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Confucius' Ontological Ethics

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Abstract

Confucius associates the good and the beautiful. Li (translated variously as “ritual propriety,” “ritual,” “etiquette,” or “propriety”) embodies the entire spectrum of interaction with humans, nature, and even material objects. I argue that Confucius attempts to introduce an ethical ontology, not of “what,” but of “the way.” The “way” of reality becomes known with the deliberate participation to the Dao. In other words, through interaction. The way people co-exist demonstrates the rationality of the associations of living and functioning together. Li, as an aesthetic-moral principle, embodies the entire spectrum of one’s interaction with humans, nature, and even material objects. Li is a constitutive element of Confucian ethics and politics, highlighting the importance of beauty, and not only goodness, in human action. The worthiness of human action is judged both aesthetically and morally. Moreover, I hold that Confucius’ ethical ontology is not an ontology of “whatness” but of “howness,” according to the Dao, since Confucius primary concern was not to define the Dao, but to restore the Dao of the ancient sage-kings. The morality of the action is dependent on the way it is performed, according to the mandates of the Dao.

Keywords: *Confucius; Li; Dao; ethics; ritual propriety; virtue; aesthetics*

The connection between aesthetics and ethics is a close one, since they are both forms of value, as Wittgenstein has pointed out.¹ The ancient Greeks had a term to describe this connection: *kalokagathia*, from the expression *καλὸς καὶγαθός* (the beautiful and the good). Aristotle equates perfect virtue to *kalokagathia*.² This concept makes sense in the context of ancient Greek thought, which stresses the importance of harmony and balance in every human expression. Confucius also associates the good and the beautiful in the concept of *li*. *Li* (translated variously as “ritual propriety,” “ritual,” “etiquette,” or “propriety”) has a central role in Confucianism, but its conceptual complexity, meaning, and use are frequently misunderstood in scholarship. Chenyang Li understands *li* as a cultural grammar and misses its aesthetic and moral overtones.³ Moreover, Kwong-loi Shun focuses on *li*'s political and ceremonial dimensions, disregarding its significance for ethics and aesthetics.⁴ Karyn Lai, while acknowledges the centrality of *li* in Confucian ethics, underestimates its interplay with aesthetics.⁵ Tu Wei-Ming considers *li* not so important for the establishment of Confucian ethics.⁶ Some other scholars interpret ritual behaviors as attempts to defend conservative practices stemming from the idealized Chinese past.⁷ Recently, Ming Dong Gu attempted to discuss the dialectic of the good and the beautiful in the concept of *li*, but he focuses on music and the arts and not on ethics.⁸ Xiaowei Fu and Yi Wang argue against the unity of the beautiful and the good in Confucian ethics. Anywise, their argument refers predominantly to the significance for goodness to aesthetics and not vice versa. Furthermore, they establish their

¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922), 6.41-6.42.

² Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics*, 1249a 18-21.

³ Chenyang Li, “Li as Cultural Grammar: On the Relation between Li and Ren in Confucius’ ‘Analects,’” *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 3 (2007): 311-329.

⁴ Kwong-loi Shun, “Jen and Li in the ‘Analects,’” *Philosophy East and West* 43, no. 3 (1993): 457-479.

⁵ Karyn Lai, “Li in the *Analects*: Training in Moral Competence and the Question of Flexibility,” *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 1 (2006): 69-83.

⁶ Tu Wei-Ming, “The Creative Tension between Jên and Li,” *Philosophy East and West* 18, nos. 1-2 (1968): 29-39.

⁷ Kwong-Loi Shun, “Ren and Li in the *Analects*,” in the *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, ed. Bryan W. Van Norden, 53-72 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67.

⁸ Ming Dong Gu, “The Ethical Turn in Aesthetic Education: Early Chinese Thinkers on Music and Arts,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 50, no. 1 (2016): 95-111.

view on texts from “early” Confucianism and, as a result, they do not cover the broad spectrum of Confucian thought.⁹

However, by a closer examination of the nature and function of ritual propriety as described in the *Analects*, it becomes apparent that it is a much broader concept than those scholars make it out to be. The rites of *li* are not rites in accordance with the Western conception of religious customs. Rather, *li* embodies the entire spectrum of one’s interaction with humans, nature, and even material objects. Confucius includes in his discussions of ritual propriety such diverse topics as learning, mourning, and governance. I will argue that ritual propriety has a key role within Confucian ethics and politics and adds aesthetic overtones to these fields, stressing the interest in the way (*Dao*) of the individual’s action; not to consequences, motives or deontological principles. Moreover, I will attempt to define the kind of ethics Confucius proposes, since *li* provides us a key to re-evaluate Confucius’ ethical thought, which, by most contemporary scholars is categorized as virtue ethics,¹⁰ or as a non-Kantian type of deontological ethics.¹¹ Confucius, to my understanding, attempts to introduce a peculiar kind of ontological ethics – an ethical ontology, not of “whatness” but of “howness,” meaning that the ethical demand arises out of the structures given with existence, not out of a relation to transcendence, since *Dao* (*Way*), as a cosmic principle, is immanent. Confucius’ moral ontology of “howness” relies on facts that exist objectively. According to Confucius, *li* encompasses a broad range of public or shared experience, existing independently. *Li* is valid and binding because the “how” becomes known with the deliberate participation to the *Dao*, as the archetypal *Way*.

Predominantly, the third and tenth books of the *Analects* are focused on ritual propriety. The ritual network includes religious and political ceremonies and norms of political and social etiquette. These were overlapping aspects of rituals and social etiquettes, and it is not always easy to distinguish between “rites,” “ceremonies,” and “manners.” All these are called *li*. *Li* is a dominant concept in Confucian thought. It is the path through which *ren* (perfect humaneness)

⁹ Xiaowei Fu, and Yi Wang, “Confucius on the Relationship of Beauty and Goodness,” *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 49, no. 1 (2015): 68-81.

¹⁰ Bryan van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 65-138; Jiyuan Yu, *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle, Mirrors of Virtue* (London: Routledge, 2007), 10-19.

¹¹ Ming-Huei Lee, *Confucianism: Its Roots and Global Significance* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017), 92-101.

can be attained in individuals, and order restored to society. The ideogram for ren is “human” on left and “two” on right. According to Confucius, human beings are always defined through others. One cannot exist without the other. Therefore, human interaction and its terms are crucial for Confucius. Perfect humaneness, the highest virtue in Confucian ethics, is not some abstract concept of good, but practical benevolence expressed in human interaction.¹²

Confucius holds that ritual propriety is valuable because it is rewarding aesthetically and generates a kind of wisdom. According to Confucius, the acquisition of ritual skills transforms one's perspective and confirms the absolute value of those skills. Confucius supports that in using *li*, harmony should be valued. Ritual propriety is the oil that keeps the wheels of our social life turning and leads to greater social harmony. Confucius holds that a large part of wise living involves making use of this ritual propriety to bring a greater degree of elegance and harmony to our personal life and to the lives of others.¹³

Ritual propriety forms a set of codes that regulate in detail every sphere of human conduct. Therefore, it is a formalized set of rules for communities, aimed to improve their cohesion and ensure their orderly function. It designates each person's exact place within a smaller or larger community. Confucius is adamant that the laws of the state alone will not bring social order.¹⁴ Nevertheless, controlling the citizens' behaviors through ritual propriety is much more effective, because, through shame, voluntary conformity is achieved:

The Master said, Guide them with government orders, regulate them with penalties, and the people will seek to evade the law and be without shame. Guide them with virtue, regulate them with ritual, and they will have a sense of shame and become upright.¹⁵

¹² Ranjoo Seodu Herr, “Is Confucianism Compatible with Care Ethics? A Critique,” *Philosophy East and West* 53, no. 4 (2003): 471-489; Fu, and Wang, 68-81.

¹³ Yong Huang, and Robert A. Carleo III, “Introduction: Contemporary Confucian Political Philosophy,” in *Confucian Political Philosophy: Dialogues on the State of the Field*, eds. Robert A. Carleo III, and Yong Huang, 1-27 (Cham: Springer, 2021), 18.

¹⁴ Randall Peerenboom, “Law and Religion in Early China,” in *Religion, Law and Tradition: Comparative Studies in Religious Law*, ed. Andrew Huxley, 84-107 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), 85.

¹⁵ Confucius, “Analects,” in *The Analects of Confucius*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 2.3.

Confucius aims to a total and voluntary participation of the people in ritual propriety. For this reason, he supports that adhering to the ritualistic order must be combined with perfect humaneness:

The Master said, A human being who lacks humaneness – what is ritual to someone like that? A human being who lacks humaneness – what is music to someone like that?¹⁶

According to Confucius, the person who embodies perfect humaneness and conforms to ritual propriety is a noble human (*junzi*). Confucius reclaims the term, removes any aristocratic connotation, and focuses on meritocracy. A noble human adheres to ritual propriety and seeks to actualize the *Dao* with perfect humaneness. His actions are aligned with beauty and grace. The noble human not only serves as a moral exemplar, but also demonstrates a level of ritual mastery in which rituals are no longer cumbersome and restrictive. Those who become noble humans not only follow ritual propriety, but also can express themselves in creative and novel ways.¹⁷

A special place in Confucian ethics is held by the concept of *shu* (being accommodative). It is taking oneself as the measure of one's behavior towards others.¹⁸ However, Confucian thought does not limit itself in the negative version of the Golden Rule, that is to avoid treating others as we would not like to be treated.¹⁹ It certainly encompasses the notion that through our actions we offer ourselves as models to others and we become moral legislators for our entire community:

Zigong said, If someone could spread bounty abroad among the people and rescue the populace, how would that be? Could that be called humaneness?

The Master said, Why bring humaneness into the discussion? If you must have a label, call the man a sage. Even Yao and Shun had trouble doing that much.

The humane person wants standing, and so he helps others to gain standing. He wants achievement, and so he helps

¹⁶ Confucius, 3.3.

¹⁷ Hagop Sarkissian, "Ritual and Rightness in the *Analects*," in *Dao Companion to the Analects*, ed. Amy Olberding, 95-116 (Dordrecht: Springer, 2018), 111.

¹⁸ David L. Hall, and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (New York: SUNY Press, 1987), 283-295.

¹⁹ Qingjie James Wang, "The Golden Rule and Interpersonal Care: From a Confucian Perspective," *Philosophy East and West* 49 no. 4 (1999): 415-438.

others to achieve. To know how to proceed on the analogy of what is close at hand – this can be called the humane approach.²⁰

It is important to clarify that we should not see Confucius' thought through the lenses of modern individualism. According to Confucius, human behavior is dictated by ritual commands. This should not be conceived as submission to the will of others, but that even discord is expressed in the appropriate way.²¹

Along the same lines, Confucius introduces the concept of *yi* (righteousness),²² through which Confucius aims to demonstrate that everyone appreciates appropriate behavior, though always within the context of ritual propriety. Social etiquette is an endless primer of methods, which we can draw upon appropriate action on every occasion. Moreover, the concept of *de* (virtue)²³ applies to how noble humans govern through the moral shining virtue of their deeds:

The Master said, Conduct government in accordance with virtue, and it will be like the North Star standing in its place, with all the other stars paying court to it.²⁴

Through the ritual propriety, everything in the world returns to perfect humaneness:

Yan Yuan asked about humaneness. The Master said, To master the self and return to ritual is to be humane. For one day master the self and return to ritual, and the whole world will become humane. Being humane proceeds from you yourself. How could it proceed from others?

Yan Yuan said, May I ask how to go about this?

The Master said, If it is contrary to ritual, don't look at it. If it is contrary to ritual, don't listen to it. If it is contrary to ritual, don't utter it. If it is contrary to ritual, don't do it.²⁵

²⁰ Confucius, 6.30.

²¹ Ibid., 16.1.

²² Hall, and Ames, 89-109.

²³ Jiyuan Yu, "Virtue: Confucius and Aristotle," *Philosophy East and West* 48, no. 2 (1998): 323-347.

²⁴ Confucius, 2.1.

²⁵ Ibid., 12.1.

Of course, the internalization of ritual propriety is achieved through intense study and effort. A ritual is valued not only for its practical dimension or for the benefit it brings, but also because it goes along with a certain beauty.²⁶ The link between ritual propriety and beauty is evident:

Master You said, What ritual values most is harmony. The Way of the former kings was truly admirable in this respect. But if in matters great and small one proceeds in this manner, the results may not always be satisfactory. You may understand the ideal of harmony and work for it, but if you do not employ ritual to regulate the proceedings, things will not go well.²⁷

Confucius stresses that ritual propriety requires harmony,²⁸ which is the beauty of the *Dao* of the Former Kings and a source of great deeds. Great deeds are beautiful as much as they are elegant and harmonious. Particularly, Master You states that when ritual propriety guides respect, we will be far from shame and disgrace:

Master You said, Trustworthiness is close to rightness – it ensures that people will live up to their word. Courtesy is close to ritual decorum – it ensures that people will give wide berth to shame and disgrace. When one makes no mistakes in what he favors, he can serve as a leader.²⁹

It becomes clear that any behavior that diverts from the context of ritual propriety is disregarded, because is not harmonized with the *Dao*. Even respect can lead to deviation or failure if it is not shown in the appropriate way. A show of respect punctuated with theatrics and verbalism can cancel out its purpose, regardless of the honest intentions of the person who pays respect. Again, ritual propriety dictates the appropriate way. Furthermore, Confucius revisits the link between ritual propriety and respect, providing a notable example:

²⁶ Fu, and Wang, 68-81.

²⁷ Confucius, 1.12.

²⁸ Jim Behuniak, *John Dewey and Confucian Thought: Experiments in Intra-cultural Philosophy, Volume Two* (New York: SUNY Press 2019), 184-187; Sean McAleer, *Confucian and Stoic Perspectives on Forgiveness* (Lanham: Lexington Books 2022), 30-31.

²⁹ Confucius, 1.13.

Meng Yi Zi asked about filial devotion. The Master replied, Never break the rules.

When Fan Chi was driving the carriage, the Master reported this to him, saying, Meng Sun (Meng Yi Zi) asked me about filial devotion. I told him, Never break the rules.

Fan Chi said, What did you mean by that?

The Master said, While they are alive, serve them according to ritual. When they die, bury them according to ritual, and sacrifice to them in accord with ritual.³⁰

Xiao (filial devotion), the noblest manifestation of virtue, serves as a model for all social and political interactions, and is consistently tied in with ritual propriety.³¹ A son's duty is to bury his parents and pay them tribute with the appropriate sacrifices, according to etiquette. As pedantic as this might seem, Confucius had realized the deep practical wisdom of ritual propriety. Especially regarding funerals, on which he insists, the main goal of the etiquette is primarily not to let people on their own in mourning. The gathering of family and friends aims to provide the support needed in these hard times. In addition, the strict funeral rites, with the numerous obligations during the first days, keep mourners occupied to avoid losing themselves in lamentations and self-absorption. The social visits after the funeral and the sacrificial offerings at the ancestral altar serve the same purpose. If the mourner decides to deviate from the proper ways, there is the risk of exaggerated mourning and its rather unpleasant personal and social consequences.³²

However, Confucius remarks that, in funerals, the expression of personal pain comes before adhering to the ritual's protocol without substance. Namely, he is fierce against those who subdue sentiments to rituals. The protocol should not get in the way of the expression of pain:

Lin Fang asked what is basic in ritual. The Master said, A big question indeed! In rites in general, rather than extravagance, better frugality. In funeral rites, rather than thoroughness, better real grief.³³

³⁰ Confucius, 2.5.

³¹ Donald Holzman, "The Place of Filial Piety in Ancient China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118, no. 2 (1998): 186-190.

³² Xiaoqun Wu, *Mourning Rituals in Archaic & Classical Greece and Pre-Qin China* (Singapore: Palgrave McMillan, 2018), 75-83.

³³ Confucius, 3.4.

The following passages are even more illuminating:

Meng Wu Bo asked about filial devotion. The Master said, Your father and mother should have to worry only about your falling ill.

Ziyou asked about filial devotion. The Master said, Nowadays it's taken to mean just seeing that one's parents get enough to eat. But we do that much for dogs or horses as well. If there is no reverence, how is it any different?³⁴

Confucius questions the common idea of his time that filial devotion primarily means covering the basic survival and nutritional needs of the parents. He then wonders what a human's difference from animals is since we provide food for them too. The answer he gives is respect. In other words, without the appropriate sentiment of respect when food is offered, the act loses its meaning. For instance, a wealthy person might offer to his parents the most expensive and refined meals, but in a demeaning and offensive way. On the other hand, you may have someone who covers their parents' basic survival needs and offers them a humble meal, but in the proper manner. Evidently, Confucius would consider the latter approach as the appropriate one, as in that behavior, beauty and respect go hand in hand. The action is defined not only by its goal or motive, but also by the mode of execution, the way.³⁵ In fact, the ethics of ritual propriety that Confucius introduces can also be applied in politics:

Ji Kangzi asked, How can I make the common people respectful, loyal, and diligent in their work?

The Master said, If you are strict in overseeing them, they will be respectful. If you are filial and compassionate, they will be loyal. If you promote persons of goodness and teach those who are incompetent, then the people will be diligent.³⁶

Ji Kangzi asks Confucius how he can win over the people. Confucius responds that people's veneration will be won with the appropriate

³⁴ Confucius, 2.6-2.7.

³⁵ Lee Dian Rainey, *Confucius and Confucianism: The Essentials* (Malden, and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 23-28.

³⁶ Confucius, 2.20.

approach, not so much with results. People seek from politicians to be treated with dignity, to pay respect to parents, and to be compassionate to the rest. Therefore, not everything is judged according to what is offered and what is achieved, as advocates of utilitarian politics claim. Confucius neither ignores nor does he dismiss the importance of securing adequate standards of living for the people. Nevertheless, he highlights the importance of providing for the people in a nice manner, to achieve the appropriate political result and ensure the excellent function of the state.³⁷

The emphasis on the way of the action, the link between ethics and aesthetics, is also evident in another passage, where Confucius vividly associates ritual propriety with perfect humaneness: “The Master said, A human being who lacks humaneness – what is ritual to someone like that? A human being who lacks humaneness – what is music to someone like that?”³⁸ Specifically, he remarks that ritual propriety without perfect humaneness is useless. It is clear that he is not interested in blind obedience, but in adherence to ritual propriety with substance. The manner is important, but the substance of the act is equally important: motive and objective. In fact, he mentions that in offering sacrifices, which of course falls under the protocols of rituals, if people do not participate in them with their soul, it is no better than not offering them at all.³⁹

It should be noted that virtue could be attained only through voluntary conformity with ritual propriety. Following rituals without deep inwardness is mere formalism,⁴⁰ and Confucius expresses his discontent for the fact that in his era they are usually considered as merely conventions: “The Master said, Ritual! ritual! they say. But is it just a matter of jades and silks? Music! music! they say. But is it just a matter of bells and drums?”⁴¹

However, simply following ritual propriety behaviors does not constitute perfect humanness. As much as Confucius praises the ancient

³⁷ Leong Chan, “Virtue-Based Politics: A Dialogue with Loubna El Amine’s New Interpretation of Classical Confucian Political Thought,” *Confucian Political Philosophy: Dialogues on the State of the Field*, eds. Robert A. Carleo III, and Yong Huang, 175-200 (Cham: Springer, 2021), 196-198.

³⁸ Confucius, 3.3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.12.

⁴⁰ Archie J. Bahm, *The Heart of Confucius: Interpretations of Genuine Living and Great Wisdom* (Fremont: Jain Publishing Company, 1992), 43; K. K. Yeo, *Musing with Confucius and Paul: Toward a Chinese Christian Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 290.

⁴¹ Confucius, 17.11.

ways, he does note at times that it might be appropriate to alter rituals to suit contemporary circumstances:

The Master said, Ritual calls for caps of hemp, though nowadays silk is used, because it is more economical. I go along with others in this.

Ritual calls for one to bow at the foot of the stairs. Nowadays people bow at the top of the stairs, but this is presumptuous. Although it means differing from others, I perform the bow at the foot of the stairs.⁴²

Ritual propriety helps to shape perfect humanness, but perfect humanness is not totally defined through ritual propriety, because there is also some flexibility to depart from existing ritual propriety. However, this flexibility must be understood within a general acceptance of existing ritual propriety behavior. Meanwhile, Confucius insistently rejects any unjustified change to the rituals, as it undermines sociopolitical stability:

The Master said, You (Zilu), have you heard of the six terms and the six flaws attending them?

Zilu replied, No, not yet.

Sit down, said the Master, and I will tell you. Love of humaneness without love of study invites the flaw of foolishness. Love of understanding without love of study invites the flaw of recklessness. Love of trustworthiness without love of study invites the flaw of injurious behavior. Love of uprightness without love of study invites the flaw of bluntness. Love of bravery without love of study invites the flaw of riotousness. Love of firmness without love of study invites the flaw of irrational action.⁴³

Confucius considered ritual propriety to be of the utmost importance, as he insists⁴⁴ that despite his contemporaries' objections, his duty is to ensure that ritual propriety is observed. Ritual propriety mostly binds the elite, so they do not mistreat the people. The ethical and aesthetical ideal turns social aristocracy into moral aristocracy:

⁴² Confucius, 9.3.

⁴³ Ibid., 17.8.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 3.17.

Duke Ding asked how the ruler should treat his ministers and how the ministers should serve the ruler.

Confucius replied, The ruler should treat his ministers in accordance with ritual. The ministers should serve the ruler with loyalty.⁴⁵

Even the riches are not acceptable if they are not attained in accordance with the Way:

The Master said, Wealth and eminence are what people desire, but if one can't get them by means that accord with the Way, one will not accept them. Poverty and low position are what people hate, but if one can't avoid them by means that accord with the Way, one will not reject them.

If the gentleman rejects humaneness, how can he be worthy of the name of gentleman? The gentleman never departs from humaneness even for the space of a meal – in confusion and distress he holds fast to it; stumbling, faltering, he holds fast to it.⁴⁶

Once more, the end does not justify the means. What matters most is the manner, the way, although it might bring no result or even lead to poverty. Disregarding an end due to the use of ill means is also evident in 4.14, where Confucius explicitly states that authority positions or fame should not be pursued in the wrong way:

The Master said, Don't worry that you have no position – worry about how you can qualify for one. Don't worry that people don't know you – look for some reason to become known.⁴⁷

People must follow the *Dao*, regardless of whether it may lead them to positions of power. The rule of the noble human is what is just, whereas the rule of the small-minded is what is beneficial.⁴⁸

In this same perspective, it is interesting to examine Confucius' opinion on wealth. Confucius does not reject it, although he admits

⁴⁵ Confucius, 3.19.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.5.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4.14.

⁴⁸ Ming-Huei Lee, "Confucianism, Kant, and Virtue Ethics," in *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*, eds. Stephen Angle, and Michael Slote, 47-55 (New York: Routledge, 2013), 49-50.

to its corrupting role. Instead, he states that what is important is the way it is used. His advice is not to reject riches but to use them to the benefit of society.⁴⁹ Emphasis on manners is also evident in 14.1, where Confucius remarks that it is shameful for someone to earn their salary from a situation where the Way is absent:

Xian (Yuan Si) asked what is shameful. The Master said, When a state follows the Way, one receives an official stipend. But when a state is without the Way, to receive an official stipend is shameful.⁵⁰

That is, if nothing around a person happens the proper way, he should not accept the salary for his work. A person can enlarge the Way (Dao), but the Way cannot enlarge a person.⁵¹ It is obvious that ritual propriety is not static. Humans could become ethical and aesthetical legislators enlarging the *Dao*. Mere conformity to the *Dao* does not add to someone's value.

Confucius touches again the issue of ritual propriety, by encouraging his speaker to be a scholar with manners of a noble human.⁵² Therefore, education on its own is not enough. Its value relies on being acquired in the appropriate way.⁵³ We could refer to this as an ontology of ritual propriety that permeates Confucian thought. Beings are independent of the way they are realized but their substance does not remain unchanged: they are determined and valued by the way they have been realized. Later the role of ritual propriety reemerges. Knowledge is not enough to prevent humans from digression. Ritual propriety takes up this role, complementing knowledge, and it is the one that keeps the noble human in line.⁵⁴ The ultimate ideal, the point of self-actualization of a perfect human, is to offer himself as an exemplar.⁵⁵ In other words, to become an ethical-aesthetical legislator for his community. Such a level of virtue cannot be attained only with knowledge.

On the other hand, the lack of ritual propriety leads to some sort of degradation. Confucius explicitly states that respectfulness without ritual

⁴⁹ Xiaoxi Wang, *On Moral Capital* (Cham: Springer, 2015), 140-144.

⁵⁰ Confucius, 14.1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 15.29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 6.13.

⁵³ Geir Sigurðsson, *Confucian Propriety and Ritual Learning: A Philosophical Interpretation* (New York: SUNY Press, 2015), 26-30.

⁵⁴ Confucius, 6.27.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.30.

propriety becomes laborious bustle; boldness becomes insubordination; and straightforwardness becomes rudeness. It is evident that virtue alone is not enough but requires ritual propriety to acquire its full meaning and reach its point of actualization. A virtue is actualized in accordance with its nature only when it is pursued in the proper way:

The Master said, Courtesy without ritual becomes labored; caution without ritual becomes timidity; daring without ritual becomes riotousness; directness without ritual becomes obtrusiveness.

If the gentleman treats those close to him with generosity, the common people will be moved to humaneness. If he does not forget his old associates, the common people will shun cold-heartedness.⁵⁶

Confucius goes into detail as to what proper conduct consists of and how it is achieved: movements, expression, words, and intonation. Competence and aspiration to virtue foster beauty, the aesthetics of action:

When Master Zeng was ill, Meng Jing Zi asked how he was. Master Zeng spoke these words: When a bird is about to die, its cries are sad. When a man is about to die, his words are good. With regard to the Way, there are three things the gentleman prizes: in his actions and manner, that he be far from harshness or arrogance; in ordering his appearance, that he stick close to trustworthiness; in his utterances, that they be far from crude or unseemly. As for the sacrificial baskets and stands, there are experts to tend to such matters.⁵⁷

Moreover, he clarifies his point by explaining that a human without flaws may look poor in his ordinary garments, but his robes are elegant in sacrifice rituals. Every occasion requires different aesthetics, according to the substance of each ritual. After all, cultivation in social etiquette and music is necessary for a person to reach a position of power:

The Master said, I can find no fault with Yu. Sparing in his food and drink, he yet served the spirits and gods with utmost filial devotion. His ordinary robes were shabby, but

⁵⁶ Confucius, 8.2.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 8.4.

his sacrificial aprons and caps were of the utmost beauty. He lived in lowly rooms and halls, devoting his entire energy to the opening of irrigation ditches and channels. I can find no fault with Yu.⁵⁸

In addition, Confucius insists on the importance of correct pronunciation.⁵⁹ Specifically, when someone read official texts and participated in rituals, he sought to use the proper pronunciation because texts acquired a higher value in it.⁶⁰ In an attempt to focus on ritual propriety, Confucius articulates the Golden Rule of ethics: never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself.⁶¹

Confucius insists that ritual propriety is an essential element in moral self-cultivation, which is one of his main contributions to ethics. At the same time the social and performative aspects of etiquette provide an aesthetic dimension to the political function of moral self-cultivation. Etiquette is part of a complex web that connects morality, religion, and politics. The mastery of etiquette may allow for some flexibility within appropriate situations, but these divergences from the norm must always be recognizable and acceptable to others in order for them to be effective as transformational actions. In this vein, the successful practice of etiquette depends on the development of an aesthetic “style,” which expresses to others one’s personal dispositions, and by extension, one’s perfect humanness. Thus, reverence for past tradition is supported by creative innovations.

Therefore, *li*, as an aesthetic-moral principle, embodies the entire spectrum of one’s interaction with humans, nature, and even material objects. *Li* is a constitutive element of Confucian ethics and politics, highlighting the importance of beauty, and not only goodness, in human action. The worthiness of human action is judged both aesthetically and morally. Moreover, Confucius’ peculiar ethical ontology is not an ontology of “whatness” but of “howness,” according to the *Dao*, since Confucius primary concern was not to define the *Dao*, but to restore the *Dao* of the ancient sage-kings. The morality of the action is dependent

⁵⁸ Confucius, 8.21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 7.17.

⁶⁰ Ann-Ping Chin, *Confucius: A Life of Thought and Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 12-13; Xing Lu, *Rhetoric in Ancient China, Fifth to Third Century B.C.E.: A Comparison with Classical Greek Rhetoric* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2022), 163.

⁶¹ Bo Mou, “A Reexamination of the Structure and Content of Confucius’ Version of the Golden Rule,” *Philosophy East and West* 54 no. 2 (2004): 218-248; Wang, “The Golden Rule and Interpersonal Care: From a Confucian Perspective,” 415-438.

on the way it is performed, according to the mandates of the *Dao*. Humans' way of acting flourishes when their individual way (*rendao*) attunes to the *Dao*. *Rendao* is a way of becoming consummately and authoritatively human. This explains Confucius' formalism, his descriptiveness, but also his poetic tone. As long as we attempt to discover "what is virtue" in Confucius' texts, they will respond with misleading and contradictory answers. Answers to the question "how is virtue obtained" will bring us closer to what Confucius meant to say with his *Analects*. An ontology of the way, of "howness," may have the downside that it focuses on the description of the real world rather on the question of whether the world is real – which is a common characteristic for grounded, practical philosophies such as the Chinese – but it has the upside that it strives to offer practical guidance to humans. The "how" of reality becomes known with the deliberate participation to the *Dao* that constitutes the archetypal "how." The way people co-exist demonstrates the rationality of the associations of living and functioning together. We can know the substance of something *that is* from the way it *participates to being*. Reality *per se* is unimportant; what is important is how people get to know and participate in reality, because each person forms several connections throughout its life. Every person actualizes substance, the nature of being, in their unique way; but their unique way should accord with the *Dao*, because humans have their own manner of development, according to the *Dao's* way of emerging and acting. The *Dao* of each being (the individual or shared substance) amounts to the totality of interactions among beings. Everyone interacts with everything, but every human interaction with other beings is unique. The uniqueness of individual agency reflects each individual connection formed. Freedom is a synonym for actualization and discovery of the personal way of being. All that determines being (nature, freedom, belonging to a species, otherness) indicates a way: not a "what," but a "how."

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