

2.9 (Part 1) Rectifying names 正名 zhèng míng

The central claim of the interpretative argument of the Confucian bureaucrats is that **when you put things into language, especially public language form, you invite dispute**. *The Analects of Confucius* 13:3, deals explicitly with this problem of language – which, it reflects, turns out to be a problem for **rituals** too (see part 2).

Concerns about this passage: Does it reflect Confucius's thinking? It is one of the later passages in the *Analects*, and these, as we said before, may have been added later in time. Also, in this passage Confucius seems puzzlingly accepting of punishment. Yet we can doubt that the passage can be used to support the bureaucratic argument against punishment since it first poses the same problem for ritual. However, we can leave these questions aside for now; what's important for our purposes is that the passage contains a recognition of a possible **interpretive** problem with ritual-based ethical systems.

The context

子路曰：「衛君待子而為政，子將奚先？」

A student challenges Confucius, “Suppose the Wei ruler entrusted you with governing. What would you do first?”

子曰：「必也正名乎！」

Confucius: “Of course, I would rectify names.”

子路曰：「有是哉，子之迂也！奚其正？」

Student: “Can this be the choice? You're exaggerating! Why that kind of rectifying?”

Then Confucius proceeds to give the following argument. (Note its very logical structure.)

名不正，則言不順

míng bùzhèng, zé yán bùshùn

If names are not correct, language will not flow.

(If we don't use words correctly and call things by the right names, then we won't be able to communicate, make sense of each other.)

言不順，則事不成

yán bùshùn, zé shì bùchéng

If language does not flow, then social affairs won't get done.

(If we can't communicate, then social affairs <事 shì, things that depend on social practices> cannot take place.)

事不成，則禮樂不興

shì bùchéng, zé lǐ yuè bù xīng

If social affairs don't get done, then ritual and music cannot flourish.

(Ritual and music are both human social affairs, so if social affairs don't get done, then obviously ritual and music won't flourish.)

禮樂不興，則刑罰不中

lǐ yuè bù xīng, zé xíng fá bù zhòng

If ritual and music do not flourish, punishment will not be on target.

(This step is rather strange, harder to make sense of than the others. Targeted punishment might depend right names and social affairs, but how connected to ritual or music? We'll leave this question open)

刑罰不中，則民無所措手足

xíng fá bù zhòng, zé mín wú suǒ cuò shǒuzú

If punishments are not on target, then people will not know how to move hand or foot.

(Without the proper administration of punishment, people will not know how to behave rightly. This conclusion seems un-Confucian. That should follow from the failure of ritual and music)

These premises combine to form an argument for the **doctrine of 正名 zhèng míng**, which is that:

Without the proper guidance of language (i.e., without rectifying names, the words on the path sign), all normative structures guiding people's behavior will lead them off course.

In the next lecture, 2.9part2, we'll take a look at how this is a problem not just for language and the publication of penal codes, but for the interpretation of **rituals** and social codes in general.