like “conformist” are anathema to modern values like freedom and individualism and need to be carefully qualified. This emphasis on conformity stems from recognizing that Confucius and Xunzi adopt an internal orientation toward the diagnosis and resolution of problems. As such, authority is located within the pre-existing order of things. Conformism in this instance does not imply a kind of rote imitation or adherence to rules, but rather harmony and integration. Plato and Aristotle, quite the contrary, at times sought an overarching perspective, and their conceptions of authority developed accordingly.

A. C. Graham introduces another way of describing this difference between Chinese and Western philosophy in *Disputers of the Tao*. They tend to be Way-seekers and Truth-seekers, respectively: “the crucial question for [the Chinese literati] is not the Western philosopher’s ‘What is the truth?’ but ‘Where is the Way?’, the way to order the state and conduct personal life.”  

Hall and Ames develop this notion in *Thinking from the Han*:

The contrast between Truth-seekers and Way-seekers is really quite significant. Truth-seekers want finally to get to the bottom line, to establish facts, principles, theories that characterize the way things are. Way-seekers search out those forms of action that promote harmonious social existence. For the Way-seekers, truth is most importantly a quality of persons, not of propositions. Truth as “Way” refers to the genuineness and integrity of a fully functioning person.

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236 Propensity, pp. 264-265.
237 Disputers, p. 3.
238 Thinking from the Han, p. 105.
We have seen how this contrast in orientation results in different conceptions of authority for Confucius and Xunzi as opposed to Plato and Aristotle. There are, however, traces of Way-seeking in both Plato and Aristotle, but they are not overtly emphasized. As a result, our ability to discern them seems to have eroded over time.

Plato and Aristotle considered it their philosophical obligation to give greater credence to the search for truth than the ideas of their intellectual and cultural ancestors. In the following final chapter on philosophy and community, we can anticipate that the Western preference for truth as it appears to the individual over other pre-existing claims to authority has important societal implications. Although it can be argued that in many respects this preference has served the West well up until now, perhaps at this time it would be worthwhile to assimilate Confucian notions of authority—and the corresponding orientation of the Way-seeker—in order to bolster the quality of our communities. Doing so may have the added benefit of enabling us to perceive better the traces of Way-seeking that lay dormant in Plato and Aristotle.
CHAPTER 5
PHILOSOPHY AND COMMUNITY

"People aiming to live a good life are no more aiming at the same goal than artists aiming to create a work of art are aiming at the same goal."239

This investigation began with the understanding that Confucius, Xunzi, Plato, and Aristotle all aspired, in their own distinctive ways, to determine optimum conditions for human flourishing. Since each of them postulates that linguistic communication is an important medium toward that end, my strategy involved first looking at dialogue and dialectic as construed by Confucius and Plato respectively. I then examined how their intellectual descendants, Xunzi and Aristotle, presented their ideas in a more direct—that is, less conversational—format. This afforded the opportunity to consider both the advantages and disadvantages that inhere to the related drive toward argumentative certainty and clarity. What remains is to delineate their optimum conditions for human flourishing, and in so doing explore possible relationships between their preferred modes of human communication. Along the way, it will be particularly worthwhile to consider how their views might be applied in a modern context. Are they of value? Do they have relevance? Or are they merely of historical interest?

There are a number of different factors we could consider when identifying and analyzing a community. Some are relatively simple and straightforward, such as a shared geographic location, nationality or ethnicity. One important and often overlooked characteristic of communities, however, is how they deal with difference. Often what seems to unite a community is the ways in which the members are similar, but the degree
to which difference is accommodated and encouraged plays an important role in determining that community’s long-term viability.

For example, despite its apparent emphasis on consistency and regularity with regard to language, *zhengming* is a strategy for attending to and honoring different vocabularies within the community. Xunzi may be quick to censure what he believes to be dissident viewpoints, but often he ultimately strives to accommodate them. Rather than pursuing a discussion of political theory *per se*, this chapter focuses on how worldviews are revealed and reinforced through language use. This stems from the belief—bolstered by the philosophical views of Confucius, Xunzi, Plato, and Aristotle—that the conversations that take place between individuals in a society have a more meaningful impact on the moral and cultural landscape of that society than whatever governmental structures may be in place. Every government, in fact, is composed of individuals who converse with each other, so even if we believe the government to play a pivotal role in community constitution, a consideration of the language used in such conversations should make an important contribution to our understanding of the values of that society.

As we examine the kinds of language our four philosophers use in discussing such issues, it could be argued that what most distinguishes Confucius and Xunzi from Plato and Aristotle is that the former employ an internal, relational and provisional vocabulary while the latter aim to establish external, objective and permanent theories. This is a contrast of emphasis, however, and not an absolute distinction. This is not to assert that

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the language of Confucius and Xunzi renders them fundamentally incapable of conceiving of transcendence or universality. Likewise, it would not be accurate to say that the chosen lexicons of Plato and Aristotle make them oblivious to their immediate surroundings. For example, it was shown in the previous chapter how Aristotle somewhat curiously tends to consider appearances authoritative even while seeking more “real” explanations and descriptions. It is nonetheless noteworthy that the prevailing emphases of these respective philosophical movements established certain distinct paradigms for thinking, which have become increasingly predominant over time. These in turn have shaped corresponding models of social organization and, of course, influenced the forms of communication that have either been prioritized or disenfranchised in their respective historical traditions.

François Jullien offers these general insights about the contrast between ancient Greek and Chinese culture and philosophy:

Two models of human fulfillment have come down to us from ancient Greece and have helped to fashion our aspiration toward the ideal. The first is that of a heroic commitment to action, conceived in the tragic mode: an individual decides to take part in the course of things, resolutely assuming responsibility for his initiative despite all the contrary forces that he encounters in the world and even at the risk of being destroyed and swept away. The second is the model of a vocation to contemplation, conceived in a philosophical and religious mode: having seen through the illusion of all that is “perceptible” and having understood that everything here on earth is ephemeral and doomed, the soul aspires to eternal truths and conceives of no “sovereign good,” and hence no “happiness,” other than the world of the intelligible, which it may reach by drawing closer to the divine absolute.

In contrast, ancient Chinese thought is above all concerned with avoiding confrontation, which is exhausting and sterile. It conceives of a model of efficacy based on correlation and detectable at the heart of the objective processes. This is the only kind of efficacy valid on the human level. Chinese thought is, furthermore, unassailed by the doubt about the perceptible realm that is the source
of the opposition between appearance and truth in Western thought and that has oriented our philosophical activity toward abstraction aimed at description and disinterest. In Chinese thought, the level of knowledge is not separate from that of action: a wise man, yielding to an intuition of the dynamism implied in the course of things (revered as the Dao), takes care not to go against it, and instead lets it it [sic] operate fully in all situations.  

Jullien describes how prevailing tendencies in Plato and Aristotle have in some sense shaped our modern dilemma, where adversarial entrenchment in one's particular worldview is the prevailing mode of engagement instead of, for example, reasonable and compromising conflict resolution. As we excavate the intellectual sedimentation and fossilization in our own tradition, we pave the way for novel ways of thinking—whether they are nascent but dormant in our own tradition, or readily available in another.

The first three chapters were designed to establish this much, thereby enabling the present discussion. The end of the preceding chapter suggested that the forms of authority exemplified by Confucius and Xunzi may have value for modern Western society. This implies, of course, that we can diagnose specific problems with Western society. If, on the other hand, one is content with the status quo, then the present investigation will no doubt be less compelling. Given the animosity and lack of common ground that tends to characterize most modern ideological debates, perhaps it is time to look beyond the Western tradition for fresh insight.

Toward that end, I would like to consider our four philosophers in the light of pluralism, a form of social morality that has received increasing attention over the last

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240 *Propensity*, pp. 259-260.
decade. John Kekes, author of The Morality of Pluralism, summarizes the problem in these terms:

Liberals tend to be morally concerned about equality, sexual freedom, capital punishment, and commercialism; conservatives tend to direct moral attention to the family, social order, and the free market. Sometimes the two sides meet and argue because they recognize that the issue is how to balance the competing claims, say, of freedom and equality, or sexual experimentation and family life. But even in these rare cases, when there is sufficient common ground to begin to argue, the argument is bound to end in an impasse, because there is no moral authority, no value, that both sides are willing to accept.\(^{241}\)

In many respects this echoes the problem as framed at the beginning of the preceding chapter. Kekes offers the above summary in order to introduce his proposed solution: pluralism.

Until quite recently, most Western approaches to ethics generally have fallen into one of two categories. Either they are what Kekes calls “monistic,” or they are relativistic. Kekes explains the two categories in these terms:

Monism is the view that there is one and only one reasonable system of values. This system is the same for all human beings, always, everywhere. Human lives are good to the extent to which they conform to this system, and particular values are better or worse depending on their standing in the system. It is acknowledged, of course, that countless people do not conform to it. The reason for this is sought, however, in the deviating people, not in the system of values that the conception embodies. People are supposed to deviate either because they are insufficiently reasonable or because they are handicapped by character defects or adverse circumstances. According to monists, the task of morality is to create institutions, formulate principles, and educate people so as to further their living and acting according to this one reasonable system of values...

The alternative that monists fear may replace their position is relativism, the view that ultimately all values are conventional. Human life would be inconceivable without values, but what values people accept depends on the context in which they were born, on their genetic inheritance and subsequent experiences, on the

\(^{241}\) The Morality of Pluralism, p. 6.
political, cultural, economic, and religious influences on them; in short, what they value depends on their subjective attitudes and not on the objective features of values. The implication of relativism is that there cannot be a uniquely reasonable system of values, because when all is said and done no value any conception embodies can be justified on objective grounds.\textsuperscript{242}

Monism, then, is a kind of closed certainty that there ultimately is but one right way to live. Examples include religious fundamentalists and those who advocate strict adherence to principles such as Kant’s Categorical Imperative. Kekes is too kind here in his treatment of relativism. Relativism is monism’s pernicious opposite: the belief that no way of life is ultimately preferable to, or more defensible than, any other. It is openness and tolerance run amuck, where powers of discrimination and judgment are rendered moot. As a relativist, the choices one makes through the course of life may as well be arbitrary—or, at best, they have a strictly personal rationale that is unreceptive to community consideration.

Pluralism must be carefully distinguished from relativism, since it could be argued that pluralism is in fact a kind of relativism.\textsuperscript{243} According to Kekes, the crux of the difference is: “Pluralists assert and relativists of all stripes deny that there are objective considerations by which conflicts among values could be reasonably settled.”\textsuperscript{244} Such objective considerations consist primarily of “the minimum requirements of good lives”—in other words, “some benefits and harms are, under normal circumstances,

\textsuperscript{242} Ibid., p. 8.
\textsuperscript{243} To adequately discuss this issue would require another project altogether. This is a central concern for Kekes that he discusses at length. His complex argument involves identifying different kinds of relativism. See, for example, pp. 48-52.
\textsuperscript{244} The Morality of Pluralism, p. 94.
The relativist cannot consistently affirm the basic human values of food, shelter, love and so on.

Based on Kekes’ definitions, none of our four philosophers could immediately be classified as either a monist or relativist. Plato, however, is most liable to be characterized as a monist. In Chapter 2, I discussed his strong opposition to the implicit relativism of the sophists—a standard monist program. In addition, there is much in the Republic that, despite possible confusion, is liable to be construed as monistic.

Cautioning against more liberal readings, Martha Nussbaum writes:

In the end we risk turning the Republic into a comfortable expression of the liberal principle (mentioned in Book VIII) that it should be ‘open to each person to structure an arrangement for his own life, the one that pleases him’ (557B)—rather than, what it is, a profound and unsettling attack on that principle as a basis for genuinely good living.

Although there are more sympathetic readings of Plato available to us, the point is that, despite such readings, Plato is still prone to be read as a monist. Throughout the course of this investigation, however, my principal objective with regard to Plato has been to illustrate how his commitment to dialectic preserves at least some degree of self-corrective openness to new ideas and values.

There is much in Xunzi that conforms to Kekes’ description of monism. His emphasis on the cosmic pattern of li, combined with his apparent intolerance toward his ideological opponents, suggests a strong resistance to novelty. His analysis of the conventional origins of language and the application of zhengming, however, implies an

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246 Fragility, pp. 140-141.
understanding that the vocabulary of values does not have permanent fixity. While not a monist, Xunzi is even less aptly considered a relativist. Confucius is even more difficult to categorize. There is little if anything in the *Analects* that could be readily associated with either monism or relativism. We have the opposite problem with Aristotle. Much of his writing dealing with logic and science could be considered monistic, but his writings on rhetoric and ethics are much less so, while still avoiding the pitfalls of relativism.

The fact that we have difficulty classifying any of these four philosophers as either monist or relativistic is not surprising and, in fact, is encouraging. As Kekes argues, neither monists nor relativists are equipped to deal adequately with the complex issues and debates that confound modern society. Kekes carefully avoids the monistic trap of trying to assert the absolute validity of pluralism. He instead points out that “pluralism is at once descriptive and evaluative.”247 This resonates rather well with the way Confucian dialogue tends to avoid drawing a fact/value distinction. Given that Kekes is writing more than 2,000 years and an entire hemisphere removed from Confucius and Xunzi, his summary of pluralism is decidedly more analytic:

The key descriptive thesis of pluralism is that central features of good lives, as they are conceived in contemporary Western circumstances, at any rate, are best understood in pluralistic terms. These features are, first, that we are motivated by various moral values, such as the common good, duty, personal ideals, love and friendship, self-development, loyalty, justice, human rights, and so on. Second, that we are also motivated by nonmoral values of different sorts, for instance, beauty, playfulness, physical well-being, career plans, creativity, adventure, style, and the like. Third, that we often encounter conflicts in which we feel the tension between and among moral and nonmoral values, and these values motivate contrary choices and courses of action. Fourth, a sense of loss often accompanies the choices and actions our values require because, although we do what we feel it

247 *The Morality of Pluralism*, p. 10.
is, on balance, reasonable to do, we are nevertheless often forced in this process to sacrifice important values. And last, we often experience conflicts, not merely within morality, but between morality and such other dimensions of life as politics, aesthetics, intimate personal relationships, or a reasonably interpreted conception of self-interest.\textsuperscript{248}

Although Kekes aims to summarize the complicated and conflicting drives that vie for priority in modern life, one might challenge certain values he designates as "nonmoral," such as beauty, creativity and playfulness. Such attributes could be considered integral to a broader conception of morality. One might also wonder what is to be gained by distinguishing "moral" from "nonmoral" values, or "other dimensions of life" from both of these, particularly since, as Kekes acknowledges, we can experience conflicts both between and among them. The above characterization is vaguely reminiscent of Socrates’ "divided soul" in the \textit{Republic}—a conflicted state Plato seemingly wants to avoid. It may also represent the framework for the sophisticated, context-sensitive analysis of Aristotle’s \textit{phronimos}. Whether we agree with Kekes’ demarcations or not, the important point is that he avoids the monistic tendency to render all of life’s choices commensurable under a single calculus.

Pluralism offers more than just the preceding descriptive thesis, as it integrates this evaluative component:

The central evaluative claim of pluralism is that although our commitments to various moral and nonmoral values produce conflicts and the resolution of these conflicts unavoidably engenders loss, nevertheless the plurality of values is not a regrettable feature of our life but a positive value. For the plurality of values enriches the possibilities for our living good lives, increases our freedom,

\textsuperscript{248} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 11-12.
motivates us to assert greater control over the direction of our lives, and enlarges the repertoire of conceptions of life that we may recognize as good.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 12.}

This final point is particularly important. Although artists collectively aim to create art, the diversity of quality and forms of expression enable us to consider many different works of art “good.” The same can be said of human life and views about what makes a life “good.” Here we may begin to make robust and interesting comparisons with our four philosophers.

Confucius is amenable to the spirit of pluralism. Recall, for example, his observation that the exemplary person strives for harmony, while the shallow person strives for sameness. In 18.8 of the \textit{Analects}, Confucius comments on seven men who withdrew from society on principle or in protest against some political decision they disapproved of. In evaluating their decisions, he groups the men into three tiers of conduct. It concludes, however, with him saying “I am not like these men. I do not have presuppositions about what may or may not be done.” This means that Confucius prefers to be more flexible and open in dealing with others who may do and say things not immediately to his liking. He values the thought and sentiment behind an action more than the content of the action itself. In addition, it is implied that Confucius prefers to remain pragmatically engaged with difficult persons and situations in order to continue working on resolving the problem, rather than abandoning the conversation or rigidly adhering to a particular doctrine.
In 4.10 he expresses a similar notion: “As the exemplary person makes his way in the world, he neither adheres to anything nor is averse to anything. He sides with what is appropriate (yi 義).” Breaking down the etymology of yi, Ames and Rosemont conclude: “Yi, then, is one’s sense of appropriateness that enables one to act in a proper and fitting manner, given the specific situation...yi is the sense of appropriateness that makes relationships truly meaningful in a community of mutual trust.”

250 Confucius is not a monist. He does not advocate a “one size fits all” approach to the world. This passage also suggests that Confucius opposes prejudices and biases of all kinds—be they political, ethnic, familial, nationalistic, or otherwise. There will be times, of course, when it is appropriate to evince such biases and use them for guidance, but never at the expense of what is yi more broadly construed. Although the Confucian position may not wholly resemble the modern form of pluralism outlined by Kekes, it nonetheless entails significant pluralistic features.

The question can and should be asked whether the Confucian vision as developed here has any practical application to today’s ever-evolving and increasingly multicultural world. Insofar as it resembles pluralism, I believe it does. Those who oppose this view will point to the inextricable commitment Confucius has to his own historical and cultural roots. This would seem to prevent him from embracing new social arrangements and worldviews precipitated by ongoing technological development and cultural interaction. Even in his time, Confucius was viewed by some as a stubborn reactionary, highly

250 Analects translation, pp. 54-55.
resistant even to seemingly small changes in social practices for fear they would upset the
delicate balance of ̆li inherited from prior dynasties.

Those who view Confucius in such a manner, however, fail to recognize one
crucial dimension of his philosophical outlook: the commitment to observing what has
come before and shaping it to fit the needs and inclinations of the present. Analects 3.14
demonstrates how, in understanding what made the Zhou dynasty successful, Confucius
seeks to apply the same operative principle to his own life: “The Zhou ruled by reflecting
upon the two preceding dynasties. Such a wealth of culture! I follow the Zhou.”
Stylistically speaking, when Confucius says, “I follow the Zhou,” it is important that
there is no explicit demand or argument that others do so too. There may be a suggestion
or implication that it would be advisable to do the same, but nothing on the order of
coercion or insistence that his way (or that of the Zhou) is the only way. He is modeling,
not mandating.

More importantly, it is not so much the abstract form of Zhou practice that serves
as Confucius’ model, but rather the reflective process by which they conducted their
affairs. John Makeham offers a similar insight that merits repeating in full:

Yet while Confucius obviously harboured a profound respect for the culture
institutions of the Zhou, nevertheless that respect was by no means limited to the
Zhou:

Yan Yuan asked about the government of a state. Confucius said:
“Follow the calendar of the Xia, ride in the carriage of the Yin and wear
the ceremonial cap of the Zhou. In music adopt the shao and wu.
[Analects 15.11]

Most importantly, however, it was the principle of cultural eclecticism guided by
intelligent selectivity that Confucius was commending in his exclamation, “I
follow Zhou.” Specifically this utterance was a salutation to the creative

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discernment that the early Zhou cultural leaders had displayed in assimilating those elements of Xia and Shang-Yin culture that were best able to contribute to the enrichment of their own culture. This statement, moreover, takes on an added significance when read in the light of *Analects* 2.10:

The Master said, “To review what has gone before and thereby come to learn something new. This may be regarded as one’s teacher.”

“Learning” for Confucius was not an increase in some area of factual knowledge but rather the insight gained through a new perspective. That insight was no less than the knowledge that *li*, the web of social mores, was the fruit of tradition and if tradition itself could be reanimated, *li* would then be open to redefinition and reinterpretation, thereby preparing the groundwork for the restructuring and reorientation of society itself. 251

Makeham eloquently conveys Confucius’ commitment to what was described above as pluralism—a mode of social organization and interaction that recognizes a plurality of excellences (particularly with respect to behavior and language use) rather than insisting that one way alone is the right way. In essence, what Confucius advocates is an ongoing, broad-ranging and attentive commitment to improving the ways we speak and behave with each other, and the things we value as a culture. This “principle of cultural eclecticicism” informed by “intelligent selectivity,” as exercised by the Zhou, is the model Confucius aspires to reintroduce to the world, not mere unreflective conservatism or strict adherence to tradition in perpetuity.

Further evidence of Confucius’ pluralistic *modus operandi* can be found in 9.3, where he explains:

A hemp cap is prescribed by the *li*. Nowadays, silk is worn for the sake of frugality, and I follow current custom. Kowtowing before ascending the hall is prescribed by the *li*. Nowadays, kowtowing after ascending is done out of arrogance. Although it is not current custom, I kowtow before ascending.

251 *Naming and Actuality*, pp. 44-45, emphasis added.
In other words, Confucius is willing to adapt his degree of adherence to the *li* based on the rationale for such modifications. If he deems them appropriate and in keeping with the spirit of propriety, change in the external form or formal expression is acceptable and even encouraged. If, however, change is the result of laziness, egoism or if it deviates from the sentiment intended to be embodied in the particular rite, that change is resisted. Note that in this case, he does not directly criticize those who have modified their practice. Instead, he attempts reform by describing the new conduct in disparaging terms combined with his modeling of the conduct he finds more appropriate. As a pluralist, Confucius can be tolerant of worthwhile change while simultaneously co-existing with and yet resisting those changes he finds damaging to the social fabric.

How, then, has Confucius come to be seen as a stuffy pontificator bent on imposing a rigid system of social stratification? The answer involves a number of complex historical factors that cannot be discussed here. We have caught glimpses of how Plato’s work befell a similar fate—the drive toward clarity with respect to a particular philosophical outlook has a tendency to coalesce into theory over time, thereby obfuscating its more ambiguous, challenging, or creativity-demanding aspects. Here we can tentatively conclude that Confucius, far from being a cultural reactionary, offers a flexible model of social and linguistic practice that would serve us well—perhaps even especially—in the dynamic world of today.

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252 See, for example, the Introduction to Herbert Fingarette’s *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, where he reflects on his first exposure to the *Analects*: “I found [Confucius] to be a prosaic and parochial moralizer.” Fingarette then successfully introduces a significantly more thoughtful and sensitive reading.
In his determination to clarify and defend his understanding of Confucianism, how well did Xunzi pick up and carry forward these pluralistic themes? On initial reflection, not particularly well. It has already been demonstrated how he vigorously opposes conflicting ideologies and how he advocates the Confucian agenda with dogged determination—somewhat ironically, perhaps, given its pluralistic orientation. And yet when we consider how his position vis-à-vis zhengming unfolds in detail, for example, there are nonetheless pluralistic undercurrents. They can perhaps best be detected in the way he quite deliberately co-opts the vocabulary of those he opposes. Although he often begins with an outright condemnation, he typically softens his tone and eventually absorbs the best of what he set out to oppose. This is emblematic of the pluralistic spirit: it is at once inclusive and corrective. Admittedly, a written treatise may not provide the optimum format to carry out such a maneuver. Contrasting ideologies are not afforded a fair opportunity to respond accordingly, as they would be in a genuine dialogue.

One could also raise questions about Xunzi’s political outlook, as summarized here by Benjamin Schwartz:

...[Xunzi], like Confucius and Mencius before him, simply assumes the need for hierarchy and authority. The good order can be inaugurated and maintained only by a vanguard elite. In [Xunzi’s] world, while most men share with the sages a mind with the bare capacity for understanding, the fact is that the vast majority seem incapable of exerting these capacities...They may nevertheless somehow be made to realize that if security and peace are to be won, there must be a clear division of social labor and that this clear division, as in the family, necessarily involves a differentiated allotment of power, authority, access to material goods, and ritual roles.253

253 World of Thought, pp. 295-296. One could dispute how Schwartz here lumps Confucius, Mencius, and Xunzi together. While they all are recognized as Confucians, one objective here is to demonstrate how Xunzi tends somewhat more toward authoritarianism, and hence away from pluralism, than Confucius.
From a certain perspective, this would seem to be a pluralistic arrangement, insofar as not everyone is expected to understand and live according to the lofty Confucian ideal. In fact, it is openly recognized that this is something attainable only by an elite few. Inherent differences of ability and inclination are afforded commensurate recognition, duties and status. The position loses much of its pluralistic appeal, however, as soon as we remember that the overarching structure is postulated as the natural order of things. This, it would seem, is not so open for debate.

When open debate does take place in the spirit of zhengming, what—if anything—does Xunzi stipulate as necessary for full participation? In addressing this question, Xing Lu draws this interesting comparison:

Like Plato and Aristotle, Xunzi attempted to integrate rationality and morality into a cohesive worldview. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Xunzi appeared not to have considered rationality a prerequisite for morality. Instead, for Xunzi, morality was a prerequisite for rationality. As he argued in his criticism of su ru and xiao ru, without morality, rational thinking has no place. It is one’s sense of morality rather than the logical and rational process of reasoning that enables a person to distinguish between right and wrong.254

Lu, like many before her, overstates the degree to which Plato and Aristotle emphasize rationality. Similarly, Xunzi may not be as ardent an advocate of morality—at least not as a prerequisite for “rational” thinking. Is “rationality” or “morality” more prone to be exclusive? The point is that none of our four philosophers would arbitrarily exclude another from the conversation—each is thoughtfully committed to a policy of open engagement.

254 Rhetoric, p. 191.
In Chapter 17, "Discussing heaven," we find Xunzi in just such a conciliatory, inclusive mood. Rather than simply deriding those he disapproves of, here he actually offers reasons why he considers other philosophies wanting. His primary critique is not so much that other thinkers erred outright, but rather that the ideas they offered were incomplete. Confucius' vision, by contrast, is considered more comprehensive. He then concludes with a marvelous statement in favor of diversity, not uniformity:

If there is only following and no leading, then the people will have no insight. If there is only deference and no sincerity, then noble and base cannot be distinguished. If there is only uniformity and no multiplicity, then governmental regulations will go unheeded. If there is only decreasing and no increasing, then the people cannot be transformed. (17.15)

Once again, we see that Confucianism should not be conflated with conformism: it is not the ideological and social straightjacket rejected by its detractors.

It has been shown previously how, for Confucius, knowledge is pragmatic: there is an ongoing concern that words are borne out by actions. At the same time, both word and deed are representative of understanding. One cannot claim to understand a certain principle, for example, and then act contrary to that principle, for the contrary action evinces inadequate understanding. Now let us consider whether Plato endorses a similar notion. In other words, to what extent does Plato endorse Socratic intellectualism—the theory that true knowledge equates with virtuous behavior?

Some scholars have questioned the prevailing view that Plato endorses Socratic intellectualism. For example, John M. Cooper contends:

...Neither Aristotle nor Plato can endorse a doctrine of the unity of virtue...Consistently with their moral psychology Aristotle and Plato cannot, and they did not, believe that having the knowledge of what is good and bad in a human life—what Plato in the Republic usually calls sophia, and Aristotle
phronēsis—is the same condition as having human virtue. To have human virtue, one indeed requires that knowledge, but other, separate conditions as well. Distinct other conditions are needed as additional virtues—the virtues of the nonreasoning parts of the soul, what Aristotle calls the “ethical” or “moral” virtues (ēthikai aretai)... So, for them, though virtue is in no sense one condition—no single state of mind and character—the complex of conditions that makes it up is a single and unified cluster, formed around and dominated by the single virtue of wisdom (Plato) or practical wisdom (Aristotle).

Cooper begins with a bombshell, but his final position is less radical than one might have been led to expect. He makes the important point that, for Plato and Aristotle, ethical conduct depends not just on a certain intellectual ability but other dimensions of character as well. What he does not emphasize is that all of these faculties are meaningful only insofar as they translate into concrete human conduct. To that end, Herman L. Sinaiko reminds us that “The abstract, verbal formula is not, and cannot be, philosophy of itself; only the ‘living word’ in the soul, the principle actually expressed through the pattern of a man’s life, constitutes philosophical knowledge.”256 In other words, knowing the good means doing the good. There can be no schism between theory and practice. Theory is practice, and practice is theory. This, in fact, strongly resembles our characterization of the junzi—the Confucian exemplary person. The difference, some might argue, is that knowledge for Plato is univocal—there is but one certain truth to be had, whereas Confucius allows for a plurality of knowledge and corresponding forms of expression through conduct. If nothing else, Plato’s method is open and inclusive, even if his ultimate objective is not.

256 Love, Knowledge, and Discourse, p. 8.
To be sure, there are those who have portrayed Plato as a monster of monism. Karl Popper, for example, is a staunch opponent of just such a Plato in his landmark work *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. Sinaiko once again provides an important corrective:

To know that there are many perspectives from which the whole of being may be seen and articulated and, in addition, to know that in each of the infinitely diverse and fully concrete human situations any given perspective may be relevant does not mean that we must be either totally skeptical of every attempt at philosophy or completely tolerant of all of them. The demand for significance and rigor in every philosophical endeavor is not arbitrary; it stems from the very problematic human situation that gives rise to the endeavor itself. To discover, however, that there are necessarily many accounts of being is not the end of the search for wisdom, but it is, perhaps, its most substantial point of departure....the awareness that there can be no final, single account of being means that we must soberly resist the temptations of our own genuine insights. “Know thyself” means, among other things, that we must recognize ourselves as necessarily limited, finite beings.\(^{257}\)

Here Sinaiko steers Plato between the Scylla of monism and the Charybdis of relativism. By acknowledging the inherent limitations of our own view and allowing that we do not have sole access to “the truth of things,” we open ourselves to the novel perspectives of others. This novelty comes to us when others share their own unique experiences and ideas, enabling us to live richer, more interesting and—I daresay—more *truthful* lives. Our lives are made more truthful insofar as we understand and integrate (or at least appreciate) alternative views while expressing and, where appropriate, modifying our own. These exchanges are the lifeblood of a healthy community because they engender a genuine understanding—not mere empty tolerance—of those around us. This is the essence of pluralism. Whether we call this process *zhengming*, dialectic, or the sharing of

\(^{257}\textit{Ibid.}, \text{p. 287.}\)
I am inclined to believe Confucius, Xunzi, Plato, and Aristotle each, in their own way, embraced the spirit of pluralism.

Aristotle might be construed as a pluralist simply by virtue of the fact that his *Politics* is more focused on discussing the inherent merits and drawbacks of pre-existing forms of political and social organization, rather than advocating any one particular theory as optimum. Although he does make certain arguments in favor of one position over another, his overall approach seems rather amenable to modification and correction should adequate evidence come to light. Some arguments that he does make, however, are liable to inflame our modern sensibilities, such as his assertion that men are intrinsically superior to women: “as between male and female the former is by nature superior and ruler, the latter inferior and subject.” Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b14. Likewise, his claim that slavery is natural and hence, right: “It is clear then that by nature some are free, others slaves, and that for those it is both just and expedient that they should serve as slaves.” Aristotle, *Politics*, 1255a1.

When we focus on particular comments such as these, it may make it difficult to take Aristotle seriously. From our modern perspective these claims seem rather absurd, if not offensive, but they should not obfuscate the greater merits of Aristotle’s philosophical approach. He is not so much interested in prescribing true and enduring principles as he is in describing what he presently perceives as natural patterns. To be sure, no one could ever mistake Aristotle for a radical bent on reform. If, however, the subject of description changes, then so will Aristotle’s corresponding philosophy.

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258 *Politics*, 1254b14.
Even the more controversial of Aristotelian "observations" is rooted in a notion that by and large still makes sense to us today. Even the most ardent contemporary advocate of human equality recognizes that each person is naturally endowed differently than the rest. Some are stronger or faster, others are wiser or brighter—no reasonable person could dispute this. In a similar vein, Aristotle writes:

Therefore whenever there is the same wide discrepancy between human beings as there is between soul and body or between man and beast, then those whose condition is such that their function is the use of their bodies and nothing better can be expected of them, those, I say, are slaves by nature.\footnote{Ibid., 1254b16.}

We differ with Aristotle, of course, in our conclusion: we resist the idea that natural differences in talent—particularly intellectual or moral development—distinguish slaves from free persons.

And yet it is reasonable to agree with Aristotle when he writes that "The state consists not merely of a plurality of men, but of different kinds of men; you cannot make a state out of men who are all alike."\footnote{Ibid., 1261a22.} Here we can detect the pluralistic undercurrents coursing through Aristotle's \textit{Politics}. Although he may be referring more to a plurality of talents and professions than ideologies and values, he nonetheless recognizes that a contrived uniformity is stale and prone to fail, whereas encouragement of diversity is more apt to foster a flourishing \textit{polis}.

Eliot Deutsch develops his own form of pluralism in \textit{Persons and Valuable Worlds: A Global Philosophy}. Calling it "creative morality," he writes:

\footnote{Ibid., 1254b16.}
\footnote{Ibid., 1261a22.}
A creative morality lays stress on the capability of a person to realize spontaneously his or her social nature, to develop what is appropriate morally in concrete situations, to recognize that one’s actions are one’s own, and therefore to assume responsibility for them—in short, to incarnate the values of personhood and freedom.

...a creative morality is concerned with personhood and freedom as values and recognizes that these values, while lacking ultimacy, are nevertheless intrinsic, and not instrumental to the securing of something else.262

A commitment to personhood involves a commitment to the development of one’s own character as well as that of others. The corresponding commitment to freedom involves the understanding that difference is not only tolerated, but appreciated and valued. Like Confucius, Xunzi, Plato, and Aristotle, Deutsch argues convincingly that these values are essential to a vibrant community.

One final issue merits discussion, however, and that is how pluralists deal with persons who transgress against the community. The Xunzi contains an illuminating—albeit potentially disquieting—account of an incident that supposedly occurred shortly after Confucius began serving as chief minister of Lu.263 Contrary to the advice of his disciples, who are concerned about Deputy Mao’s popularity, Confucius sentences him to death. Confucius explains himself by saying:

People can be evil in five ways, not counting banditry and theft. The first is to be knowledgeable yet treacherous. The second is to be resolute in perverse conduct. The third is to use contrived language contentiously. The fourth is to remember the debased comprehensively. The fifth is following what is contrary while

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262 Persons and Valuable Worlds, pp. 255-256.
263 This particular chapter of the Xunzi is widely considered to be apocryphal, although Mark Lewis observes that this event also appears in the Shiji (see p. 223). Lewis points out that such accounts tend to be representative of Confucius’ “imaginary political career” (p. 196). He also cites similar examples of Confucius as stern administrator that appear in other, post-Analects documents. What matters here, however, is not so much the historical accuracy (or lack thereof) of such accounts, but rather how such accounts might be interpreted and integrated into the broader Confucian vision.
glossing over it. A person who has but one of these five cannot avoid punishment by an exemplary person, while Deputy Mao has them all. Thus, at home he gathers crowds of followers. His insidious speeches disguise his insolence and beguile the masses. He uses his strength to overturn what is right and stand alone. Petty people revered him as a hero. I could not fail to put him to death. (28.2)

Of course, we must bear in mind that the Xunzi, written several hundred years after the death of Confucius, is far from a first-hand account. This particular incident is of dubious authenticity. Still, it is worth considering how the justification for this sentence integrates with Confucianism generally, and its particular form of pluralism specifically. After specifying Deputy Mao's five character flaws, Confucius compares his sentencing of him with six well-known historical instances of capital punishment. He then concludes with a quotation from the Shijing lamenting the outrage of petty people against such action. Confucius is careful to defend his decision as rooted in historical and cultural precedent so as not to appear capricious.

Still, this incident presents us with a complicated problem. Is Confucius' judgment in this case true and accurate? Even if it is, does the punishment fit the crime? Lewis analyzes the matter in these terms:

This arch-criminal is a non-ru philosopher, who preaches doctrines contrary to those espoused by the Xunzi, engages in disputation, and gathers crowds of followers. This is demonstrated not only by the crimes, which all are related to comprehension, to speech, and to memory, but also by the initial reference to "banditry and theft" not being among the true evils...

In the Xunzi the story of the execution of Deputy Mao is paired with an anecdote in which Confucius releases a son who had engaged in a legal dispute with his father. When the head of the Ji clan protests against this leniency, Confucius argues that such behavior shows that the officials have not instructed the people. Only after they have been carefully instructed should punishment be employed.
These two stories demonstrate the distinction, articulated elsewhere in the Xunzi, between the irredeemably evil and the educable.²⁶⁴

Deputy Mao has not engaged in any conduct that would be traditionally considered criminal. He has not stolen property belonging to someone else, and he has not caused bodily harm to another. His crime, according to Confucius, is much more serious: he is an erudite person who knows better and yet still chooses to challenge conventional wisdom and sow the seeds of social discontent. Whereas the son disputing with his father was in need of better education, the astutely clever Deputy Mao apparently was beyond remedy. Is sentencing such a person to death the act of a pluralist, or a fascist?

Confucius’ condemnation of Deputy Mao is not unlike the accusations against Socrates in Plato’s Apology. Specifically, Socrates was accused of corrupting the young, and believing in gods of his own invention, rather than those of the state. He attracted crowds of citizens who enjoyed seeing prominent men flounder as a result of his persistent questioning. This begs the question: would Confucius or Xunzi have condemned Socrates in the same way Confucius condemns Deputy Mao?

The historical Confucius portrayed in the Analects would not, as 12.19 demonstrates:

Ji Kangzi asked Confucius about governing, saying: “What if I execute those who have abandoned the dao so as to promote the dao?” Confucius replied: “If you govern well, what use is execution? If you aspire for goodness the people will be good. The excellence of the exemplary person is the wind, while that of the petty person is the grass. As the wind blows, the grass is sure to bend.”

²⁶⁴ Writing and Authority, p. 224.
This also suggests that the historical Confucius might not have condemned Deputy Mao, placing the onus for exemplary conduct squarely on the ruler. With Xunzi, given that the Deputy Mao account appears in his text, it is more difficult to say whether he would similarly condemn a Socrates. Both Confucius and Xunzi would surely recognize that, for the most part, Socrates was embarrassing to those pompous public figures most in need of humility. Whereas Confucius openly conducted himself in a similar manner when circumstances deemed it necessary, it is possible that Xunzi nonetheless would view such conduct as overly disruptive of social harmony. In fact, this incident highlights the distinctively authoritarian undertone brought to Confucianism by the Xunzi.

Still, it could be argued that Xunzi, like Confucius, would not have condemned one such as Socrates. It was the ire of petty persons that led to Socrates’ conviction, and it was the ire of the petty masses that resisted Deputy Mao’s execution. In both cases, we see an individual’s principled judgment transcending that of an angry mob. In the case of Socrates, with the mob in power, this led to his demise. In the case of Deputy Mao, with Confucius exercising discretion, his execution—and other examples of “ruthless efficiency”—reportedly led to greater social stability and harmony. The execution of Socrates can hardly be said to have produced a similar effect in Athens.

While not addressing execution explicitly, Aristotle dispassionately observes that ostracism is practiced by those states that feel threatened by an exceptional individual,

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265 This is true if, as Mark Edward Lewis reports on p. 224, accounts in various historical records are accurate.
whether that person be distinguished by wealth, popularity, or some other measure: "The method is useful not only to tyrants, and tyrants are not alone in practicing it: oligarchies and democracies are in just the same position, for ostracism has very much the same effect as lopping off and exiling the leading men."\(^6\) That is, when a political authority is concerned with maintaining social stability and/or equality, ostracism may provide a viable solution. While at first Aristotle seems inclined to deem this an acceptable practice, he reverses course by writing, "Of course if the lawgiver can so construct the constitution from the start that there will never be any need of this kind of medicine, so much the better."\(^6\) In other words, a tolerance akin to pluralism is always the preferred solution, although most states face the political difficulty of establishing practices that safeguard such an arrangement.

Thus, it is difficult to say whether execution is a viable form of community policing, particularly for a pluralist who is presumably committed to fostering social diversity. Confucius and Xunzi seem to differ on this point. One might think that execution is acceptable only if it is deemed to serve the long-term ends of inclusive pluralism. Under these conditions, only ardent opponents of the pluralistic program who are beyond remonstration would be susceptible. It would seem, however, that pluralism cannot operate as such without undermining its own objective: the veneration and preservation of diversity.

\(^6\) Politics, 1284a35.
\(^6\) Ibid., 1284b16.
The Language of Economics

“To allow one’s conduct to be motivated by personal gain (li 利) will incur much resentment.”

“The attempt to identify democracy with economic individualism as the essence of free action has done harm to the reality of democracy and is capable of doing even greater injury than it has already done.”

Perhaps it is overstating the obvious to say that Confucius was not an economist. Although a number of passages in the Analects indicate that he was interested in fair distribution, he refrained from analyzing human relationships from an economic perspective. For example, 9.1 states, “Confucius rarely discussed personal gain (li 利) in connection with the propensity of things or humaneness.” In other words, living properly has little to do with seeking petty advantage for oneself. Elsewhere, 7.25 states that “Confucius taught four subjects: culture, conduct, doing one’s best, and living up to one’s word.” All four Confucian subjects involve some aspect of character development and enrichment, while none deal with li 利—economics or personal gain.

Although nowhere in the Analects does Confucius explicitly contrast li 利 with he 和, he essentially does by inference in the above citations. He 和 (harmony) is the aim of the exemplary person, while the petty person sets his sights on uniformity and conformity. Despite the fact that li 利 and he 和 share the he 禾 (grain) radical, they could hardly be further apart in meaning. To the ancient Chinese, grain was the lifeblood of human society, and human communities could not exist without it. The difference between li 利 and he 和, of course, lies in the phonetic component. Dao 刀, the phonetic

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268 Analects, 4.12.
for li 利, is a knife or cutting tool. Pronounced diao, it can also denote mean or wicked. Together with he 禾, li 利 suggests one’s personal take of the harvest or, as Karlgren indicates, “keen on profit.” In certain contexts one might read the graph simply as “greed(y).” Kou 口, the phonetic for he 和, is a mouth, but it also is used to enumerate persons. This suggests both an emphasis on productive communication as well as honoring the uniqueness of individuals. Combined with the he 禾 radical, we see how he 和 denotes a rich, inclusive sense of harmony. Whereas Confucius encourages us to aspire for he 和, he sees li 利 as a selfish individual motive disruptive to community welfare.

Much has changed since the time of Confucius. The academic subjects taught at most schools, colleges, and universities today have little if anything to do with character development or he 和, and it almost goes without saying that economics, or li 利, furnishes the predominant vocabulary of our time. Philosophy, by contrast, exists primarily as an “Ivory Tower” discipline, far-removed from the everyday lives of most citizens. Of course, contemporary philosophers still study and examine topics otherwise considered external to the discipline, such as law, science, artificial intelligence, and so on. More often than not, however, these seem like desperate attempts to lend credence to a discipline whose academic territory seems to be steadily shrinking. The religion department encroaches on one side; English (or literature) on the other. The hard

270 Grammata, p. 141.
sciences, political science, and even psychology have furthered the erosion of philosophy's once grand status among disciplines.

Setting aside the aforementioned outward-looking approaches to philosophy, what is philosophy proper about? Today, beyond teaching, the primary professional obligation of philosophy and philosophers is to publish propositional literature. Yet James Boyd White asks rhetorically: "May it even be that our modern aspiration to produce philosophic texts that can be reduced to [propositional] forms is itself misguided, likely to fail, and perhaps an evasion of philosophic responsibility?"271 Do philosophers have what James Boyd White calls a "philosophic responsibility," and if so, what is it? The work of those philosophers we still revere—such as Confucius, Xunzi, Plato, and Aristotle—suggestions that philosophic responsibility involves extending beyond the currently narrow academic purview of philosophy in order to become more socially and politically active.

Many people today see philosophy as an obscure, even esoteric pursuit with little or no practical value. Philosophers are capable of altering this impression, but only by engaging—and thereby changing and shaping—the everyday concerns of everyday citizens. John Dewey writes: "Philosophy recovers itself when it ceases to be a device for dealing with the problems of philosophers and becomes a method, cultivated by philosophers, for dealing with the problems of men."272 Our four philosophers also saw this as a primary role and responsibility for philosophy. Plato's inspiration, Socrates, roamed the streets of Athens, interrogating the values and knowledge claims of his fellow

citizens. Confucius journeyed from state to state, offering advice to those who would ask and remonstrating with those who otherwise would not. Their words were not always well received, but it would not be difficult to argue that the communities were better off—more thoughtful, less inclined to hubris—in the wake of their efforts.

The domain of philosophy used to be much broader. The topics explored in the writings of Plato and especially Aristotle are germane to most modern academic disciplines from the arts to the humanities and the sciences. One important exception is economics. There is very little in Plato or Aristotle, let alone Confucius or Xunzi, that would be of interest to an economist. The theories of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and John Maynard Keynes—just to name a few—have transformed life both in and outside the academy. Yet, economics is a comparatively new field of expertise, complete with its own invented vocabulary. Despite its relative infancy, this vocabulary has permeated, and in many cases revolutionized, our discourses. From domestic and international politics, to the media and entertainment industry, down to individual choices about career and lifestyle: the language of economics is the medium through which we evaluate and communicate about these and countless other issues.

Employees and citizens are referred to as “producers” and “consumers” in more than just the corporate realm. The government itself attends to the “supply and demand” for its “services”—whether prevailing concern is focused on Social Security, Medicare, terrorism, or some other issue that has inflamed public opinion. Among the general population, “success” is typically construed in merely the economic sense. A successful person is one that has amassed a wealth of material possessions.
This way of thinking has even infiltrated the vocabulary of academia, where administrators—who for the most part have imposed an economic model on university operation—are now apt to refer to students as “customers” seeking to “purchase” a “product.” Students are rarely said to be seeking an education, but rather they are making an “investment” towards their “future earning potential.” This is particularly damaging because it reverses the traditional hierarchy of roles essential to university functioning. In a traditional classroom, students generally defer to the professor because the professor has devoted her career to accruing knowledge. Of course, a good professor will allow some give and take in the course of study and will recognize and appreciate young genius. For the most part, however, the authority of the professor holds sway. When this hierarchy is reversed, and professors are implicitly advised “the customer is always right”—meaning everything within reason must be done to please the students, rather than educate them—the university ceases to function as it was intended. It has become a retail business.

The economic orientation of our modern-day vocabulary is anathema to the lexicons employed and advocated by the four philosophers reviewed here, despite their many differences. For example, Alexander Nehamas points out that the debate surrounding the ancient Greek term aretē hinged on how one construed the meaning of “success,” with the sophists adopting a more economic or conventional understanding while Socrates/Plato leaned more toward a moral conception:

[If] we interpret aretē more broadly, as something more akin to “success” than to moral goodness, as what it is that is responsible for people having a good reputation among their peers, then the ancient debate [between Plato/Socrates and the Sophists] acquires an immediate contemporary resonance. For the question now turns out to be what it is to be successful and how one can secure success for oneself. Success, much more than moral goodness, is what is often called an
“essentially contested concept.” And what we observe in the conflicts between Socrates and Plato, on the one hand, and Protagoras, Gorgias, or Evenus, on the other, is a deep disagreement about the very nature of the state that they are willing to name aretē in the first place. Where Protagoras promises to show his students how to secure economic well-being and political power, Socrates insists that aretē consists in possessing what we now call the moral virtues. Where the world identifies success with public acclaim, Socrates insists that “real” success consists in having a harmonious soul. The sophistic insistence that success can be taught is countered by the Socratic view that, even if it can, it constitutes at best a poor substitute for what makes a human being truly worthwhile. Today, the primarily oral mode of teaching of the sophists has been replaced with print and electronic versions. But many individuals make fortunes—fortunes equivalent to that which Protagoras is said to have amassed for himself—by showing people the “secrets” of various forms of success—in personal relationships, in business ventures, in acquiring power—while intellectuals in general and philosophers in particular pass those people by in silent disdain and contempt. Though we are convinced that such hucksters fail to teach what they advertise, and that, even if they do, they impart a debased conception of what constitutes a valuable human life, we refuse to face them and to articulate directly and in public an alternative conception of what such a life would consist in. But that is just what Socrates, and Plato following him, did: they refused to pass such people by, they attacked them squarely and plainly, they claimed that what they taught, if they taught it at all, was merely apparent success and not worth learning in the first place, and they presented a conception of real success, which makes human beings admirable for a good reason.²⁷³

In other words, Nehamas is saying that sophists—complete with their economic vocabulary—have taken over our world. For evidence we need look no further than the proliferation and tremendous popularity of self-help books and television programs offering cheap and easy solutions to personal relationships, financial prosperity, and so on. One can hardly escape their definition of success—material wealth and/or popular fame—as it permeates nearly every form of media in our culture.

The problem, Plato has argued convincingly, is that this definition of success depends on simulacra, rather than authenticity. Confucius would no doubt concur. It is

²⁷³ Virtues of Authenticity, pp. xxxi-xxxii.
based on the manipulation of appearance and opinion, rather than genuine understanding and conduct. As a result, people are made worse off, not better, by following such "advice." This in turn has a negative impact on society as a whole, as more and more people feel compelled to play the appearances game in order to be viewed as "successful" by their peers. Nehamas is essentially issuing a call-to-arms for academics everywhere, especially philosophers, to resist actively the staggering weight of sophistic influences—particularly that imposed by an economic vocabulary—in our society today.

James Boyd White raises serious concerns about the tendency of economics to focus on self-interest as the primary, if not sole, motivation in human life:

The use of "self-interest" to comprise all motives, including altruism, and the use of "wealth" to comprise all values, including ascetic ones, destroys distinctions that are essential to our ethical thought: between selfishness and generosity, for example, or between avarice and moderation...

White also questions the economic presumption of "value neutrality":

Economics is troubling not only for the self-interest that it directly asserts, but for the very neutrality, the "value freedom," that it claims. To be neutral in principle on all questions of motive external to the acquisitive and competitive ones enacted in the exchange game is to be silent on all the great questions of human life: questions of beauty and ugliness in art and music, sincerity and falsity in human relations, wisdom and folly in conduct and judgment, and on the greatest of all questions, which is how we ought to lead our lives. Economic analysis assumes as a given the existence of "tastes" or "preferences" which drive the system, but economics as a language can provide no way of talking about them, whether in oneself or another, no way of thinking about which to prefer and which not.\(^{274}\)

\(^{274}\) *Justice as Translation*, p. 55. The reader is encouraged to read White's entire chapter "The Language and Culture of Economics," which is enormously provocative and thoroughly in keeping with the philosophical views under development here.

In this sense, economics is relativistic. It is not at all inclined or equipped to evaluate personal choices. It is silent on the questions that matter most—the kind of provocative philosophical questions that permeate the work of Confucius, Xunzi, Plato, and Aristotle.

The economic vocabulary that presently pervades modern discourse is so alien to the concerns of our four philosophers that often we can at best discern oblique forms of criticism. For example, Xunzi concludes his second chapter by explaining a quotation from the Book of Documents, saying: "This means the exemplary person must be able to place public welfare over personal desires." Claims such as these are not arguments, however, they are more akin to prescriptive definition.

What can be done to stem the rising tide of economic language? White proffers this solution:

It is not enough...simply to confine economics to its proper sphere or domain. It needs to be integrated with and transformed by the other discourses that make up our culture, by the rest of what we know and value...

Whatever its merits, the language and practice of economics cannot be justified in its own terms. Whoever is to think and speak seriously about this matter must in the end turn to some other discourse, some other language, than economics. When that happens one necessarily affirms a view of self and language for which economics itself is insufficient. This is to take the single step I think most essential, to begin to think in more than one language, more than one voice, and thus to locate the particular practices of a discourse in the larger context of the rest of what we know and are.276

What White is advocating amounts to zhengming: he asks that we deliberately interrogate the linguistic framework of economics in order to arrive at something that

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276 Ibid., pp. 77, 79.
more richly and broadly expresses our actions, our motivations, and the nature and quality of our lives together.

This brings us full-circle, back to the initial discussion of 13.3 from the *Analects*. Confucius’ answer, too, is *zhengming*. We need to adopt and employ a vocabulary that emphasizes the robust character of the person and the community, not mere economic “success.” This also means that we must conscientiously reject the vocabulary of the sophists—we must be sensitive to and point out how economic vocabulary has impoverished other communities of discourse. This is not to say that there is anything inherently wrong with pursuing material satisfaction in life. It is all too easy for those that “have” to tell the “have-nots” that the pursuit of material wealth is misguided. The problem arises when the vocabulary of economics becomes the *only* (or even primary) mode of discourse at the expense of other forms of human expression—moral, spiritual, artistic, and so on. We can engage in such genuine dialogue with our colleagues, neighbors, and family. In so doing, let us bear these contrasts in mind: the language of economics, like sophistry, influences us to approach the world as a combative enterprise; dialogue and dialectic are cooperative undertakings. Sophistry and economics aim merely for personal enrichment; dialogue and dialectic enrich the community in more than a monetary sense. The goal of sophistry and economics is domination and submission; the goal of dialogue and dialectic is mutual fulfillment. The petty person strives for *li* 利; the exemplary person strives for *he* 和.
Keep Talking

"I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth."277

"What is mere talk, nothing but talk, can, however, untrustworthy it may be, still bring about understanding among human beings—which is to say that it can still make human beings human."278

Karl Popper and Ludwig Wittgenstein, two of the most revered philosophers of the twentieth century, had but one encounter between them and, by all accounts, it was not civil. Details of the exchange vary depending on who is telling the tale, but all agree that Wittgenstein stormed from the room after Popper made a sardonic quip about the fire poker in Wittgenstein’s hand.279 Stephen Hawking, reflecting on the propensity of human beings to act with animosity toward each other, said: "It doesn’t have to be like this. All we need to do is make sure we keep talking."280 In the simplest of terms, Hawking has captured the spirit behind each of the four philosophical positions reviewed here. Although some significant differences between them have been elucidated along the way, they are united by a common commitment to a communicating community. Viewing Plato through the Confucian lens suggests an alternative interpretation to those that view him as positing a monistic morality. Although at times Plato seems to be pointing in this direction, by virtue of the dialogue format he may in fact refrain from making claims to ultimate authority.

277 A maxim frequently cited by Karl Popper. See Wittgenstein’s Poker, p. 240.
279 As recounted in Wittgenstein’s Poker. This is a rather interesting fact in its own right—credible philosophers who all witnessed the same event nonetheless came away with important differences in their account of it. In the context of the present discussion, it lends further credence to the notion that “truth” is a slippery objective indeed.
If somehow we could work together with Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, and Xunzi to establish some common ground, what might be the result? First and foremost, the position would be, like pluralism, anti-foundationalist at its core. There are no ultimate or transcendent truths. Instead, truth is something that must be continually worked out, negotiated, and re-established among members of a community, as well as among communities. This is, in some sense, an anti-authoritarian position, although it recognizes the need for modeling authoritative conduct. It also might be considered democratic, insofar as it invites all members of the community to participate in the conversation. To be sure, certain positions and viewpoints in certain contexts will emerge as more authoritative than others, but ultimately everyone enjoys the opportunity to have their say. Views are distinguished as superior, or more tenable, only after undergoing careful review through community discussion. Efficacy and truth will be viewed in balance with each other. By unfortunate contrast, so much modern political "debate" amounts to empty rhetoric because the participants seem more interested in talking at each other rather than communicating with and genuinely understanding each other. The language of economics, with its focus on monetary self-interest, is one principal culprit.

The present reading of Plato is likely to be construed as a radical departure from the prevailing view. Any such challenges will be met with the response that was developed in Chapter 1 and has been repeated throughout: we miss something important if Plato's dialogues are read as if he is delivering his position through the mouthpiece of

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280 As sampled in the Pink Floyd song “Keep Talking.”
Socrates or any other dialogue participant. As Sinaiko observes, “There is for Plato no account of being in abstraction from a dialogue, from an actual conversation…

Philosophy, the desire and the search for wisdom, cannot be disengaged from the actual [people] who participate in it.” No matter how persuasive a conversation might seem, and no matter how conclusively a dialogue seems to point in a certain direction, ultimately Plato’s writing retains an element of ambiguity that continues to invite reflection.

Socrates’ strong suspicion of the written word no doubt had its impact on Plato. Writing and reading invite caution—it is dangerous to adhere to something in writing as if it posits an absolute certainty. The dialogue format, together with the fact that many dialogues are staged several steps removed from their original context, alerts us that these factors are in play in any honest discussion of what his views may be. Sinaiko reminds us that

...Socrates learns that discourse itself is the only activity that is fully adequate to the search for wisdom. This lesson Socrates seems to have grasped completely and it goes a long way toward explaining why the Platonic Socrates never seems to do anything other than talk; *insofar as his whole life is dedicated to the search for wisdom, it is also committed to discourse.*

In order to practice philosophy as Socrates intended, we need to talk—and *keep* talking—with each other. Based on what we know of the life of Confucius, the same could be said with regard to him.

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281 *Love, Knowledge, and Discourse*, p. 286.
282 Ibid., p. 314 fn, emphasis added.
Of course, our common-ground position is itself continually subject to review and revision. The argument, however, is that even under intense scrutiny, the spirit of pluralism remains intact. Such inquiry is, in fact, encouraged. It is precisely such openness to self-interrogation that keeps pluralism viable. Philosophical perspectives that strive to be authoritative in an ultimate, transcendent sense, by contrast, are significantly more vulnerable: the location of a single flaw in reasoning could very well amount to a refutation of the entire system. How can claims to absolute truth be only mostly true? They cannot. They must be completely true, or the foundation collapses.

In the course of this investigation, we have had the opportunity to reflect upon various ways of life—sophist, physician, poet, and so on, and how they might be compared with that of the philosopher. Much like the sophist, the politician tends to be consumed by self-interest and, ironically as a result, is continually beholden to others.

Andrea Wilson Nightingale, commenting on the “digression” in the *Theaetetus*, writes:

> The politician is a slave, a servile flatterer, a person who always acts out of self-interest. The philosopher, by contrast, is free. He avoids the marketplace, the lawcourts, the assembly, and every other public gathering, not because he is seeking honor or a good reputation…but because his occupation is somewhere else; while his body dwells in the city, his mind is concerned with the nature of reality (173c-174a). *It is important to stress that the philosopher is not simply pursuing theoretical knowledge*. Socrates makes it quite clear that the philosopher’s wisdom is fundamentally concerned with *praxis*. For the philosopher not only inquires “about justice and injustice in themselves” but also “about kingship and human happiness and misery in general, what these things are and in what fashion it is fitting for human beings to acquire the one and avoid the other” (175c). The goal of philosophy, Socrates adds, is to “liken oneself to god” by becoming “as just as possible”…for “the knowledge of this is wisdom and true virtue” [176c]. The philosopher, in short, is not *uninterested* in practical affairs; rather, he approaches them from a position of impartiality or *disinterest*. 283

283 *Genres in Dialogue*, pp. 51-52, emphasis added.
It is with these considerations in mind I submit that Confucius and Socrates shared a similar enterprise: the development and embodiment of a then-novel way of life—one that places a reflective interest in community welfare above self-interest. We call this occupation "philosopher." Although we have examined a number of qualitative differences in the ways their lives and ideas evolved, at the core their mission was one and the same. We, the modern practitioners of this way of life that is still known as philosophy, might benefit from reflection upon our own endeavors. To what extent do we aspire to emulate the paradigm of Confucius and Socrates? Do we place community welfare above our own? In keeping with the spirit of zhengming, only those who share their dreams—of community harmony and genuinely robust human flourishing, realized through authentic communication—are truly worthy of the title "philosopher."
BIBLIOGRAPHY


