

A Reader's Companion to the Confucian Analects

Henry Rosemont, Jr., *A Reader's Companion to the Confucian Analects* (Palgrave Macmillan Publishers, New York, NY, 2012) ISBN: 978-1137303387

Henry Rosemont's newest contribution to early Chinese Philosophy functions, in his own words, not as "another interpretation of [Confucius's *Analects*], but rather as an aid for contemporary students to develop their own interpretive reading of it, in hope of thereby aiding them in the search for meaning, purpose, and service, in their own lives" (book blurb). For those of us who teach the *Analects*, this volume is a welcome addition to the growing number of resources available to us as we guide our students to finding their own way in that profound but curious text.

One difficulty of teaching a complex text like the *Analects* is to find ways to empower students to become competent, independent readers of the text. In *A Reader's Companion to the Confucian Analects*, Henry Rosemont offers us a well-organized compendium of tools to help us achieve this lofty task. Rosemont's brief book offers a variety of short chapters and appendices that will be of use to teachers and students alike. In doing so, it covers some of the same ground that translators typically offer in their translations of the *Analects*: a Wade-Giles to Pinyin conversion table; a concordance of key characters, along with their range of possible meanings; a list of passages related to each disciple (in Rosemont's term, students); and a brief annotated bibliography, as well as standard histories of the text. In addition to these useful materials, Rosemont offers advice on "how" and "why" to use them, which makes all the difference to the success of this book.

Rosemont argues that because Confucianism has changed in its ideological commitments over time, the central feature of the teaching is not its theories, but its emphasis on the practice and celebration of the rituals. As Rosemont says, "Confucianism has never really been a system at all" (2). In light of that, what is a reader—most especially, a philosophical reader looking for a system—to do with this text? Rosemont's view that Confucianism is not a system is accompanied by another sensible claim—that the Confucian project is particularistic. For example, at 11.22, Confucius is reported to have told Gongxi Hua to immediately practice what he has learned, but also said to Zilu to consult his elders first. In this passage, Confucius explains that this difference is due to what each student, given the imbalance in his character traits, needs to be on the Way. Rosemont takes this passage as an indication of how best to understand all of the question and answer passages of the *Analects*: Confucius's teachings in these passages indicate his advice to each individual, not general principles applicable in the same way to everyone.

Rosemont recommends that readers study how Confucius's answers to student questions arise from his sense of the particularities of their situation, including their character and what they need to develop to be on the Way. As he says, "[B]ecoming acquainted with [the students] is perhaps the most important single technique that can be employed by serious readers in order to most fully understand and appreciate the remarks Confucius makes to them, and the answers he gives to their queries" (21).

Accompanying Rosemont's technique of focusing on the students is his commitment

to the semantic view that “Virtually every saying [in the *Analects*] is multivocal” (ix). His glossary reflects that view by offering a variety of glosses for each character. To take one, 仁 (*ren*) is presented as meaning the following: “Authoritative, Benevolence, Human heartedness, Consummate conduct, etc.”(64). But, Rosemont claims, not all interpretations of specific passages that use one or another of these glosses are equally valid. Using some of the glosses would produce interpretations that we judge to make little sense and so must assess as uncharitable (54).

In some of his most interesting analyses, Rosemont sifts through possible readings, seeking the most charitable interpretation. For example, how in action-guiding contexts should we understand 知 (*zhi*): (Realize, Realization, To realize, Knowledge, Wisdom, Acknowledge)? In reprising an argument he and Roger Ames developed in *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, Rosemont argues that in most cases, “*zhi*” means “realize” in the sense of making real, which he glosses as “to put into practice” (32). He argues that this gloss will help us avoid obvious falsehoods. Consider the following passage: 16:9 “*Zhi* had from birth is the highest; *zhi* obtained from learning is next highest.” Rosemont argues that to translate *zhi* as propositional knowledge of contingent facts or theories makes this translation: “Some folks know contingent facts and theoretical explanations of them from birth.” Since this translation is obviously counter-intuitive, we need to find an alternative interpretation of *zhi*. As he later claims, *zhi* is more akin to “knowing how” (32).

Some of the interpretations that Rosemont offers strike me as controversial. As I indicated above, he claims that in most instances in the *Analects* “*zhi*” means to realize in the sense of “putting into practice.” As promising as this suggestion may be, the examples he offers (33) are hard to parse using this interpretation. Consider this:

Children must realize (*zhi*) the age of their parents. On the one hand, it is a source of joy, on the other hand, of fear. (4.21) (Rosemont 33)

What would it mean to say that here Confucius is saying that children must “put into practice” the age of their parents? Or, to use another gloss he offers, what would it mean to say that here Confucius is suggesting that children must “make real” the age of their parents? These glosses do not yield intelligible English sentences. The principle of interpretive charity requires us to try some alternative glosses.

In raising these points, I am actually using the very method this text teaches. In my mind, this result is an important, remarkable achievement of the text. The way it gets readers actively engaged in interpreting the *Analects* offers students a method that can be used to assess its very own interpretive claims. This is as it should be. Its approach to the text’s basic features, along with the tools it offers students, presents us with a useful primer on how to become independent readers of the *Analects*.

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