TIMOTHY CONNOLLY

INTRODUCTION: TEACHERS, FRIENDS, AND TRUTH

Along with two other volumes of the 40th anniversary Festschrift, this special issue of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* is dedicated to the work of senior scholars in the field of Chinese philosophy. There is a long tradition in China of honoring one's teachers. As the Confucian Classic *Liji* 《禮記》 (Book of Rites) says, "As far as the way of learning is concerned, respecting teachers is the most difficult thing to do. When teachers are respected, knowledge will be respected; when knowledge is respected, people will know that learning should be respected."¹

In the Western philosophical tradition, regard for truth in the abstract has often been given the exalted position in philosophical inquiry. Most students of philosophy become familiar early on in their studies with Aristotle's reference to Plato in the *Nicomachean Ethics*:

We had perhaps better consider the universal good and run through the puzzles concerning what is meant by it, even though this sort of investigation is unwelcome to us, because those who introduced the Forms are friends of ours. Yet presumably it would be the better course to destroy even what is close to us, as something necessary for preserving the truth—and all the more so, given that we are philosophers. For although we love them both, piety bids us to honor the truth before our friends.²

Dedication to truth over friends follows from the very nature of philosophy itself. True to his word, Aristotle follows with a number of arguments aimed at obliterating Plato's most characteristic theory.

Aristotle's injunction later becomes a well-known motto: "*Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas*" ("Friend of Plato, but greater friend of the truth"). Many prominent figures in the Western tradition, including Cervantes, Luther, and Newton, have invoked the phrase in their writings. Nietzsche titled his lectures on Greek philosophy at the University of Basel "*Plato Amicus sed.*" The logician Alfred Tarski cleverly changed the line to "*Inimicus Plato, sed magis inimical falsitas*" ("Enemy of Plato, but greater enemy of falsehood"). And in

TIMOTHY CONNOLLY, Associate Professor, Philosophy and Religious Studies Department, East Stroudsburg University. Specialties: ancient Greek philosophy, classical Chinese philosophy. E-mail: tconnolly@po-box.esu.edu

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a curious inversion of the original, when Heidegger dedicated *Being and Time* to Husserl, the latter, feeling that his pupil had misunderstood elements of his phenomenology, wrote the Latin phrase on his copy of the work (Heidegger later removed the dedication).

The temptation is to contrast Aristotle's attitude toward Plato with that of Confucius's students toward their teacher. The last three passages of Book 19 of the *Analects* set the tone for later tradition in proclaiming the vastly superior quality of the Master: he is like a residence with walls that no one can see over and a gate few can enter; as unreachable as the sun and moon; incapable of being equaled by his students or anyone else. These passages are at odds with the humble way in which Confucius presents himself to his students earlier in the text.

However, the division between Western and Chinese attitudes toward teachers is not as stark as it may first appear. There is no saying in the Chinese philosophical tradition that tells us to destroy the truth in following our teachers. On the contrary, the veneration of Confucius by generations of students is balanced out by his own teachings. "When it comes to being *ren*," he says, "defer to no one, not even your teacher."³ As the commentator Zhang Ping notes, however, this does not mean that Confucius's followers face an all-or-nothing choice between being *ren* and following their teacher: "Acting in this way does not mean that one is not fond of showing deference, it just means that the Way is something with regard to which one does not defer."⁴

Aristotle's attitude toward Plato is also complicated by some additional considerations. Aristotle's method does not consist in the *elenchic* refutation of his philosophical interlocutors. Rather, he begins by setting forth the "reputable opinions" (*eudoxa*) regarding some issue, including both those of the majority of men and those of the wise; considering what difficulties arise from these opinions; and then preserving the truth that is contained in them.⁵

Among the wise, Plato holds the highest position in Aristotle's writings. In most of his works Aristotle deeply engages with questions first explored by his friend and teacher. To name just a few examples within the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle's function argument draws on material from Book I of the *Republic*; his account of *akrasia* in Book VII is strongly influenced by a view that Plato attributes to Socrates in the *Protagoras*; his discussion of friendship in Books VIII and IX follows on questions first raised in Plato's *Lysis*.⁶

As it happens, the passage about honoring truth above one's friends is itself adopted from earlier statements in Plato. As Socrates tells his interlocutors in the *Phaedo*, "If you take my advice, you will give but little thought to Socrates but much more to the truth. If you

think that what I say is true, agree with me; if not, oppose it with every argument and take care that in my eagerness I do not deceive myself and you. . . .”⁷ At the outset of his examination of poetry in *Republic* Book X, Socrates expresses his reluctance to criticize Homer, given that he has loved and respected the latter since he was a child. Nonetheless, he continues, “no one is to be honored or valued more than the truth.”⁸

Thus, as perceptive commentators have noted, Aristotle is referencing Plato himself in the statement about honoring truth above those who introduced the theory of Forms. What Plato expresses about Socrates’s relationship to Homer, Aristotle expresses in relation to Plato. His commitment to truth over friends is inspired by the very friend he is about to criticize.⁹ If the content of Aristotle’s views differs from the content of Plato’s, it is only because he shares the same commitment to truth that his teacher does.

Confucius and his students are committed to the goal of moral cultivation rather than the pursuit of truth in the abstract. One of the most revealing passages of the student–teacher relationship in the Confucian tradition is *Analects* 5: 26, where Confucius asks two of his students to express their aspirations. Each expresses his desire to improve his character in one important respect. When they are finished, Confucius expresses his own: “To bring comfort to the aged, to inspire trust in my friends, and be cherished by the youth.” The passage reminds us that our teachers are like us in one way, and not like us in another. We resemble our teacher insofar as we share the same commitment with him or her. Yet a teacher is someone whose way of articulating this commitment, and devoting himself or herself to its pursuit, inspires us with awe.

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When human beings are born they are ignorant. They remain fools if they do not have teachers and friends. The Way and justice are possessed through the help of teachers and friends and are then honored and respected. Is their significance not also important? Is their accumulation not also a joy?¹⁰

EAST STROUDSBURG UNIVERSITY
East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania

ENDNOTES

1. The translation is taken from Xinyan Jiang, "The Concept of the Relational Self and Its Implications for Education," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 33, no. 4 (2006): 543–55.
2. 1096a: 11–16. Translation from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
3. *Analects* 15: 36. All translations from this text are from *Confucius: Analects, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003). Though Slingerland translates *ren* as "Good" in this passage, I prefer leaving it untranslated.
4. Quoted in Slingerland, *Confucius: Analects: with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 188.
5. For discussion, see Jiyuan Yu and Nicholas Bunnin, "Saving the Phenomena: An Aristotelian Method in Comparative Philosophy," in *Two Roads to Wisdom? Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions*, ed. Bo Mou (Chicago: Open Court, 2001).
6. For a number of other prominent examples, see *Plato and Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Robert Heinaman (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003).
7. 91: c. All quotations from Plato are taken from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
8. 595: b–c.
9. For this view, see Leonardo Tarán, "*Amicus Plato Sed Magis Amica Veritas*," in *Collected Papers (1962–1999)* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 9.
10. This quote, with very slight modification, is taken from Zhang Dainian, *Key Concepts in Chinese Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Edmund Ryden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 356.