

The Fisherman Fallacy

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Modern readers often prefer, in antiquity, what is nearest their own time: what in antiquity is *least antique*. In a composite text, posterity will often like the later parts, those where the text has reconfigured itself precisely so as to appeal to later readers.¹ This danger, this snare of affection for the modern reader, I call the Fisherman Fallacy.

Jwāngdǔ 31 漁父

This chapter, “The Fisherman,” consists of a single and beautiful story, in which “Confucius” treats with reverence a sage hermit who seems to reject everything that Confucius has always stood for. In contrast to the terse style of the earlier Jwāngdǔ, this piece builds slowly, gathering atmosphere as it goes by echoing the Analects – especially those Analects passages which are closest to Dàuist thought:

Confucius had been wandering in the Black Curtain forest, and sat down to rest atop Apricot Altar.² His disciples were reading their books; Confucius was singing to the string, thrumming his cithern. The song was not yet half done when a fisherman got out of his boat and approached. His beard and eyebrows were white; his hair hung loose and his sleeves waved. He climbed up the shore and stopped when he reached level ground. His left hand rested on his knee, his right hand cradled his chin; thus he listened. When the song was finished, he beckoned to Dǔ-gùng and Dǔ-lù.³ The two came over. The stranger indicated Confucius, and said, Who is that?⁴ Dǔ-lù replied, He is a gentleman of Lǔ. The stranger asked his ancestry. Dǔ-lù replied, He is of the Kǔng clan. The stranger said, What do the Kǔngs do?⁵ Dǔ-lù made no answer, but Dǔ-gùng replied, As for the Kǔngs: within, they embody loyalty and fidelity;⁶ without, they practice benevolence and righteousness;⁷ they adorn with rites and music, and select from human relationships; above, they relate loyally to the rulers of the age; below, they bring transformation to the lower populace. They offer benefit to the whole world. *This* is what the Kǔngs do.

Surely there could be no more high-minded answer; no more complete defense.

¹For this common and important phenomenon, see Brooks **Reader**.

²The site of the atypically Dàuist, and atypically long, LY 11:24.

³The same two disciples who failed to answer the questions of two hermits in LY 18:5.

⁴彼何爲者 inquires not about identity but about social role; hence the reply.

⁵何治也 “What do they have charge of?” Notice the extremely slow tempo of this piece. Notice that it is not so much against Confucius as against the whole “Kǔng” enterprise.

⁶The essence of the early Confucian aristocratic warrior code; see LY 9:25, 1:8.

⁷The signature phrase of the later ethicized Confucianism of Mencius; see MC 1A1.

The visitor then proceeds to disassemble that defense in two quick strokes:

He asked, Are they rulers with territory? Dž-gùng answered, No. He asked, Are they assistants to some Lord or King? Dž-gùng answered, No. The stranger smiled and turned to go, saying, Benevolent; yes, benevolent; but I fear he will not escape with a whole skin. He toils his frame and endangers his true self. Alas! So far removed is he from the Way.

Dž-gùng returned and reported to Confucius. Confucius put aside his cithern and rose, saying, Is this not a sage? And seeking after him, he came to the water's edge, where the fisherman was just about to take up his pole and steer his boat . . .

And the story goes on, drawing on several Jwāngdž stories in which Confucius admits the superior wisdom of his Dàuist opposite.⁸ The fisherman shows that, without an official position, mere ritual and relational excellence has no meaning. Confucius confesses bafflement at his failures,⁹ and is shown that activity is not the way to cure the failures of activity. The fisherman's secret is sincerity (誠), the key term of the 03c Jūng Yūng – the inner element which attends all right efforts, gaining results which Confucians labor to produce from outside. This is no Dàuist refutation of Confucius; it is instead a refutation of activist 04c Confucianism by mystical 02c Confucianism, a view popular in the early Empire. And in later ages, including our own.

The story announces its own moral, in JZ 31:7, 同類相從，同聲相應 “Like kinds flock together, like sounds resonate.”

Matthew 5-7

The Sermon on the Mount is held in great esteem both inside¹⁰ and outside¹¹ the Christian persuasion. It includes the Beatitudes, the Golden Rule, the Lord's Prayer. Its quick ascent to acceptance has been documented in the survey of Massaux. But its elements can easily be traced to earlier sources, mostly in Luke. The First Beatitude is often viewed as more primitive in its rugged Lukan form (“Blessed are the poor”) than in Matthew's attenuated version (“Blessed are the poor *in spirit*”). The Golden Rule is better situated in its context in Luke, which is thus presumptively original.¹² The Lord's Prayer is thought by many to be formally earlier in its Lukan version.¹³

All this suggests that the more popular Sermon *is also the more modern Sermon*.

⁸Such as JZ 14:5-7, where the Dàuist opposite is no less than Lǎu Dān himself.

⁹Compare JZ 20:6, from which the Fisherman author has borrowed several phrases.

¹⁰Note the glancing, but shattering, reference by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes at the end of his dissent in the matter of *Rosika Schwimmer*, 279 US 644, 653 (Lief **Dissenting** 57).

¹¹The final judgement of the Jewish commentator C G Montefiore, after registering doubts about the originality of the Sermon as a statement by Jesus, concludes, “It remains for all time a religious document of great nobility, significance, and power” (**Synoptic** 1/127).

¹²Montefiore **Synoptic** 1/119, “This maxim (the so-called Golden Rule) seems in a good connection in Luke.”

¹³Montefiore **Synoptic** 1/472; Kilpatrick **Origins** 21, notwithstanding Betz **Sermon** 372.

Attempts have been made to reverse that judgement. The Lukan Sermon on the Plain, evidently the base on which Matthew constructed his own Sermon, has been said to be later, even by commentators who compare the two Sermons side by side.¹⁴ Such has been the rescue effort, which however fails against the directional evidence for the secondary of Matthew in this area.

Phalaris

Better than a late addition to an early work is a late addition to nothing at all. Phalaris, an 6c tyrant of Sicily, was known to Pindar (05c) as liking to roast people alive in a bronze bull. Plutarch (2c), coming later and being more generously disposed, thought Phalaris just though severe. Someone, perhaps Adrianus of Tyre (died 192) composed 148 Phalaris Epistles, representing him as an ideal lawgiver. This was an age in search of ancient lawgivers to venerate, and these letters steadily rose in the esteem of posterity. Sir William Temple praised them in his *Essays on Ancient and Modern Learning* (1690). Charles Boyle published an edition of Phalaris in 1695.

Enter young Richard Bentley (1662-1742),



who in his *Dissertation on Phalaris* (1697) showed that the letters were spurious. And how was this shown? Bentley noted that the letters contained such anachronisms as mention of towns which did not exist in the time of Phalaris, and quotations from Greek poets who did not exist in the time of Phalaris. Boyle replied in 1698, in defense of his creation. Bentley issued a second edition of the *Dissertation* in 1699, which demolished the Epistles and ended the matter in the judgement of learned persons. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff calls the *Dissertation* “immortal.” It did much to usher in the modern period of critical scholarship. Bentley, representing the humanities, was a worthy younger contemporary of Newton (1643-1727).

¹⁴Betz **Sermon** 1-2 views the Lukan Sermon as “Greek rather than Jewish.” On p572 he describes the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount as written “in terms of Jewish morality” (and thus presumptively earlier) and those of the Sermon on the Plain as relating to “Hellenistic literature elsewhere” (and thus presumptively later). This is a hermeneutic of desperation.

The Iliad

The Iliad is the result of a formation process, in which celebrations of military prowess were transmuted into a hymn to peace and reconciliation.¹⁵ Walter Leaf, in outlining his own view of this process,¹⁶ has a warning for those of us who think that later authors must necessarily be inferior to the earlier ones. That does not prove out. “In fact, among the parts of the Iliad which are always recognized as the latest, we find as a rule most of the passages of noble pathos which sink deepest into our hearts.”

Exactly.

Conclusion

We like, in antiquity, what in antiquity *is near to us*. The rule for those who would read a text historically is: ignore your feelings. This is hard advice; sagehood is not easily won. But having won it, we are not seduced by the charm of the “love” treatise, 1 Corinthians 13;¹⁷ or the pathos of the Woman Taken in Adultery, John 7:53-8:11.¹⁸ We are not perplexed that, when Shǐ Jì 63 lists the parts of the Jwāngdǔ which it regards as being by the historical Jwāng Jōu, it entirely ignores the brief and craggy Inner Chapters (JZ 1-7) and names instead several higher-numbered longer chapters, *beginning with the Fisherman*. Not so surprisingly, it was the Hàn-period “Fisherman” that spoke most directly to the Hàn-period authors of the Shǐ Jì.

That is what it was put there for. Thus did Hàn enthusiasts add to their “Jwāngdǔ,” making it ever more their own.

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¹⁵Brooks **Reader** 10.

¹⁶Not always rightly, in my view, but he has the general picture. Leaf **Companion** 23-28.

¹⁷See Walker **Interpolations** 147-165 for a thorough argument in favor of interpolation.

¹⁸See Metzger **Commentary** ad loc. The most decisive evidence against the Tale is the fact that it has been inserted *at more than one place* in John, and in one manuscript, even in Luke.