

A Confucian Irony in LY 4:15

César Guardé
University of Barcelona
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Abstract. Interpreters of LY 4:15 focus on its irregular grammar and the possibility of “cardinal virtues” in Confucius’ philosophy. I suggest that LY 4:15 was originally meant as ironic against Zēng Zǐ 曾子, and propose three stages: (1) an original LY without 4:15, (2) 4:15 is interpolated as ironic against Zēng Zǐ; and (3) sympathizers of Zēng Zǐ tamper with the passage to make it favorable to their Master.

The most recent discussion of LY 4:15 is that of Van Norden **Unweaving** (2002), revisited in his **Introduction** (2011) 250-252: followers of Zēng Zǐ tampered with the text, inserting a saying related to 15:3, so that (1) the grammar of 4:15 is anomalous, and (2) we cannot rely on this passage for “cardinal virtues” in Confucius’ philosophy.

The Philological Problem. The main philological argument for regarding LY 4:15 as a later interpolation is its anomalous grammar: if we take the sentence “As for my Way, with one thing it binds it together” 吾道一以貫之 (following Van Norden’s translation), what are yǐ 以 and zhī 之 referring to? Northern Sòng commentator Xíng Bīng 邢昺 and Southern Sòng philosopher Zhū Xī 朱熹 take yī yǐ 一以 as an inversion of yǐ yī 以一, a view rejected by Van Norden given that, since this section interpolates 15:3 予一以貫之, there is no point in discussing its irregular grammar. But even if it was interpolated by followers of Zēng Zǐ, it must have made sense to them. In fact, a phrase introduced by yǐ 以 can either precede or follow the the main verb, and 之 is usually omitted after yǐ 以 (Pulleyblank **Outline** 47, 70). Thus, the antecedent of 以 should be yī 一, agreeing with Xíng Bīng and Zhū Xī. Compare:

LY 5:9 聞一以知十 “Heaving one thing, by that he knows ten.”

LJ 39:20a 故樂者審一以定和 “Therefore, for musical performances, the pitch of the prime note is set in order to determine the proper pitch of the other notes” (following Knoblock **Xunzi** 3/81).

Here, the antecedent of yǐ 以 is a sentence: “Hearing one thing” 聞一, or “Set the pitch of the prime note” 審一.

LY 9:23 欲一以窮之 :Wishing one, by it delimiting them.”

LY 8:7 仁以為己任 “Rén, it is taken as one’s own burden.”

The antecedents are simply yī 一 and rén 仁: Wishing that by one thing, good and bad in human minds can be investigated, and taking rén as one’s burden. In the first case, the sentence is introduced by the verb yù 欲, which subordinates 一以窮之, but in the second example there is no subordination. Then 15:3 and 4:15 can be translated as:

15:3 “I bind it together with one thing” (following Van Norden, the antecedent of zhī 之 is “what is studied and remembered” 多學而識之者)

4:15 “As for my Way, with one thing I bind it together” 吾道，一以貫之

Irony. The quandaries with LY 4:15 extend beyond philology. As has been pointed out, Zēng Zǐ was not a very bright disciple. He is called “dull” (lǔ 魯) in LY 11:18. But we find another irregularity: Confucius leaving before the conclusion of the passage is a hapax in the Lún Yǔ. What should be understood from his absence after Zēng Zǐ’s dull-witted answer? From the point of view of the disciples of Zēng Zǐ, this would give some authority to the otherwise dull young master. It seems to me that this passage can be seen in a new light if an original saying was transformed to increase Zēng Zǐ’s position in the school. A closer reading of LY 4:15 may provide a clue (I follow the Brooks translation with a slight modification):

The Master said: Shēn! My Way: by one thing I link it together.”

Zēng Zǐ said: “Yes.”

The Master went out, and the disciples asked: “What did he mean?”

Zēng Zǐ said: “Our Respected Master’s Way is simply loyalty and empathy.”

Confucius leaving silently could be understood as censoring. Zēng Zǐ realizes that he is wrong. So when questioned by the rest of the disciples he corrects himself: the Way of the Master is not linked together by one thing, but two (note the final “and that is all!” ér yǐ 而已). Confucius remains absent after Zēng Zǐ’s continuous mistakes.

Formation. If LY 4:15 was originally meant as a Confucian irony, it had to be changed to approve Zēng Zǐ as a rightful successor to his Master. Thus, a paraphrase of 15:3 was introduced, modifying the original Confucius question about the unity of his doctrine: the pronoun zhī 之 was added, introducing obscurity into the text. If Zēng Zǐ could uncover such obscurity, he could be said to properly understand the Confucian doctrine. We can imagine the disciples of Confucius listening to the now enigmatic answer, asking Zēng Zǐ about the nature of that very thing that is bound together by Confucius’ Dào (the “zhī 之”), and the bright Zēng Zǐ illuminating them: “The Way of the Master is zhōng and shù, and that is all!” 夫子之道，忠恕而已。 Translators often assume that the disciples are asking about the “one,” but (1) the mysterious element here is “it/them” (zhī 之), and (2) Zēng Zǐ’s answer contains two precepts, not one. By taking zhī 之 as “them,” a reference to zhōng shù, the problem that yī (“one”) is explained with two concepts is solved, and the Confucian obscurity introduced with the interpolation is clarified.¹ These readings are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they may have grown around a central text after the death of Confucius until Zēng Zǐ consolidated his position as head of the school.

In the beginning, the text that we find today at LY 4:15 would have looked different. Confucius/s departure from the scene shows his censoring of Zēng Zǐ’s answer, and Zēng Zǐ explaining that the Way of Confucius’s teaching was not bound together by one principle, but by two, could be understood as an irony to show his dullness. Finally, when the followers of Zēng Zǐ felt the necessity to tamper with the Lún Yǔ to provide a more positive image of their master, a fragment from LY 15:3 was interpolated in the original 4:15, changing the intended meaning of the anecdote.

¹It should be pointed out that zhōng shù 忠恕 is also a hapax in the Lún Yǔ. 忠 is paired with xìn 信 eight times, but only once (in a suspicious passage) with shù 恕. I suggest that the original text may have read zhōng xìn 忠信, being changed later by the followers of Zēng Zǐ. Note that wéi 唯 as an affirmative reply in LY 4:15 is also a hapax in the Lún Yǔ.

Chronology. If 4:15 was tampered with by followers of Zēng Zǐ, as Van Norden believes, this could not have happened after c0400, when Zǐ Sī 子思 took over the Confucian school, hence c0400 is the terminus ante quem. The sequence would then be: (1) An original LY without 4:15 (c0479). (2) 4:15 is added to attack Zēng Zǐ. Since he became head of the school in c0455, this is the terminus ante quem for this addition; those who made it could have been disciples who didn't believe Zēng Zǐ should lead the school. (3) After Zēng Zǐ's death in 0436, his followers modify 4:15 to make it favorable to him. This could have happened during Zēng Yuán's leadership, and before c0400, when Zǐ Sī took over. This presents a problem if LY 15:3 is dated to c0301/c0300: since LY 15 is sympathetic toward Zēng Zǐ, for example in 15:24, we can provide an alternate sequence for stages 2 and 3: (2) c0360. Following LY 11:8a ("Shǔn is dull," c0360), 4:15 is introduced to ridicule Zēng Zǐ. (3) Following 15:24 (c0300), sympathizers with Zēng Zǐ's theory of "empathy" also modify 4:15.

Comment

E Bruce and A Taeko Brooks (2011)

It seems to us that the Van Norden "ironic" reading of LY 4:15 cannot be made to work without violating the probable rule that only the school head could add material to the school text. We suggest: (1) The LY 4 core (c0479) lacked *4:15. (2) Dzǔngdǔ became school head, and was respectfully remembered in LY 8 (c0436). (3) Dǔ-sǔ took over (c0400). His successor denigrated the 05c disciples, omitting Dzǔngdǔ from the 11:3 disciple list and plonking him in 11:18a; the old value rǔn 仁 was denied by the interpolated 9:1 (all c0360). (4) In the late 04c, perhaps due to the presence of Mencius, the school attitude toward Dzǔngdǔ became more favorable; he reappears in 12:24, in which (and in 12:1-3) the previously banished 仁 also returns to the text. (5) The principle of consistency arises (late 04c); in *15:3 (c0300) Dǔ-gǔng expounds it for the Confucian system in terms of 恕. In support, the rehabilitated Dzǔngdǔ again explains it in the entirely favorable *4:15 (c0296), where the linking idea is 忠恕.

Why 忠恕 and not 恕? We think the answer lies in César's reminder that the main 05c value was the 忠信 warrior code, a personalistic loyalty and fidelity to the ruler. The 04c social transformation replaced this with upward loyalty to the state and lateral concern for others (see 12:5 四海之内皆兄弟, c0326). In that context, we see 忠恕 as capturing what is new about the new society. It seem to us not stupid, but profound.

As for answering one thing with two, is Jesus's two-part answer to the lawyer's query about the greatest commandment in Mk 28:29f, with its grammatical plural ("There is no other commandment greater than *these*"), meant to display Jesus as a philosophically incompetent fool? We somehow doubt it.

Works Cited

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