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A cross-cultural archery analogy in Matteo Ricci's *Tianzhu shiyi*

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Abstract

In the sixth chapter of his *Tianzhu shiyi* (天主實義, “The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven”), Matteo Ricci offers a critique of the anti-intentionalistic thread that he detects in the Chinese philosophical tradition. In this brief essay, I offer an analysis of a noteworthy archery analogy that Ricci employs to describe the nature of ethical action as an intentional process with a conscious aim. I trace how Ricci skilfully combines Western and Chinese images and categories to craft this simile. Before that, I set the stage by offering some preliminary comments that contextualize Ricci’s interest in the question of intentional vs. non-intentional conduct.

Keywords: Matteo Ricci; Archery; Intention; Analogy; Chinese philosophy; Jesuits in China

In the sixth chapter of Matteo Ricci’s *Tianzhu shiyi* (天主實義, “The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven”), first published in 1603, we find a fascinating discussion of the proper place and nature of motives or intentions in ethical action.¹ A significant portion of this chapter concerns the appropriateness of acting morally out of a desire to enter heaven and avoid hell. But before arguing what kinds of intentions are appropriate, the Jesuit must first defend the position that intentionality *tout court* is an essential component of ethical action. The chapter as a whole is among the more philosophically interesting parts of the work, and the specific arguments that Ricci musters deserve close scrutiny. While the chapter has received due attention from scholars,² I will for the present limit my attention to the earlier arguments critiquing what he deems to be an anti-intentionalistic thread in the Chinese philosophical tradition. More can be said on this aspect of Ricci’s text than has been already, especially when it comes to clarifying the precise manner in which Ricci frames his arguments and how they relate to his various source materials, Western and Chinese. In this essay, I would like to offer a detailed analysis of a noteworthy analogy that Ricci employs to describe the nature of ethical action as an intentional process with a conscious aim. Before that, I will set the stage by offering some preliminary discussions that contextualize Ricci’s interest in the question of intentional vs. non-intentional conduct.

At the end of chapter 1 (esp. §58–62) of the *Tianzhu shiyi*, Ricci lists certain qualities of God that can be known. Ricci is here imitating the list of divine qualities provided by his

¹ I follow the text and paragraph numbering system of Ricci (2016): throughout, the symbol § is used to mark the paragraphs in the *Tianzhu shiyi*. I have often generously adapted the translations available in the bilingual edition. See also Ricci 2013; 2014.

² See recently Ferrero (2019) for a summary and holistic analysis of the issues involved in this chapter.

co-missionary Michele Ruggieri in the second chapter of his own *Tianzhu shilu* (天主實錄, “The True Record of the Lord of Heaven”), published in 1584. The text, both briefer and less conceptually adept than Ricci’s own,³ nonetheless provided the basis for many of Ricci’s own discussions. In both, we find a warning against overconfidence in the human ability to know God – using the same famous anecdote of Augustine walking by the seashore⁴ – followed, however, by a list of divine attributes, all selected from Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*, that can nevertheless be asserted. Ruggieri lists seven qualities beginning with perfection (天主之德甚是圓滿: “the virtue of the Lord of Heaven is fully perfect”), i.e. *perfectio* (ST I, q. 4, a. 1).⁵ Many of these find direct correspondences in Ricci’s text. For example, in §62 we find reference to the Lord of Heaven’s 滿圓 “completeness”. Or when Ricci, referring to the Lord of Heaven, says 其善純備無滓 “his goodness is perfect and without defilement” (§61), he picks up from, while verbally adapting, Ruggieri’s second quality (甚嘉), itself reflecting *bonitas* (ST I, q. 6, a. 1). While Ricci does not, for instance, explicitly bring up at this point God’s justice manifested in his dispensing of punishments and rewards, which is mentioned by Ruggieri as the fifth quality, this is only because he has numerous other opportunities to do so. But especially noticeable is how Ricci receives Ruggieri’s final quality. Ruggieri had written: 天主無為而成 “the Lord of Heaven engages in non-action (*wuwei*) and so accomplishes things”.⁶ The phrase 無為而成, here applied to the Lord of Heaven, is taken from *Zhongyong* 26, where it qualifies the person with sincerity.⁷ As is made clear by what follows,⁸ Ruggieri uses the language of *wuwei* to express the fluent effortlessness of and omnipotence entailed in God’s creative activity. Ricci, however, writes more plainly concerning the indefatigability of God’s power (能), which can create out of nothing. This rephrasing is not itself so remarkable, as we have just seen such stylistic changes at work above, but further reason for consideration is provided when we consider that in chapter 7, when arguing that the Lord of Heaven does not require deputies (such as the Buddha) to help him rule the world, Ricci states (§493): 無外為而成 “he can complete any task without any external action”. Ricci presumably had Ruggieri’s expression in mind, but deliberately included 外 in 無外為. This is to be explained as follows: while Ruggieri understood that *wuwei* was often used in contexts to express completely natural ease, he did not reflect on the difficult questions that this raised in terms of divine intentionality or lack thereof. Ricci understood the problem, as made clear by his criticisms of the notion in chapter 6 (to be discussed presently), and thus made sure tacitly to forestall any in his view problematic and negative associations of *wuwei* being ascribed to the deity. In so doing, Ricci also makes sure to restore purposive intentionality to its rightful, unassailable place at the heart of God’s nature.⁹

³ Ruggieri’s text has recently been the subject of several informative articles by Daniel Canaris: see Canaris 2019; 2020; 2021. Additionally, Canaris has prepared an edition of the Chinese text along with the original Latin version, *Vera et Brevis Divinarum Rerum Expositio*, to be dated to 1582 (see Canaris 2023). The text of the *Tianzhu shilu* was subsequently revised and published under the fuller title *Tianzhu shengjiao shilu* sometime around 1640. On the reasons for this new edition, see Wang 2022.

⁴ In the story, Augustine, talking a stroll on the beach, encounters a boy (in fact, an angel) attempting to empty the sea with a leaky bowl and upon ridiculing him is then met with the rebuttal that his attempts to fully understand God are even more foolhardy.

⁵ I cite from Zhou 2013: 10. All translations of Ruggieri are mine.

⁶ Zhou 2013: 11.

⁷ Noted by Canaris (2023: 99).

⁸ 苟有作為，亦只成於須臾之間耳。“If there is an act of creation, for his part he would only accomplish it within the interval of a moment”. Also, the corresponding Latin original has *Adiunge etiam ... admirandam Dei potentiam, qui quidquid vult ad nutum potest facere* (“Add also ... the admirable power of God, who is able to do whatever He desires at will”). On God’s *potentia*, see ST I, q. 25, a. 1.

⁹ Even if the article makes certain interpretative judgements and polarizing dichotomies with which not everyone may agree, Ziporyn (2014) offers interesting reflections on the importance of a purposive deity to

If this allows us to appreciate in part the level of interest that Ricci held towards this question, we can turn to analysing his arguments in more detail. In chapter 6, Ricci deals with the question not of divine but rather of human intentionality. This portion of the text goes back to discussions that Ricci held with the Neo-Confucian Zhang Huang (1527–1608) in Nanchang in the mid-1590s.¹⁰ The chapter opens with the Chinese scholar claiming (§321) that we should not seek profit (利 *li*) from good conduct, obviously echoing *Mengzi* 1A1, but instead do good – and here is his addition – 無意 *wuyi*, which from the context would seem simply to mean “without any ulterior motive”, but which Ricci takes to mean “without any motive/intention whatsoever”.¹¹ Without intentions – so the counterargument goes – we are no different from earth, stones or vegetation, and there can be no good or evil, reward or punishment (§326, 329).¹² Ricci then very quickly singles out the Daoist concept of *wuwei* represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi as destroying the very basis of ethical reasoning and action, and furthermore argues that their position entails a performative contradiction to the degree that their own advocacies for non-action (勿為), non-intending (勿意) and non-disputing (勿辯) consist of active attempts to persuade others in order to transform the world (§327). One is reminded of Bai Juyi’s famous short poem wondering how Laozi could write down the *Daodejing* if, according to himself, the one who speaks proves his ignorance (cf. *Daodejing* 56), where a similar issue of performative contradiction is raised, albeit in a gentler manner. Ricci also picks up material from the *Zhuangzi*, especially the *Qiwulun* chapter in which the sage is said not to dispute: 聖人懷之, 眾人辯之以相示也 ... 言辯而不及 “The sage embraces things. Ordinary men discriminate among them and parade their discriminations before others ... If discriminations are put into words, they do not suffice.”¹³ The response from Ricci would presumably be that this rejection of 辯 itself entails the distinguishing activity (e.g. between 聖人 and 眾人, 懷 and 辯) that is the hallmark of 辯, and so that disputation between alternatives cannot in principle be avoided. While Ricci’s argument in the present form is too brief to do full justice to the complexities of this question, which still occupies scholarly attention – and in the present essay, I will not attempt a more substantial answer – we can nonetheless admire the sensitivity to this foundational philosophical issue that he demonstrates.

In the next step, Ricci lays out in positive terms his own understanding of the nature of ethical action, comparing it to archery (§328): 吾觀世人為事, 如射焉, 中的則謂善, 不中則為惡。 (“In my view, when people do things, they are like archers. If they hit the

the Western tradition in contrast to most Chinese traditions. At least on this specific point, we can see Ricci’s instincts aligning strongly against those aspects of Chinese philosophical thought that would in the current context subvert the Christian theistic paradigm emphasizing teleology and divine planning.

¹⁰ See Hsia (2010: 158–9) and Ricci (2013: xxiv–xxvii).

¹¹ This is also how Ricci reads Confucius’ injunction 毋意 in *Lunyu* 9.4. See §325–6. Ricci has hit upon a sensitive point, even if he has not brought to bear the most relevant source texts. While passages like *Mengzi* 1A1 (cf. also e.g. *Mengzi* 5A7) would rather suggest an ideal of intentionally seeking and cultivating virtue for its own sake (cf. also the Chinese scholar’s clarification in §341), one can find indications that there is a stage even beyond this where intention would indeed appear to play a diminished role. I think especially of the depiction of the sage-king Shun in *Mengzi* 4B19: 由仁義行, 非行仁義也。 “Humaneness and rightness were the source of his actions; he did not just perform acts of humaneness and rightness”, the point being that these virtues were so natural to Shun that he no longer needed actively to reflect on them in order to carry them out. For the *Mengzi*, I follow the translation of Bloom (2009).

¹² For a more contemporary attempt to deal with the relationship between *wuwei* and intention, consult Slingerland (2000: 300): “For a person in *wu-wei*, proper conduct follows as instantly and spontaneously as the nose responds to a bad smell ... *Wu-wei* actions are not, however, automatic, unconscious, or purely physiological ... Unlike instinctual or merely habitual forms of action, *wu-wei* calls for a high degree of concentration on the part of the agent and allows for a considerable amount of flexibility of response”.

¹³ I cite the translation of Watson (2003: 39–40).

mark they are said to be good, whereas if they miss it they do evil”). After continuing by saying that the Lord of Heaven (天主) naturally hits the mark and is therefore perfectly good, Ricci states that with humans the situation is different: 吾儕則有中，有不中矣，其所修之德有限，故德有不到，即行事有所不中，而善惡參焉。（“We, however, sometimes hit the mark, but we also sometimes fail to hit it. Because the extent to which we cultivate our virtue is limited, therefore our virtue has deficiencies, which is to say that what we do has occasions where the mark is not hit; this is why there is good and evil.”). He concludes with the remark that if it is difficult to achieve ethical conduct even when we aim for it, how much more must we be concerned when there is no intentional motivation at all. Ricci gives no explicit indication as to why the example of archery seemed suitable to him for the present argument. In providing a concrete explanation for Ricci’s choice, I will thereby also shed light on Ricci’s argumentative and rhetorical technique, as well as his stellar ability to blend materials from different cultural and linguistic spheres.

Thierry Meynard notes that the image was a common one in Neo-Confucian thought, adducing a passage from the *Zhuzi yulei*, juan 14 which concerns the opening of the *Da Xue*.¹⁴ The process of resting in the supreme good is there described in the following terms (*Da Xue* 1):¹⁵

知止而后有定，定而后能靜，靜而后能安，安而后能慮，慮而后能得。

The point where to rest being known, the object of pursuit is then determined; and, that being determined, a calm unperturbedness may be attained to. To that calmness there will succeed a tranquil repose. In that repose there may be careful deliberation, and that deliberation will be followed by the attainment of the desired end.

Asked whether there is a slight difference between 知止, the first step in this sequence, and 得止, the final one, Zhu Xi replies that there is: 知止，如射者之於的；得止，是己中其的。“Knowing where to rest is like an archer before the target mark; attaining the point where one ought to rest is for oneself to have hit one’s mark”.¹⁶

Mention should also be made of the use of archery specifically as an analogy for moral cultivation in the early classical Confucian philosophical texts, such as *Mengzi* 5B1:

智，譬則巧也；聖，譬則力也。由射於百步之外也，其至，爾力也；其中，非爾力也。

Wisdom is like skill and sageliness is like strength. It is like shooting an arrow from a distance of a hundred paces. That you reach the target is a matter of strength; that you hit the mark is not a matter of strength.

Here the passage presents the complementary virtues of 聖 *sheng* and 智 *zhi* as respectively giving one the ability to reach and then hit with precision the target. The association of archery with moral conduct is found in numerous other places, not all of which are directly relevant for Ricci: I selectively refer to *Lunyu* 3.7, 3.16, *Mengzi* 2A7, as well as the *She Yi* chapter from the *Liji*.¹⁷ This is unsurprising considering that archery constituted one of the traditional Six Arts which the gentleman during the Zhou period was expected to learn. But many of these passages do not explicitly use the language of a

¹⁴ See Ricci 2014: 161.

¹⁵ I follow the translation of Legge (1893: 356–7).

¹⁶ See Zhu 2002: 454. Translation mine.

¹⁷ See further the passages discussed in Raphals 2022: 15–19.

simile but merely describe the performance of archery as the place where one's virtue is manifested; or, as in the case of *Mengzi* 2A7 (cf. also *Zhongyong* 15 and *She Yi* 11), the comparison is between the person endowed with 仁 *ren* and the archer who does not resent being outdone by others but looks into himself for improvement. Here the analogy does not emphasize so much the physical act of drawing the bow and hitting or failing to hit the target. Rather, it is primarily the moral disposition and noble demeanour of the archer that provides the basis for the analogy with *ren*. Thus, while passages like these form the essential background to understanding the metaphors discussed above in the main text, they serve as less exact comparanda to the specific form of the analogy as employed by Ricci. But what we can say is that Ricci, the sensitive missionary that he was, evidently chose the simile of the archer because he knew it would resonate with his Chinese readership. His association of failing to hit the mark with a deficiency in fully cultivating the virtues directly builds on passages like the ones just discussed, where the process of shooting the bow and hitting the mark is used as the vehicle of the simile to describe the process of building up a series of virtues or proceeding through the stages in spiritual/moral cultivation. This is strategically included to suggest the nature of the ethical life as something requiring graduated steps of concentrated intentional progress and growth, drawing from the Chinese tradition itself to conjure a picture of the ethical life that he believes contradicts any hint of non-intention and non-action which he associates with *wuwei*.

There is one detail, however, that suggests that Ricci was drawing on more than simply Chinese philosophical literature. The comment 中的則謂善，不中則為惡 “if they hit the mark they are said to be good, whereas if they miss it they do evil” is expressed with a baldness that goes further than merely associating missing the mark with not possessing the full range of virtues. As Meynard notes, Ricci's argument in the paragraph expresses the dominant Catholic position that evil does not have an autonomous existence but exists in virtue of a defective good.¹⁸ Compare Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I^a-IIae q. 18, a. 1, ad. 1: *Ad primum ergo dicendum quod malum agit in virtute boni deficientis. Si enim nihil esset ibi de bono, neque esset ens, neque agere posset. Si autem non esset deficientis, non esset malum. Unde et actio causata est quoddam bonum deficientis, quod secundum quid est bonum, simpliciter autem malum.* (“In the first place it must be said that evil acts in virtue of a deficient good. For if nothing were there of good, neither would there be being nor would it be possible to act. But if it were not deficient, there would not be evil. Wherefore, the action that is caused is a certain deficient good, which in a certain respect is good, but simply evil.”).¹⁹ If Ricci interprets missing the mark on the one hand as the result of unperfected virtue, and on the other hand as signifying evil full stop, this corresponds to the notion of the “deficient good” which is good in one respect but is simply (*simpliciter*) evil. A further observation should be made. The association of missing the mark with evil is not simply an association imposed onto the archery analogy for external theological considerations, but is one integral to a particular cultural iteration of the literary analogy that he has chosen.

The unqualified equation of missing the mark with performing evil has a very natural explanation when we remember that Ricci's remarkable linguistic competencies included Greek, which he studied as a youth and later taught to gifted pupils during his time of theological studies at St. Paul's College in Goa.²⁰ The Greek verb ἀμαρτάνειν, “to sin/do wrong”, more literally means “to miss the mark”, especially in the context of archery or spear-throwing. It is relevant to add that the range of the Greek includes both the

¹⁸ See Ricci (2016: 237), with reference to *ST* I^a-IIae q. 18, a. 5. Ricci brings up the point more explicitly in §431.

¹⁹ Translation mine.

²⁰ More details can be found in biographies such as Cronin (1955: 17, 30) or Fontana (2005: 12, 27).

meaning of doing wrong by carelessly committing a mistake, and the stronger sense of “to sin”, as we find for instance in the New Testament. Lying behind the phrase 不中則為惡 is therefore the fact that the Greek for 為惡 (or at any rate, one Greek word for this) has the root sense of 不中. Given the striking nature of the parallel, we can plausibly infer that Ricci’s choice to express himself in this specific way was determined by a conscious desire to bring in associations that he remembered from Greek. The result is a very pleasing and coherent combination of divergent associations with respect to the same core image. That Ricci manages to weave these aspects of the archery analogy together simultaneously both to underline the Catholic understanding of the nature of evil and argue for the nature of ethical action as an intentional striving for an aim is further confirmation of his subtle argumentative art. This particular simile could hardly have been better chosen.

The use of archery as a metaphor for moral conduct in both China and the Western (especially Greek philosophical) tradition has recently been the object of several comparative essays, for archery-inspired language employed in ethical discussions can also be found in texts such as Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.²¹ This comparative study itself participates in the wider interest in the usage of metaphors in Chinese philosophical thought.²² Although metaphorical thought is an essential component of all human thinking, the specific form that analogies take or the work that they do can be expected to differ across cultures.²³ This applies to the case of archery, which is intriguingly applied in both Chinese and Greek contexts to moral action and the aiming for virtue, even if subtle distinctions can be made in terms of what the similes are understood precisely to emphasize. If the conclusion of the present essay is correct, the complementarity of the Chinese and Greek moral applications of archery imagery had – at least in general outlines – already been perceived by Ricci, who was moved to then covertly combine associations from each tradition in his own deployment of the analogy. It may be remarked that Ricci on other occasions uses analogies for the moral life that are deliberately chosen for their resonances in both Western and Chinese contexts.²⁴ In this brief essay alone we have had several different occasions to point out Ricci’s ability to sense interesting areas of cross-cultural agreement or tension that remain alive today as objects of scrutiny and discussion. This particular instance of cultural synthesis is of course utterly characteristic of Ricci, who stands as one of the greatest pioneers in the project of understanding the relationship between Chinese and occidental thought and values.

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²¹ See especially Yu 2010, Camus 2017; 2019, and Raphals 2022.

²² Seminal in this regard was Allan (1997). I cannot mention all the further contributions here, but consult in particular Slingerland (2003, esp. pp. 21–39; 2011).

²³ See Slingerland (2017), which helpfully makes reference to a number of his earlier works. He writes (p. 435): “With regard to a complex, social practice such as archery, we would expect the specific entailments of an archery metaphor to vary cross-culturally”.

²⁴ In §363, Ricci compares the world to a dramatic performance in which each must play his or her assigned part, borrowing from Epictetus, *Enchiridion* 17. But Ricci also alludes to the *zaju* variety drama: see Yin 2022: 552–3, *pace* Hsia 2010: 234.

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