

## 2.9 (Part 2) Rectifying names 正名 zhèng míng

The doctrine of 正名 zhèng míng (rectifying names) – the doctrine that proper use of language is necessary for normative guidance – applies not only to published penal codes, but to **rituals and social guidance in general**. (Recall that 禮 lǐ (ritual) can be understood in Confucius to stand for social conventions in general.) Confucius makes it clear that we can think of 禮 lǐ (ritual) as as a kind of code-like thing. There is a sense in which when you perform a ritual or live up to some social expectation, you are “reading” a guide, you are “reading” a dào (道), and then you are **executing** it. And what you actually **do** (your performance) will depend on *how* you read the language, the ritual, or the social code.

### Confucius's example of Upright Gong



葉公語孔子曰：「吾黨有直躬者，其父攘羊，而子證之。」

孔子曰：「吾黨之直者異於是。父為子隱，子為父隱，直在其中矣。」

(Analects 13:18)

Duke Ye told Confucius, “Among my people there is one Upright Gong, whose father stole a sheep, and his son reported him to the authorities.”

*Confucius does not approve, but his response here is not: “That’s a horrible, immoral thing to do!”*

Instead, his response is: “Among *my* people, the upright are different from this. The father protects the son, the son protects the father. Uprightness lies in that.”

Confucius sees the issue here as one about **language**. What you do (you report or you don’t report your father) depends on how you use the word “upright”.

### Example from Western society: abortion

We can apply this idea to the Western moral dispute about abortion. Rather than saying that the pro-life and the pro-choice side each have different **values**, we can understand the dispute as a **rectification of names question**.

We can say: everyone has the same value: “**Killing an innocent person is wrong.**” The disagreement comes in at the level of **language**. The pro-life people believe that the fetus counts as an “innocent person”. The pro-choice people believe that the fetus is not yet a person. So it’s a **naming** problem: is the fetus an “innocent person” or a “not-yet person”?



### What’s the solution?

Of course, this doesn’t make the dispute any easier to resolve. How do we decide what is the right way to name the fetus? How are we going to resolve this disagreement? We have different conceptions of how to use words. And Confucius’s answer, at the end of the rectification of names passage, is not very satisfying, either. He doesn’t give us a theory about words and how to use them. We see no hint of the Western solution: definitions. He just says, “The sage simply will not go awry with his language.”

君子於其言，無所苟而已矣。

Jūnzǐ yú qí yán, wú suǒ gǒu éryǐ yǐ.

But there is another concept in Confucius that may provide us with a solution to the problem. It’s a solution that people often use, even in debates like the debate about abortion. And that solution is to appeal to our **intuitions** about behavior. We’ll go on to discuss this in these last two lectures on Confucius.