

Appendix Six

On Interpretation and Translation

The purpose of this appendix is to briefly discuss the hermeneutical assumptions that inform the approach to the *Analects* adopted in this translation—the term “hermeneutics” being derived from the name Hermes, Greek messenger of the gods, and referring to the study of interpretation.

This translation of the *Analects* is informed by a particular interpretative “horizon.” The concept of interpretative horizons—that is, the idea that all texts are inevitably approached from a particular historically and linguistically contingent standpoint—was developed in a movement in hermeneutics that arose in the early 20th century, associated primarily with Hans-Georg Gadamer, and that opposed the view that saw interpretation as involving the recovery of the original meaning of a given text. So-called “philosophical hermeneutics” argues that no amount of philological or historiological rigor can give us completely objective access to a text: every interpreter approaches a text from within his or her own interpretative “horizon,” shaped by his or her “pre-understandings” (*Vorurhabe*) of what the text means. Understood this way, any interpretation should be seen as an interactive product of the “fusing” of the horizon of the interpreter with that of the text rather than the apprehension of some timeless, immutable truth.¹ The approach to the *Analects* adopted in this translation might be loosely characterized as Gadamerian in that, in contrast to the approach of scholars such as Brooks and Brooks 1998, our point will not be to analyze the *Analects* as an object of scientific inquiry, but rather to understand it as a living text embedded in a historical tradition—one that continues to unfold to

¹ For a brief introduction to Gadamerian hermeneutics, see Mueller-Vollmer 1994: 256–274; for roughly “Gadamerian” approaches to the Confucian tradition, see Chan 1984, Henderson 1991, and the essays found in Chow et al. 1999 (especially Ng 1999), which argue for understanding the Confucian tradition as a dynamic, living tradition with an open textual corpus, constantly being reconfigured and repositioned by its proponents in response to the needs and pre-understandings of the day. For case studies of individual passages from the *Analects* that demonstrate quite dramatically how different pre-understandings shape traditional interpreters’ understanding of the text, see Kieschnick 1992 and Ivanhoe 2002.

this day, with modern Western and Asian scholars carrying on the torch of exegesis. This inevitably involves approaching the text with certain pre-understandings.

Which pre-understandings, however, should we adopt? And does it matter? In other words, do all interpretative horizons give us equally good access to the text? This is the central problem faced by those who would follow a philosophical hermeneutical approach to any traditional text. Gadamer, like Heidegger before him, rejected the extreme relativist position, arguing that not just *any* pre-understanding will do if we are to “authentically” engage a text: for true understanding to occur, the hermeneutic process must be informed by “suitable” pre-understandings that open the interpreter up to the claims of the text, rather than by “arbitrary fancies” or popular misunderstandings that prevent authentic engagement.² In fact, for both Heidegger and Gadamer human existence is itself “hermeneutical”: the sort of fusion that occurs in understanding a text also characterizes the subject’s interactions with others and with the world, and the issue of “authentic” engagement thus becomes a pressing existential question.

However, neither Gadamer nor Heidegger ever really provides us with subject-independent criterion we could use to distinguish “suitable” from “unsuitable” pre-understandings, and this is the rub: how to reconcile the apparent subjectivity of the philosophical hermeneutic enterprise with its truth claims? This tension perhaps explains why many conflate the Gadamerian stance with the more radically relativist position of postmodernists such as Derrida, for whom no one enjoys a privileged position in the free play of interpretation. My own feeling is that the only way to reconcile the insights of philosophical hermeneutics with the intuition that some interpretations are simply *bad*—an intuition that forms the bedrock of the modern academy—is to moderate the Gadamerian suspicion of *Methoden*, the philological and historiological “methods” that earlier hermeneutics theorists, such as Schliermacher, felt would give them objective access to the original intention of the author of a given text. While we can acknowledge that the complete recovery of the original intention of the author is perhaps beyond our grasp, the methods of philological and historiological research can, I think, allow us to separate less appropriate from more appropriate pre-understandings. In this respect, the historical and philological methods developed by both Asian and Western scholars from the Qing Dynasty

² See, for example, Heidegger 1962: 195 and Gadamer 1975: 236–238.

onward serve to distinguish the modern academic approach toward texts such as the *Analects* from that of previous, more unselfconsciously appropriative and anachronistic interpretations.

Hermeneutical Assumptions

The particular interpretative “horizon” adopted in this translation is that of a modern, historically and philologically responsible student of the text—whether a Qing Dynasty Chinese philologist or a contemporary Asian or Western scholar—fluent in reading classical Chinese and interested in the thought of “Confucius.” Some of the pre-understandings that inform this standpoint are as follows.

- 1) Textual Coherence. Though it may contain different chronological strata, the text of the *Analects* was edited together at one time by an editor—or more likely a group of editors—who had a coherent interpretation of the Master’s views to present. The received text thus presents the views of what we might call the “early Confucian school” prior to the innovations of Mencius and Xunzi. This means that one of our central interpretative strategies will be to use passages from different parts of the text to explain one another, and also means that other interpretative strategies—most notably the Brooks and Brooks’ approach of explaining difficult or contradictory passages as expressions of conflicts between rival groups of disciples—will be closed off to us. Related to this assumption is the belief that the organization of the text is significant; in other words, passages are not simply thrown together randomly, but have often been placed together by the editor(s) because of some commonality of theme. We will see evidence throughout the text of thematic “pairing” or “grouping,” and we will often rely upon this phenomenon to help adjudicate between possible interpretations of individual passages.
- 2) Historical Accuracy. To the degree that it is possible without violating assumption 1,³ we should avoid obvious anachronisms, allowing our knowledge of late Spring and Autumn

³ One example of a conflict between principles 1 and 2 is our treatment of Book Ten, which almost certainly consists of what were originally fragments culled from ritual texts that were then integrated by the editor(s) into the *Analects*. These fragments were apparently intended by the editor(s) to be read as descriptions of Confucius’ behavior, and the translation therefore treats them as such, allowing principle #1 to override #2.

and Warring States society, history, and thought to delimit the parameters of possible interpretations. This means rejecting certain assumptions shared by many pre-Qing Chinese commentators, such as the belief that Confucius wrote the *Annals* and composed commentaries on the *Book of Changes*, that he ever held anything more than very minor official positions during his lifetime, or that his sagely status rendered him omniscient or endowed him with supernatural powers.⁴

- 3) Avoidance of Anachronistic Concepts or Terminology. Related to principle 2, this principle demands that we avoid introducing concepts or terminology radically alien to the original text. Of course, deciding what is “radically alien” is a moot point, but among modern scholars of the text one would encounter little argument in maintaining that the metaphysical dualism of “principle” (*li* 理) and “material force” (*qi* 氣)⁵ or “God” as conceived of in the Judeo-Christian tradition⁶—to cite just two examples—would be unrecognizable to the compilers of the *Analects*.
- 4) Favoring of Early and Late Commentaries. Practically speaking, principle 3 means that we will sometimes avoid the Song neo-Confucians, who rely heavily on alien metaphysical schemes in their interpretations of the text,⁷ and instead favor either early

⁴ See Csikszentmihalyi 2002 for the Han Dynasty view of Confucius as a supernatural being with extraordinary powers.

⁵ For a discussion of the influence of Buddhist metaphysics on the thought of Song and Ming Dynasty neo-Confucians, see Ivanhoe 1993: 51–54.

⁶ The 19th century missionary James Legge’s reading of the text, for instance, is often heavily influenced by his Christian faith. See Pfister 1999 for a discussion of Legge’s hermeneutical approach to the text, as well as for a discussion of a Chinese Christian-Confucian Lo Chung-fan (d. circa 1850), who, influenced by James Legge, found evidence in the earliest Confucian texts for a monotheistic, Christian-like faith.

⁷ Although, as the reader will note, we will still make fairly heavy use of Zhu Xi, whose profound insights into the text cannot be denied. Qing philologists sometimes “throw the baby out with the bathwater” in needlessly denigrating Zhu Xi, or simply contradicting him as a matter of principle.

commentators, who harbor fewer alien metaphysical assumptions,⁸ or post-Ming Dynasty commentators, who make a conscious effort to explicate the texts in a historically and philologically responsible manner. This principle also motivates our heavy reliance on other texts from the Spring and Autumn, Warring States, or early Han periods, which have been essentially neglected—at least by Western scholars—as a source of commentary on the *Analects*. These texts often present revealing alternate versions of *Analects* passages, elaborate upon them, or illustrate them by means of entertaining stories. Cheng Shude does an excellent job of providing selections from such texts, which effectively represent some of the earliest and most revealing commentaries on the *Analects*.

Therefore, we shall take care to avoid the “inappropriate” *Vorhabe* and interpretive excesses of the Han and Jin neo-Daoist commentators, Buddhist-influenced Song and Ming neo-Confucians, or Christian missionaries such as James Legge and his minions, our goal being to gain a sense of how the *Analects* might reasonably be understood by a modern, philologically and historically sophisticated person who believes the text has an important and consistent message to impart. Again, it should be emphasized that this network of assumptions is by no means the only horizon from which one might approach the text of the *Analects*—indeed, even a cursory survey of the Chinese commentarial tradition reveals the wild variety of ways in which the text has been understood by different commentators at different stages of Chinese history⁹—but ultimately it seems to be the most rewarding and historically responsible standpoint for someone interested in understanding the text in something resembling its original religious and cultural milieu.

⁸ It must be noted, however, that even Han and Jin Dynasty commentators are by no means entirely free of alien metaphysical assumption, particularly neo-Daoist and cosmological ones. See Yuet Keung Lo 1999 for a discussion of a new interest in the metaphysics evinced by late- and post-Han Confucians, who begin broadening their reading and commentarial habits to import, for instance, the metaphysical dualism of neo-Taoism into the Confucian context. Lo shows that the type of syncretism we later see in Song neo-Confucianism is by no means a new phenomenon.

⁹ See especially Kieschnick 1992, Gardner 1998, and Ivanhoe 2002.