

Can Confucius's rectification of name's escape conservatism? (2500 words)

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In Analects 12, Confucius says 'The one thing needed first is the rectification of names'. By this he means to restore societal harmony and political order in a time in China which was in a moral and societal decline. But it can also be believed he got this idea the same way that Plato did. By this, there is a slight comparison between Confucius's idea and Plato's theory of the forms where things are fixed in an order for there to be order (Mozibur Ullah, '*What Did Confucius Mean By Saying That The Rectification Of Names Is The First?*' Philosophy Stock Exchange, 2019). When talking of conservatism, it is a social, cultural, and political ideology that promotes traditions, values, and preserving them. And in the context of the rectification of names, it is used as a way to preserve the traditional idea of names and roles in a social and political sense. I will attempt to explore whether or not Confucius's rectification of names can escape the idea of conservatism by also looking at the ethical aspects that can be applied.

The core reason as to why Confucius's rectification of names is often likened to conservatism in the first place is because its core goal, like conservatism, is to maintain a social order with assigned names to roles and jobs, hierarchy, and moral practises such as please and thank you, in a social sense. A supporting argument for this was made by Dr James N. Holt in his 2016 article '*The Rectification Of Names*'. In his article, he starts off by comparing the rectification of names to a conservative way of democracy with the example of an American presidential election as they vote on their candidate based on their belief of the candidate fulfilling the role of 'president' the best of those available. Later on however, he does criticise Confucius's theory as he believes that we should behave according to social situations rather than roles given (Dr. James N. Holt, '*The Rectification Of Names*' Polarizing Political Economy, 2016). This, to me, shows that the rectification of names cannot escape conservatism as it is still very relevant even in a modern era as we still use traditional ways such as democratic voting when deciding who is best fit for certain roles.

There could be an argument that Confucius's rectification of names has a demand for conforming to society and its social normative ways. One example commonly used to support this is that the rectification of names gives roles a name for the betterment of society. By this, an example is that a ruler given this role should rule as that is his role within the society, but if they can not rule or rule effectively for the people, then they should not be a ruler. I believe that this point perfectly summarises the rectification of names as it highlights the main point of matching a person's role to the person's abilities with there being an expectation that person would be able to carry out the demands of this role to the best of their abilities. This point is supported

in Analects 13.25 where the master says “the superior man is easy to serve and difficult to please. If you try to please him in any way which is not in accordance with right, he will not be pleased. But in his employment of men, he uses them to their capacity” (Translation By James Legg, *Confucius - The Analects* 13.25, 1861). To further analyse this section of Analects, to me, this shows that despite the ruler, the superior man in this case, being difficult to please, he is however best placed for this role but does not do this role with virtue and in fact shows a more conservative way of leadership in always wanting more. This shows to me that Confucius’s rectification of names doesn’t escape conservatism as there is a demand for it to conform to societies and their social ways.

But there is a question to raise from this, can we still criticize roles and the names given to them even if they’re conservative in their ways? To me, the answer is simply yes. This is because if a person in their role does not uphold the conservative way or social way of doing the role, or is not fulfilling the duty and needs of the role and what is expected of it, then they should be criticized in order to maintain the conservative ideal norm of that role. For example, if a business owner does not do what is best for their employees and company, then that is not fulfilling the needs expected from them for their role in a conservationist sense and therefore, should be criticized as their actions not only is against the role’s needs, but is also immoral as it would have a negative knock-on effect for their employees. Confucius’s argument for this in Analects 13.3 says ‘if names are not rectified, then language will not be in accord with truth. If language is not in accord with truth, then it cannot be accomplished. If things cannot be accomplished, then music and ceremonies will not flourish. If music and ceremonies do not flourish, then punishment will not be just’.

(translated by Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book In Chinese Philosophy*, Princeton University Press, 1963). From this, I believe we can gather that Confucius shows that if names are not properly aligned or followed, then language itself won’t align as words such as ruler and father, will lose their meanings, but also that things will not succeed in what they need to do, music and ceremonies will not flourish in the ways of their purposes, and giving punishments itself will not be just in itself. The quote explains that misunderstanding or misusing the names or roles given makes society unstable. For example, calling someone a teacher just because they said a piece of information is a misuse or misunderstanding of the word ‘teacher’ and contributes to making society unstable as the line of what a teacher is becomes less reliable if used in this way. A further point to note is, if someone does not do their role in a way which satisfies the needs and requirements, such as a teacher teaching people, that not only destroys the trust that others have for that person, but also begins to tarnish the conversationalist way of that role in that society until that person either does the role better or is replaced by someone who will do it better. And from that, the question raised must be whether rectifying a name destroys the meaning of the role, or if underperforming in the role is the only destroyer of the role? Therefore, I think it is fair to say here that Confucius’s rectification of names does not escape conservatism because if a person does not fulfill their duty in line with the social or

conservative way, then they should be criticised. But also that Confucius himself was a big advocate of keeping traditions as he talked of ceremonies and music and their need to flourish by not misusing their names or any other names or roles.

There is also an argument that Confucius's rectification of names can not escape conservatism as there is still a strong use of it in modern governance. Like previously mentioned, Dr James Holt highlights how modern democracies such as presidential elections and parliamentary elections are conservative in their ways as they seek to fit the best candidate to the role, I would go a step further to say that using the rectification of names is possibly the strongest root cause to use as a way of governance. A reason for this is because I believe that using the rectification of names allows an encouragement for rulers and leaders to actually fulfill their rules which is to lead. This would increase public trust if governed correctly, and more importantly, either give or maintain political and social stability as people would be more likely to respect and support a leader who behaves according to the social expectations of their role. To support this, it says in Analects 12.11 'let the ruler be a ruler, the minister a minister, the father a father, and the son a son' (translations by Edward Slingerland and Burton Watson, *Analects 12.11 - The Confucian Pages*, No Publication Date). This supports my argument as leaving the rulers to govern and not take on other roles would boost their efficiency and therefore also increasing trust within the public for the ruler. A further point is that it would also leave leaders more responsible for their actions and behaviours. The benefit of this in governance is rulers will fulfill their roles properly which would create a better society to live in and as a knock-on from that, it would encourage the people within that society to replicate those behaviours which would lead to society flourishing in a more moral and beneficial way as a ruler leading in the correct way will inevitably have an influence on the majority of the society. One example of a society where the ruler has influenced their society in a positive way is Nelson Mandela when he became president of South Africa in 1994. His leadership style involved the power of forgiveness towards others, but also the power of unity, both of which he used in practice in order to gain his vision of a united and harmonious South Africa when it was in constant dispute between the national party and the African National Congress. His strength of practicing unity and forgiveness helped the unification of these two parties, but his leadership style was so effective it is still seen in some societal rulers today. But a second example of Mahatma Gandhi shows that you can be a ruler and leader while not being the ruler of the nation, but still impacting the behaviours of a society with his actions. His non-violent, silent protests for the independence of India highlighted his leadership style emphasising moral courage over physical force. But his core value was a sense of deep understanding of other's struggles and empathy which he displayed himself and was then inherited by his supporters and is now a common ideology among many people today. (Posted By Leadership IQ, *Inspiring Leadership Examples From History - Leadership IQ A Mark Murphy Company*, 2024).

A second point to raise when discussing the use of governance is that using the rectification of names as a way of governance means that corruption is less likely from the rulers. The benefit this has on governing is that an official or a ruler who is responsible for their role and is held accountable if they don't do their role well, then they are less likely to misuse their power which allows the government or society as a whole to work more efficiently. This also would encourage officials and a ruler to behave more honestly which would then make the people in their society behave more honestly as well. Furthermore, a third point to support why using Confucius's rectification of names as a use of governance is it improves the quality of decision making as people would be more likely, in my opinion, to see the justice system as something fair rather than more dictatorship like where they are punished harsher, which will therefore also increase the respect that people have for laws and social rules. For example, a judge would be fairer and more impartial when sentencing someone which would make the person sentenced more likely to accept their punishment as they see it as a fair one in the sense of justice under that ruler. This also links back to the previously mentioned Analects 12.11 where a judge should act as a judge is expected to by demonstrating the qualities, such as being impartial and having a moral compass, that the role expects of them. So, to me, I believe that Confucius's rectification of names, from this, doesn't fully escape conservatism as the roles within governance have almost always had the same expectations, and those that have, have only changed slightly and the expectations would still be the same regardless.

A further issue to take into account when discussing if Confucius's rectification of names can escape conservatism is the power of language in ethical life. This theory says that giving a name to something with a moral meaning means that it must be upheld. For example, promising someone you will take them out for dinner creates a social normative contract between them and makes that an obligation, due to this, ethical language can be used in ethical life and has a clear link to Confucius's rectification of names. In Analects 2.3 it says "If you govern the people legalistically and control them by punishment, they will avoid crime, but have no personal sense of shame. If you govern them by means of virtue and control them with propriety, they will gain their own sense of shame, and thus correct themselves" (James McGrath, translated by A. Charles Muller, *Analects Of Confucius*, 2020). To me, this quote supports that ethical language can be used in ethical life as a response to Confucius's rectification of names because it shows a contrast where leading a governance, or without virtue, will get people to follow the laws and rules but won't get them to have a sense of shame to learn from their mistakes. But ruling with virtue will allow the people to gain that sense of shame and therefore learn from their mistakes. A further use of using the power of language in ethical life when talking of Confucius's rectification of names is that the names of roles already exist. From this, the moral and logical thing to do, in my opinion, is assign the roles to those who fit the description of what the expectations are best. For example, as mentioned before, there is no point in giving someone like a shop worker the title of 'ruler' when they

clearly aren't fit to do so as they have no qualities for the role would be illogical. Confucius supports this claim in Analects 12.11 which says "let the ruler be a ruler, the minister a minister, the father a father, and the son a son" (Translations by Edward Slingerland and Burton Watson, *Analects 12.11 - The Confucian Pages*, No Publication Date) which supports the idea to give roles to those whose qualities and characteristics match the demands and expectations of the role. To go further into the roles of what Confucius gives in the quote, a ruler should only be a ruler if they can govern fairly, morally, responsibly, and justly. A minister should fulfill the duties of their office such as selflessness, objectivity, leadership and confidence in their decisions, but also honesty about why they have made certain decisions. A father should act as a father with kindness, honesty, benevolence, and being present with his child, while a son should act with honor, respect, gratitude and with practical care when his parents need it. These 4 key examples given by Confucius highlight to me that having a name carries a moral duty and they become unimportant if used or labelled incorrectly. This overall shows to me that Confucius's rectification can't escape conservatism as the roles and their duties have a deeper moral meaning which would be embedded in the societies.

To conclude, I would argue that Confucius's rectification of names can't escape conservatism based on the evidence because of its similarities to conservatism in its core goal of maintaining social order, but also due to the use of ethical language when talking of the rectification of names. It can also be seen to me that many quotes from Analects such as 12.11, 2.3, and 13.3, are nearly directly targeted towards conservatism's traditional ways of moral and social order.

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