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4. Respect and Reward: Ecology from the *Analects* of Confucius

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Abstract

Today's ecological crises are scientifically well understood. Their dire consequences follow predictions with relentless accuracy. What is astounding is how little we can bring ourselves to do about them. Granted, powerful economic interests invest heavily in maintaining the *status quo* of consumption. But there is another side to this problem, a curious unwillingness, inability to take personal responsibility. The reasons for this failure to respond are questions for philosophy.

Original sayings of Confucius are collected in a slim book, the *Analects*. Throughout, we find an emphasis on the nurture of ethical values that are derived from reciprocal forbearance, trustworthiness, and loyalty. In Confucian philosophy, the concept *Li* 禮, generally translated as “ritual propriety”, expresses how a sincere respect for nature and society can manifest the self, and how self-cultivation is a way to transform the private self into an open, transparent self that is in balance with the dynamics of one's environment. From this Confucian perspective, the self and its context, whether other individuals, society in general, “nature” or cosmos, exist in a constant, innate, gap-less encounter and dialogue, based upon meaningful differentiation rather than antagonistic struggle. The awareness of this immanent relationship is not based upon a set of imposed social rules, but an intuitive sensibility towards propriety, an “enabling restraint”, a procedure of propagation, derived from life's inner growth.

Grounded within an embodied self here and now, this attitude of sincere respect, independent of expectations of utility and reward, envisions behaviour in accordance with ecological needs and sustainable principles as an effortless response, fed by an aesthetic sensibility towards an environment that is constitutive of and cultivated within the self. Thus, the key to ecological responsibility is an education through which we understand that responsible behaviour can be pursued because it is an expression of who we are as human beings, and for which economic gain, social status and humanitarian responsibility are natural consequences. Such a personal yet not private response to our current challenges, day-to-day, and in every moment, is the ultimate win-win proposition.

4.1 INTRODUCTION: A QUESTION FOR PHILOSOPHY

When you sit in front of the panoramic window of the cafeteria of Tokyo's Nezu Museum, and sip freshly made powdered green tea, the tea bowl in your hand, small as it is, nevertheless contains the entire green of the garden. In this tranquil moment, nature, you, and tea may become an original, inseparable, and harmonious unity.

Today's ecological crises – e.g. pollution, climate change, mass extinctions – are scientifically well understood regarding their global scale¹ and the expected severity of outcomes (IPCC, 2014a). Their dire consequences follow predictions with relentless accuracy. We understand that the current challenges to ecology indeed constitute existential risks for humans and for humanity.² Therefore, rational actors should be expected to pursue decisive, preventative action. Instead, policy makers are achieving too little, too late.³

A part of our inability to respond adequately to the challenges e.g. of climate change can be attributed to the targeted activities of influential lobby groups,⁴ and powerful economic interests invest heavily in maintaining the *status quo* of consumption. However, macroeconomic effects derive from the actions of individuals, and while the process of decision making rests on comparatively few actors in the private sector, politics, and law, these actors in turn are not isolated from the attitudes of consumers, voters, and their own social and professional networks. Policy makers are responsible to voters, company executives to shareholders, communities to their constituencies. It is a precondition of positive change that individuals take a stance in public discourse and hold their delegates and representatives responsible. This is however not the only way to make significant contributions: the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report specifically states that “Behaviour, lifestyle and culture have a considerable influence on energy use and associated emissions, with high mitigation potential in some sectors, in particular when complementing technological and structural change” (IPCC, 2014b, p. 20). Effective individual actions include having fewer

¹ Environmental impacts of humans on the planet are so profound (Waters *et al.*, 2016), that a proposal to label the 20th century as the beginning of a new geological epoch, the *Anthropocene*, is currently undergoing ratification by the International Union of Geological Sciences.

² Risk is loss multiplied by probability. If the result of an event is death or extinction, i.e. we are considering loss of existential proportions, then even a small probability for the event to actually occur results in significant risk.

³ Regarding “doing too little”, it is noteworthy that those countries that contribute most to global carbon emissions are also forecast to bear the highest country-level social cost of carbon (Ricke *et al.*, 2018) refuting arguments that activities in the developed world would disproportionately benefit other nations. As well, the magnitude of costs that are being downloaded to future generations have apparently been severely underestimated. Regarding “acting too late”, the IPCC report on the 1.5°C global warming milestone target contains a pessimistic outlook and a strongly worded warning (2018): “*Climate-related risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic growth are projected to increase with global warming of 1.5°C and increase further with 2°C*” (p. 11). However, “*Pathways reflecting [the Paris accord] ambitions would not limit global warming to 1.5°C, even if supplemented by very challenging increases in the scale and ambition of emissions reductions after 2030*” (p. 24).

⁴ For a poignant example see e.g. the argumentation strategies against European Union action on climate change, authored by an influential industry lobby group as detailed in a document leaked by the Greenpeace NGO (Greenpeace European Unit, 2018).

children, living without a car, reducing intercontinental air-travel, eating a plant-based diet, and purchasing renewable energy (Wynes & Nicholas, 2017). These are not trivial lifestyle choices, but they do emphasize that individual actions can indeed contribute significantly to mitigation – the role of the individual is not negligible.

In the face of the existential challenges of the Anthropocene, and given a perceived lack of options, it is becoming apparent that we are utilizing subconscious defense mechanisms, which lead to various forms of denial (Adams, 2016, p. 129ff). The subsequent failure of individuals to respond broadly, across cultures and societies has been seen as a challenge for art as an alternative approach to understand factual information (Cape Farewell, 2018). As Cape Farewell's founder, David Buckland (2012) writes "*Climate change proffers a unique cultural problem: it is a future truth*" (p. 139). As such, its consequences are not tangible to our present society, and activists, artists, and scientists have collaborated in numerous projects to catalyze an intuitive awareness for such as yet intangible issues. Such intuitive awareness adds emotional and aesthetic dimensions to rational understanding and thus is expected to be more effective to change attitudes and behaviours. A recent study by Liselotte Roosen and colleagues (2018) reviews the effectiveness of Cape Farewell's and related activities and concludes that art indeed has benefits over other approaches to communicate climate-change issues. Art may show a way forward to help individuals understand what is; the question "what should be" is for philosophy.

In the following, we provide a philosophical exploration of the question how individuals could derive value from actions that are "responsible" regarding the ecological crises sketched out above. We start from the text of the *Analects*, attributed to Confucius (551–479 BCE), to ask how the self is constituted in the everyday world and actualized in everyday activities, and we consider how sincere respect, encoded in rituals and rites, shapes the relationship between the self, others and nature. We argue that there is an overlooked implication: such respect must be independent of an expectation of reward. And we outline that this reveals how utilitarian rewards to motivate individuals carry an inherent contradiction. This view on nurturing the self, derived from the *Analects* and based on a phenomenological understanding of the self-in-the-world, can act locally with global consequences, and bring immediate benefits unconstrained by future truths.

4.2 ESSENTIAL CONFUCIANISM

Confucianism is one of the four great Asian philosophical traditions, along with Hinduism, Daoism and Buddhism. Named after Confucius, it originated in ancient China some 2,600 years ago. The prevailing Western view of Confucianism is dominated by its supposed contrast to the Daoist and the Buddhist world view, in particular regarding the meaning of human life, how to manage human relations, and on the relationship between humans and nature.⁵

⁵ The position of Confucianism on ecological and environmental ethics is discussed broadly in the literature and we can but provide a few recent results. A standard reference, albeit now twenty years old is *Confucianism and Ecology* (Tucker & Berthrong, eds., 1998) in which a common thread are Neo-Confucian views on the

A popular Asian artistic *topos* however is “Three Vinegar Tasters” based on an apocryphal story about the three most accomplished intellectuals in China’s Northern Sòng 北宋 dynasty, Sū Shì 蘇軾 (1037-1101), Huáng Tíngjiān 黃庭堅 (1045-1105), and the monk Fó Yīn 佛印 (1032-1098). The famed Chinese painter Lǐ Kěrǎn 李可染 painted the meeting as “Three Sour-ness Painting” (“Sān Suān Tú” 《三酸圖》) (Lǐ, 1943), writing the following comment:

*The monk at Golden Mountain Temple, Fó Yīn, was befriended with Huáng Tíngjiān and Sū Shì. One day, the two together visited the temple. Fó Yīn showed them a jar of freshly made ‘peach flower vinegar’. After tasting the beautifully made vinegar, each of them showed a different expression of “sour-ness”. Therefore, this painting is called “Three Sour-ness Painting”.*⁶

We may focus on the differences in experience from a Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist perspective – but it is all the same vinegar.⁷

Like all great philosophies, including in particular Daoism and Buddhism, Confucianism has over millennia become a tradition of commentary as much as a platform for the words of its founders. But Confucianism served as state philosophy for a major part of Chinese history, and the ideas of Confucius and his disciples have been plied, interpreted from many vantage points, and adopted as a philosophical justification of authority by many different rulers and the commentators in their service. Indeed – and far removed from the founders’ principles – Confucius’ teachings are regarded today, especially in the West, as a philosophy that commands blind deference to received hierarchies. This is a profound misunderstanding. Yet, against the historical background, the actual position of Confucius and his disciples arguably might not be properly called “Confucianism” at all.

Original sayings of Confucius are collected in a slim book, the *Analects*.⁸ Throughout, we find an emphasis on the nurture of ethical values that are derived from reciprocal forbearance, trustworthiness, and loyalty. These are the vehicles through which Confucianism is actualized: based on *Rén* 仁 (humanness), cultivated through *Lǐ* 禮 (propriety), striving for *Hé* 和 (harmony).⁹ The concise expressiveness of ancient Chinese lends itself well to excerption, and in the West, Confucius’ *Analects* is often assumed to be aphoristic.

relationship of humans and nature. Tracing environmental ethics to Neo-Confucian metaphysics provides a focus on “reciprocity” in the most recent scholarship (Brasovan, 2017). For example, Zhou & Huang (2017) added “aesthetic”, “moral” and “social” dimensions to the previous metaphysical discussion on environmental issues, but do not focus on “respect” or “reward”; Nuyen, A. T. (2008) focuses on Confucian ethics as a philosophy of relationship, again with an emphasis on “reciprocity”. Contributions to the current debates on ecological issues based on the *Analects* itself have not been adequately addressed in recent literature, with the exception perhaps of metaphysical questions raised by Tu Weiming in works cited elsewhere in this manuscript.

⁶ Translation by the authors, the original text is written on the painting itself (cf. Lǐ, 1943).

⁷ All three traditions have important contributions to make on environmental ethics, as does Hinduism; For a recent exposition of current approaches as “comparative environmental philosophy”, see Callicott & McRae (2014).

⁸ Numerous English translations are available: the most accessible online version is James Legge’s translation available via Wikisource (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Confucian_Analects). New, annotated translations in print include Ni, 2017 and Chin, 2014. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. offer a philosophical translation, see Ames & Rosemont (1999). A standard modern English translation can be found in Oxford World’s Classics, translated by Raymond Dawson, 1993, 2000, 2008.

⁹ For a more complete exposition of key Confucian concepts, we would need to add *Shù* 恕 (Reciprocity), *Yì* 義 (Righteousness), *Xìn* 信 (Trustworthiness), and *Zhì* 智 (Wisdom). These seven concepts were named the “five

Take for example the “Golden Rule”: “Do not impose on others what you would not wish for yourself” (己所不欲，勿施於人) (*Analects* 12. 3. trans. Ni, 2017, p. 281), which is a first-order formulation of ethics that is common to virtually every philosophical tradition. Albeit hardly contentious, this and similar statements may have contributed to a perception of a doctrinal philosophy, a prescriptive, if not proscriptive world view.

As so often, even a cursory look at the actual source shows how the meaning of a quote changes, when seen in context. The *Analects* records a conversation between Zhòng Gōng 仲弓, the disciple, and the Master, on the question “What is *Rén* 仁?”. Confucius responded: “When you go out, behave as if you were going to greet a great guest; when you employ people, do it as if you were conducting a great sacrifice; do not impose on others what you would not wish for yourself. You will have no resentment either in the state or in the family” (出門如見大賓，使民如承大祭。己所不欲，勿施於人。在邦無怨，在家無怨。 *Analects* 12. 3¹⁰. trans. Ni, 2017, p. 281).

Herein lies a profound difference. Confucius did not command his disciple to behave in a certain way, he answered a philosophical question about the essence of *Rén* 仁 (humanness). Rather than teaching abstract moral principles, Confucius emphasized that *Rén* 仁 is a way of being humane. The specific examples of extending respect in encounters and in managing relationships manifest an *existential* aspect of the self, i.e. *Rén* 仁, and this understanding of *Rén* 仁 happens to include the Golden Rule, which is however contextualized as one of many expressions of *Rén* 仁 through *Lǐ* 禮 (Propriety).

Such humanness is the basis of Confucian philosophy and it is not rule-based, but expresses (the Confucian view on) human nature. Moreover, since every human is different, there is no single doctrine that would be applicable to everyone and any time – such doctrine would directly contradict *Rén* 仁. Thus, while Confucianism does promote the Golden Rule, considering it a doctrine is based on a misreading of Confucius.

But if Confucian philosophy is not prescriptive, how can *Rén* 仁 be pursued? The Confucian approach is embodied in the Confucian concept *Lǐ* 禮.

4.3 THE CURIOUS NATURE AND ROLE OF RESPECT IN *Lǐ* 禮

In Confucian philosophy, the concept *Lǐ* 禮, interpreted and translated as “ritual”, “rites”, “etiquette”, “customs”, “ritual-propriety”, “observing ritual-propriety” or simply “propriety”, is, first of all, a concept that is devoted to shaping the integrity of mind and body through shaping day-to-day behaviour. *Lǐ* 禮 expresses respect and reverence for the context in which we exist, showing that both nature and society can manifest the self, and in turn be cultivated through the self. *Lǐ* 禮 aims to foster a self that is fully aware, while situated within the complexity of social relations. Self-cultivation (*xiū shēn* 修身) in the Confucian tradition is a day-to-day, moment-by-moment process, regardless of the social and economic status of an

plus two” (*Rén, Yì, Lǐ, Zhì, Xìn, Shù, Hé*) by Alan Chan (Zēng Fán Rú 曾繁如), the 76th generation descendant of one of the most respected Confucian disciples, Zēng Zǐ 曾子 (or Zēng Diǎn 曾點). (c.f. Chan & Chen, 2018).

¹⁰ For a positive formulation of the “Golden Rule” see also *Analects* 6.28.

individual. It is this “self-cultivation” through *Lǐ* 禮 that transforms the private ego into an open, transparent, dialogical identity in a harmonious balance with the dynamics of the natural and social environment it experiences.

The directives that constitute the Confucian *Lǐ* 禮 are complex and detailed. Yet they express a common requirement: an attitude of respect, almost a spiritual awe towards every single entity, be it nature, human or divine that one encounters. *Lǐ* 禮 is the expression of this fundamental reverence, and staying true to this principle overrides all other considerations:

子曰：「麻冕，禮也；今也純，儉。吾從眾。拜下，禮也；今拜乎上，泰也。雖違眾，吾從下。」

The Master said, “The use of a linen cap was prescribed by the rituals, but now a silk one is used instead. It is economical, and I follow the common practice. Bowing before ascending the hall was prescribed by the ritual, but now the practice is to bow only after ascending it. This is arrogant. I continue to bow below the hall, though it is contrary to the common practice”.

(*Analects* 9.3. trans. Ni, 2017, p. 230-231)

In ancient China, linen was more precious than silk and this passage emphasizes that the actual rules of propriety must bend to the discerned principles for which they were formulated. The Confucian places the essence of *Lǐ* 禮 above widely accepted social norms. Blind acceptance of rules and unreflected conformity is in fact not proper. This has deep implications regarding the actualization of *Lǐ* 禮: it is not enough to perform the ritual, it must be performed with an inner sense of meaning, and with sincere respect. Obviously, respect can be nurtured but not commanded and in exactly this sense *Lǐ* 禮 is not to be considered prescriptive; indeed, if it were, it would miss its point.

Lǐ 禮 is best understood as a *personal* yet *public* interpretation of a principle – “personal” denotes its origin in self-reflective awareness, in an authentic exposure of the roots and motifs of day-to-day practice; “public” characterizes its open and dialogical nature.¹¹ Confucius’ explanation puts it clearly: an “economical” choice might even enhance *Lǐ* 禮, whereas “arrogance” is a defect of attitude, and certainly not compatible.

This has profound implications for Confucian governance. The widely accepted *Lǐ* 禮, when genuinely practiced, is expected to foster and nurture an awareness of the common good in a society, without the need to explicitly invoke that good as a reward. Such governance through *Lǐ* 禮 is considered to be much more natural and sustainable than an exertion of authority, enforced through punishment:

子曰：「道之以政，齊之以刑，民免而無恥；道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格。」

The Master said, “Leading the common people with administrative regulations and keeping them in order with penal punishments, they will try to avoid troubles (mian 免) but will have no sense of shame (chi 恥). Leading them with virtue (de 德) and keeping them in order with ritual propriety, they will have a sense of shame and will constrain (ge 格) themselves”.

¹¹ The relationship between “personal” and “public” in the Confucian philosophy of “self-cultivation” was highlighted in a recent keynote speech by Tu Weiming 杜維明, a widely acclaimed Confucian thinker and public intellectual, at the 24th World Congress of Philosophy held in Beijing, China in August 2018 (Tu, 2018).

(*Analects* 2.3. trans. Ni, 2017, 95-96)

Similar ideas appear throughout the *Analects*, for example when Confucius was asked by Ji Kāngzǐ 季康子, a member of the ruling family, whether it is right to kill the unrighteous, in order to be close to the righteous, Confucius replied, “*Sir, in governing, what is the need for killing? If you aspire to what is good, the common people will be good. The virtue of those in high stations (junzi 君子) is like the wind, and the virtue of common people (xiaoren 小人) is like the grass. The grass will surely bend when the wind blows across it*” (季康子問政於孔子曰：「如殺無道，以就有道，何如？」孔子對曰：「子為政，焉用殺？子欲善，而民善矣。君子之德風，小人之德草。草上之風，必偃。」 *Analects* 12.19. trans. Ni, 2017, 293).

The Confucian idea of good governance is certainly not based upon indiscriminate love or naïve altruism. Confucians believe that human beings are not born equal, but with different abilities, and the moral achievements of every one are different.¹² But beneath such distinction is a premise that moral good is not only a constitutive part of being a human, a human universal, it is also beautiful and truly brings joy to each individual, in every moment. This is important, after all, what we consider to be ethical is more often than not a reflex of our aesthetics.

This aesthetic dimension of *Lǐ* 禮 is opened up by an immanent curiosity, which is often misinterpreted as external guidance and/or imposed regulation. One of such instances can be found in a passage that is hardly questioned, and rarely found ambiguous:

有子曰：「禮之用，和為貴。先王之道斯為美，小大由之。有所不行，知和而和，不以禮節之，亦不可行也。」

Master You said, “Bringing harmony (he 和) is the most valuable practical function of ritual propriety. This is what makes the way of the former Kings beautiful, whether in things great or small. There are situations in which this will not work: if one tries to bring about harmony for harmony’s sake without regulating it by ritual propriety, this is not going to work”.

(*Analects* 1.12. trans. Ni, 2017, p. 89)

The passage seems to be coherent with regarding *Lǐ* 禮 as external regulation, guidance or prescription.¹³ The crucial character though is *jié* 節, here translated as “regulating”.

Etymologically, *jié* 節 denotes a “node”, in particular the nodes that segment the culm of the bamboo stalk and that meaning survives in *zhú jié* 竹節, bamboo node. The anatomy of bamboo shows that the cells at the node are distorted, compressed by the growth of the shoots, and the fibres are significantly shorter than those of the flexible internodes, which gives the stalk stiffness, permits the culm to bend if necessary, and limits the extent of splitting when overstressed (Liese, 1998, p. 94). Interestingly, no matter how different the appearance of bamboo from species to species, the nodal area remains distinctively special. If we consider this original meaning of *jié* 節, the interpretation of the above passage changes, from an imposed *constraint* to an enabling *restraint*. The *node* structures but transmits, thus we

¹² Note the profound difference in world view that underlies the notion of equality in a focus on equal rights, in the West, versus a focus on differentiated responsibilities in Confucianism.

¹³ See, for example, previous translations such as Ames & Rosemont (1999, p. 74), Chin (2014, p. 9), and Leys (1997, p. 5).

translate *jié* 節 as *propagate* and the translation acquires a distinctly different tone: “The use of *Lǐ* 禮 is for precious harmony. This way of former kings has beauty, and things small and large follow. Still they would not practice harmony through harmony: if not propagated through *Lǐ* 禮, harmony will not do.”

When we interpret *jié* 節 as “to propagate”, we intend to reveal the etymological significance of the character, which has been forgotten in contemporary usage. The etymology provides a phenomenological footnote to the abstract meaning of “restraint”, as *jié* 節 is normally translated. Confucius himself never stopped inquiring and questioning the true meaning of *Lǐ* 禮, and he did not hesitate to say that he did not know much about it. “When the Master entered the Grand Temple, he asked about everything. Someone said, ‘Who says that the son of the man of Zou understands (*zhi*, 知) the rituals? When he entered the Grand Temple, he asked about everything.’ The Master heard the remark and said, ‘It is itself a ritual.’” (子入大廟，每事問。或曰：「孰謂鄒人之子知禮乎？入大廟，每事問。」子聞之曰：「是禮也。」 *Analects* 3.15; trans. Ni, 2017, p.122).

If we were to consider *Lǐ* 禮 to be an empty formula, then we might consider Confucius’ questioning as a mere expression of courtesy. However, asking everything about even the most familiar matters allows meaning to grow from exchange. In this case, the *Lǐ* 禮 that Confucius performed in the Grand Temple illustrates that the true expert does not hesitate to question his expertise. Casting his questions as an expression of *Lǐ* 禮, the estrangement inherent in restraint propagates the inquiry. For Confucius, such learning is itself *Lǐ* 禮. Similarly, Confucius once claimed that he did not know about the *Dì* 禘 rituals: “Someone asked the meaning of the *di* sacrifice. The Master said, ‘I do not know. Wouldn’t one who understands it find the affairs under heaven (*tianxia* 天下) just as displaying them in this?’ pointing to his palm.” (或問禘之說。子曰：「不知也。知其說者之於天下也，其如示諸斯乎！」指其掌。 *Analects* 3.11. trans. Ni, 2017, p. 120).

Some may need doctrines and good examples to aspire to *Rén* 仁, but such growth is already enabled by the immanent propagation, or restraint of *Lǐ* 禮. Since restraint in this sense is an attitude, not imposed behavior, it cannot be enforced, nor does it need to be. Through properly, respectfully and sincerely practicing *Lǐ* 禮, adjusting one’s own propriety in both self-cultivation as well as in governance, a common virtue, or social harmony (*Hé* 和) develops. In a phenomenological sense, this brings “thickness” to the self; as in the examples of Confucius’ own practice, *Lǐ* 禮 manifests the self as a phenomenon but does not constrain it.

We emphasize the dialectic of respect in this relationship: respect is attitude, not behaviour. However, proper behaviour can indeed foster an attitude of respect which in turn becomes both an expression of the self, and its constitution. Interestingly, this dialectic resonates e.g. with the familiar observation that the conscious behaviour of smiling can in fact improve well-being (Kraft & Pressman, 2012). In this way, a Confucian path towards responsible, ecological behaviour turns on the notion of respect.

4.4 EXISTENTIAL CONFUCIANISM

The Confucian idea of a complex, situated self, rather than a one dimensional private ego, is expressed in the Confucian philosophical term “self-cultivation” (*xiū shēn* 修身), whose meaning is reflected in the Chinese character for the “self”: *shēn* 身, body. This body is both constituted and shaped as an integrated natural and cultural human-*becoming* and the archetypical posture of this becoming is one of uprightness.¹⁴ The body as an emerging, constitutive self grants a presence here and now, the dialectic of inward attitude and outward behaviour is a silent but immanent *encounter*. Note that we are not talking about the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy, but referring to the humanistic basis of the Confucian mode of self-cultivation, namely, *Lǐ* 禮 (Propriety).

Based on its etymology, the Chinese character *Lǐ* 禮 literally means “sacrificial utensils”. Through adherence to *Lǐ* 禮, self-cultivation transforms the self into a phenomenon. Indeed, “self” becomes a phenomenological *project* that situates the self both within and beyond society. To be authentic, such a dynamic process of self-cultivation cannot blindly follow *Lǐ* 禮 as a finite set of immutable norms. For those who properly adhere to *Lǐ* 禮, the practice is dynamic and comprehensive. This embodied expression of a transcendental objective is vividly illustrated through one of the core subjects of Confucian education: archery, *shè* 射, a martial art that originates from the closest point of the body, here and now, but nevertheless reaches the most remote, even seemingly invisible target.

Practising the Confucian *Lǐ* 禮, first of all, leads us back to “real” activities in the “real” world, a world that is referred to as “the world of perception” by the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961), who reminds us of the very existence of *this* world thus:

The world of perception, or in other words the world which is revealed to us by our senses in everyday life, seems at first sight to be the one we know best of all. For we need neither to measure nor to calculate in order to gain access to this world and it would seem that we can fathom it simply by opening our eyes and getting on with our lives. Yet this is a delusion.

(Merleau-Ponty & Davis (trans.), 2008, p.31)

Lǐ 禮 defends against this delusion, since it transforms everyday activities into performances, and this distancing makes matters that we would otherwise take for granted, available to reflection, deeper insight and restructuring. It provides the distance we need to examine the things that are closest to our self, so close, that they would otherwise be invisible. This calls for examining the *Lǐ* 禮 of everydayness.

4.5 RITUAL IN THE KITCHEN

The existential view of Confucian philosophy integrates theory and practice, or rather, shows how they are one and the same. In the language of modern Continental Philosophy we can speak of phenomena, and the dialectic of distancing to make the self as a phenomenon accessible to self-reflection. Intriguingly, this is the same approach that has been developed in

¹⁴ The original form of *shēn* 身 body, in the archaic Oracle Script style, highlights the curve of the body, and that which supports it, the backbone.

Confucian *Lǐ* 禮 for a long time – moreover, with an emphasis to open up paths to self-improvement, not merely reflection. However, the *Analects* is not doctrine, it invites us to seek examples that resonate with us personally in our quest for *Lǐ* 禮. Confucius offers this concrete example:

食不厭精，膾不厭細。食饁而餲，魚餒而肉敗，不食。色惡，不食。臭惡，不食。失飪，不食。不時，不食。割不正，不食。不得其醬，不食。肉雖多，不使勝食氣。惟酒無量，不及亂。沽酒市脯不食。不撤薑食。不多食。祭於公，不宿肉。祭肉不出三日。出三日，不食之矣。食不語，寢不言。雖疏食菜羹，必祭，必齋如也。

He did not demand his rice to be superbly polished or his meat and fish to be finely minced. He did not eat rice that was spoiled, nor fish or meat that was rotten. He did not eat if the food was discolored, or it smelled bad. He did not eat anything that was improperly cooked or during periods other than regular mealtime. He did not eat meat if the animal was not properly slain, nor did he eat what was served without the right sauce. Though there might be plenty of meat, he would not eat more of it than rice. Only with alcohol did he set no limit, though not to the point of disorienting himself. Wine and dry meat purchased from the marketplace he would not eat. He would not remove ginger from his food, though he would not eat too much of it. During a court sacrifice, he would not keep the meat overnight (su rou 宿肉). Sacrificial meat could not be used three days after it was prepared. Beyond three days, he would not eat it. When eating, he would not converse (yu 語). When lying in bed, he would not talk (yan 言). Even when he had only coarse rice and vegetable soup, he would always (bi 必) offer them as sacrifice, and he always did so as if he were fasting.

(*Analects* 10.8-10.11. trans. Ni, 2017, p. 251-254)

The English translation of this passage faces difficulties. For example, its beginning “*Shí bú yàn jīng, kuài bú yàn xì*” 食不厭精，膾不厭細 has become a common Chinese idiom “pursuing refinement in preparing rice, slicing meat in the thinnest way” which means: pursuing the peak of refinement. Taken at face value this appears to contradict Confucius’ overall attitude of being content with a simple life: “*With coarse rice to eat, plain water to drink, and my bended arms for a pillow, joy can be found in the midst of these [...]*” (飯疏食飲水，曲肱而枕之，樂亦在其中矣。 *Analects* 7.16; trans. Ni, 2017, p. 200). Moreover, the entire passage, as usual in classical Chinese, was written without personal pronouns, thus equally valid translations e.g. of *shí bù yǔ* 食不語 express various registers of authority: “Confucius never spoke when eating”, “One does not speak at a meal”, or even “Don’t talk with your mouth full!”¹⁵ But whatever the register, the essence is to demonstrate that the very same refinement of eating could be either vice or virtue – vice, if it fosters decadence, virtue, if it promotes reverent attention to detail. The difference does not derive from outward appearance, but emerges from our innermost attitude. This is not cherry-picking – Confucian philosophy most certainly does not expound moral relativism – on the contrary: though the approaches are negotiable, the advancement of *Rén* 仁 is an absolute.

Focussing on the *Lǐ* 禮 of the kitchen in practice, every food item is given full consideration from both mind and body: sensational, emotional and intellectual. Food is not merely consumed, but a source for appreciation and aesthetic enjoyment of what has been served;

¹⁵ In principle, we prefer the impersonal voice: “Not speaking while eating” which retains the original ambiguity, attenuates the prescriptive implication, and thus makes it easier for the reader to relate the passage to the self, rather than to a deity, sage or authority.

concern for the quality, the look, the smell, the taste, and the quantity of the food, and paying special attention to the right time, all contribute to the conscious ritual of eating.

Confucius intentionally positions eating alongside sacrificial rituals. This juxtaposition does not only transmit a sense of spiritual awe, but more importantly, transforms eating from an inconvenient interruption of more important affairs into a reverent way of life and meaningful activity of self-cultivation. Receiving food and returning respect realizes the metaphysical goal of “Unity between Heaven and Human Beings” (*tiān rén hé yī* 天人合一), the highest achievement for a Confucian thinker.¹⁶

The proper balance between humans and nature, which is after all the quintessential concern of ecology, can be supported by this everydayness. The simple act of eating consciously can contribute to well-being, as has been recently reported in a large study on the psychological benefits of dietary regimes (Lassale *et al.*, 2018). The authors reported that “healthy” dietary regimes – irrespective of their specifics – were correlated with a decreased risk for clinical depression. Intriguingly this correlation was not apparent in regimes that aim to achieve a specific benefit for hypertension, although the dietary recommendations are virtually the same. A mechanical expectation of benefits might not only be misplaced, but might actually be counterproductive and this has deep implications for a Confucian approach to ecology. Considering climate action to be an investment and demanding results as return, prompting action with the promise of reward, would miss the point. Such is the trap of utilitarianism: in practice, universal utility remains elusive. But how else could we “reward” respect?

4.6 RESPECT AND REWARD

In a frequently cited passage of the *Analects*, Confucius describes the meaning of sacrificial rituals through the state of mind in which they are performed: “*Sacrifice is as if [there is a] presence. Sacrifice to spirits is as if the spirits are present. The Master said: ‘Would I not [sincerely] participate in a sacrifice [It is] as if I would not sacrifice [at all].’*”¹⁷ (祭如在，祭神如神在。子曰：「吾不與祭，如不祭。」 *Analects* 3.12). In the expressive terseness of classical Chinese, the author's intent hinges on the understanding of two words: “as if”, and “participate”. Regarding “as if”, Peimin Ni points out that a true sacrifice would channel spirituality and reverence, an attitude that would be appropriate for believers and atheists alike: “This position does not focus on *believing* the existence or presence of the spirits as they are in themselves; instead, it guides one’s mental disposition of their ‘as-if-presence’ in the practice” (Ni, 2017, p. 121). Regarding “participate”, we add *sincerely* to the translation, to emphasize the *Analects*’ general attitude towards rituals that we have discussed at length

¹⁶ Tu Weiming observed such unity as a common Confucian goal for the most distinguished Confucian thinkers in the 20th century from both mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, and named this phenomenon “*The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism*” (Tu, 2003, p. 480). Tu’s metaphysical approach to the relationship between mankind and nature, which is characteristic of the metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism, situates human beings within the cosmos, in an extension from the self to the family, to the state, to nature, and beyond, based upon an expanding network of reward in reciprocal relationships.

¹⁷ Authors’ translation. Peimin Ni translates: “*Sacrificing as if present. When sacrificing to the spirits, do it as if the spirits were present. The Master said, ‘If I did not participate in a sacrifice, it is no different from not having done the sacrifice.’*” (2017, p. 121).

above. In context, the passage emphasizes: sacrifice means a sincere spiritual experience. This in turn means: it is inconceivable that such an attitude could involve an expectation of reciprocity, a benefit granted in return for the sacrifice. Indeed, “as if the spirits are present” demands to be understood as a spontaneous expression of *unconditional* respect. This subtle but crucial point profoundly distinguishes the *Lǐ* 禮 of the *Analects* not only from traditional folk religion, but also from the state religion promoted by “Confucianism”.¹⁸ We contend that such “respect, independent of reward” is more true to the attitudes promulgated in the *Analects* than the focus on reciprocity which is read into them up to today. And we further contend that this attitude provides an important alternative formulation of Confucian ethics, and environmental ethics in general.

Let us illustrate this principle from a movie that is set in Japan, a society in which a high regard for mutual respect and for harmony in relations pervades the social sphere and is ubiquitous in daily life. Famed director Hayao Miyazaki has made an inspiring movie that can be read as an ecological allegory from a Confucian perspective, with Shintoist overtones: *My Neighbour Totoro* (Miyazaki, 1988).¹⁹

The story is set in the *satoyama* (里山) landscapes of Saitama prefecture, near Tokyō. The *satoyamas* are the quintessential Japanese cultural landscapes, wherein small scale sustainable farming centred around rice paddies integrates diverse crops, grassland plots, aquaculture, forest stands and subsistence husbandry, and has over millennia shaped nature, and the inhabitant’s attitudes towards nature. This agricultural model based on harmony with nature and human beings, is indeed Confucian at its core – every activity, no matter whether planting, weeding or harvesting is taken care of with utmost respect and reverence. The year is approximately 1955, significantly at a time when Japan was regaining balance in its post-war reconstruction efforts, but before it had lost its ecological innocence in the environmental catastrophes of Minamata disease and Yokkaichi asthma (cf. Kagawa-Fox, 2012, p. 62) – some twenty years before the movie was made.

Two young girls move into an old farmhouse with their father, and soon, in a narrative space between dream and reality, encounter Totoro: a large and benevolent spirit of the forest who lives in a hollow of a giant camphor tree. One dark night, waiting at a bus stop in the rain, the girl Satsumi offers her father’s umbrella to Totoro who has appeared waiting beside her. This offering is significant in that it initiates a relationship from a gesture of respect, and clearly without implied obligation. When Totoro leaves, he gives Satsumi a small package in return.

¹⁸ On the purpose of sacrificial rituals in the Confucian tradition, see e.g. Ruin, 2018.

¹⁹ We follow Damian Cox and Michael P. Levine in asserting that film studies can be a valuable addition to the philosopher’s toolbox. “*Philosophical problems [...] are ingredients of life. As such, and with varying degrees of success, they are often depicted and analyzed in literature and film, as well as in art forms, such as music and painting that have less explicit narrative content, or perhaps no narrative content at all.*” (2012, p. 18). Indeed, film is not just a domain for philosophical thinking, it can be a medium of philosophy in its own right. We further observe that whether a film is a critical or even commercial success is a salient fact by itself, since it reflects on the degree to which the work resonates with the general sentiment of a society. Thus, we discuss *My Neighbor Totoro* since it not only illustrates the attitude of “respect, independent of reward”, but this attitude is essential to the storyline, which hinges on specific actions of the main protagonists that conform to the Confucian ideal we develop in this manuscript. Remarkably, the movie does not only resonate with its original Japanese audience, but has also become an enduring success in the Western world following its worldwide release.

These offerings of mutual respect and recognition establish harmony: the umbrella is given because it is proper to hand someone an umbrella in the rain. The package contains seeds and acorns. In Confucian terms, this exchange is an example of *Shù* 恕 (reciprocity).²⁰

Satsumi and her little sister Mei plant the acorns – but at first they will not grow. Some days later in a moonlit night, the two girls join Totoro in a stalk-raising ritual and bring forth a gigantic, towering tree from the seeds. While Totoro initiates the ritual, its success comes from the joint efforts between the two sisters and the spirits of nature. The movie’s exchange of respect and harmony is not at all directed towards reward and compensation: if any benefits appear they are joyfully accepted, but they are not to be expected.

This allegory perfectly illustrates how the Confucian principle of respect acts from the self, and towards the self: expecting reward from a gesture of respect would void its sincerity, but mutual respect ensures reciprocal benefit. This is Confucian propriety, and it is an obvious model for environmental ethics (Kagawa-Fox, 2010) as it establishes a virtuous cycle of action and inner growth that does not depend on external validation. In this way, a principal problem of our culture of runaway consumption can be addressed: it appears unreasonable to expect the problems of unsustainable practices that are driven by consumer habits to be solved from a culture that expects (material) returns. In contrast, the prospects of establishing well-being through respectful, sustainable life choices appear far more promising. Confucian philosophy can contribute to define creative, practical approaches to individual development and support a powerful win-win proposition.

This does not come for free: *Lǐ* 禮 is not magic and there are no shortcuts. In “Totoro”, the acorns had to be planted and carefully tended before they grow. In the morning, the towering tree was no longer present. Nevertheless, as Satsumi and Mei dance around their little field in which their seeds have now actually sprouted, they can cheer: “*it was a dream, but it wasn’t a dream*” (Miyazaki, 1988, 1:00:55).

4.7 CODA: HARMONY

Respect in Confucian philosophy is a reward in and of itself. Social harmony and the harmony between humans and nature derive naturally from a life-long “self-cultivation” (*xiū shēn* 修身). And indeed, this is the opening of the *Analects*:

²⁰ Note that “reciprocity” in a Confucian sense is an exchange without expectation of reward, originating from the self. This concept cannot be exactly translated into English where reciprocity implies “reciprocation of cooperative or altruistic behavior” (OED online, 2018). In the Confucian sense however we have sequential but independent unilateral actions, originating from sincere respect, and the reciprocal relationship only appears in the perspective of a third-person observer. *Shù* 恕, although regarded as a key concept in Confucian philosophy, is in fact mentioned only twice in the *Analects*. The first instance uses the term to express a sense of extending favors to others (*Analects* 4.15). The second instance is remarkable. To a disciple’s request for one maxim that could direct his entire life, Confucius replies: “*Would that not be ‘reciprocity’? What [one] oneself does not wish, do not impose on others*”. (「其恕乎、己所不欲、勿施於人。」 *Analects* 15.24). The Golden Rule is expressed word by word as in *Analects* 12.3, discussed above, but here it defines the core of Confucian “reciprocity” (*Shù* 恕); there it defines “humanness” (*Rén* 仁). Since this establishes an equivalence of those two concepts, this further underscores that the English sense of the word “reciprocity” is not an appropriate translation of the Confucian concept.

子曰：「學而時習之，不亦說乎？有朋自遠方來，不亦樂乎？人不知而不慍，不亦君子乎？」

The Master said: "To learn (xue 學) and to practice (xi 習) what is learned repeatedly (shi 時), is it not pleasant? To have companions (peng 朋) coming from far distances, is it not delightful? To be untroubled when not recognized by others, is this not being an exemplary person (junzi 君子)?"

(Analects 1.1. trans. Ni, 2017, p. 79)

Regarded as the quintessential Confucian agenda up to today,²¹ “learning for the self” sets the basic tone for Confucian philosophy – a philosophy for which learning is a lived and living foundation. Learning through proper timing and practise; learning to build and enjoy spiritual friendship, and learning to become the true self without aspiring to impress others, converge.

To foster such learning, Confucius’s renowned disciple Zēng Zǐ 曾子 remarks, “*I daily examine myself on three counts — whether, in serving others, I have been not wholeheartedly devoted (zhong 忠); whether, in interacting with friends, I have been not trustworthy (xin 信); whether, having been given instruction, I have not practiced accordingly?*” (曾子曰：「吾日三省吾身：為人謀而不忠乎？與朋友交而不信乎？傳不習乎？」 *Analects 1.4. trans. Ni, 2017, p. 82*).

The negative emphasis of this passage may disguise the true enjoyment and the aesthetic value of this self-reflective mode of learning. Yet, the apparent “harshness” towards the self illustrates how restraint propagates self-cultivation, which underscores how *Li* 禮 nurtures harmony from within, and how harmony grows from the cultivated self.

Personal, individual decisions can indeed contribute to manage the existential risks of the Anthropocene. They may be associated with personal sacrifice. Why would we want to do this? Confucian philosophy gives the answer that such actions are “proper”, they express respect for the world around us; through sincerely expressing respect, they become not merely something we do, but an expression of who we are. The *Analects*, and the Confucians after it up to the present time, affirm that respect is a constituting element of the self, balancing it with its relationships; we point out in addition that in order to extend *sincere* respect, that respect has to be independent of anticipated benefits. Apparently it is so natural for us to focus on the beneficial returns of Confucian virtues – their reward – that the inherent contradiction between sincerity and expectation of reward is usually overlooked. But it is important to realize that being motivated by reward - however noble the outcome - makes the virtue itself contingent. Not only is this limitation unnecessary, it also perpetuates the root cause of our inability to respond adequately to the existential environmental challenges we face. If everyone's respect depends on the expectation of benefit, we are back at the irreconcilable tangle of conflicting objectives of utilitarianism, in which no agreement can be achieved on the “best” approaches to a multipolar, globally pluralistic world. As we extend respect for the sake of its own merit, rather than in anticipation of any benefit, we propagate our humanness. Once this objective is apparent, specific measures can facilitate it, the insight

²¹ Tu Weiming’s talk at the 24th World Congress of Philosophy held in Beijing, China in August 2018 emphasizes “*learning for the sake of the self*”. According to Tu, the Confucian Way of learning starts from a concrete self, here and now, situated within a societal network, formulated by various traits of the roles and relationships, yet able to navigate “troubled waters” through learning and self-cultivation (Tu, 2018).

we propose has actionable consequences with measurable outcomes. Educators have had success with activities that empower students through engagement; the ecological, community based movement for restoring satoyamas is another example that comes to mind, and an increasing body of work in psychology is demonstrating that gratitude is correlated with reduced materialism. Indeed, interventions to increase gratitude in American adolescents have significantly decreased materialism and increased generosity (Chaplin, 2018), and there are obvious parallels between this empirical evidence and our philosophical argument.

There is yet another crucial advantage to promoting respect through self-improvement: that is the question of the time horizon in which positive outcomes can be realized. The benefits of actions to prevent a global catastrophe may not become apparent in our lifetimes. In the best case, as a result of enormous effort, the environment does not degrade catastrophically – and the positive outcome may be no more than that the current status quo can be maintained. In contrast, the benefits of expending such effort in a framework of sincere respect – perhaps codified in personal ritual – are manifest in every moment and with every act. They are not deferred, they do not depend on a large number of like-minded allies, they are immediate and personal. Buckland’s dilemma that a “*future truth*” seems unable to motivate current behaviour (2012) could yet be resolved.

We hope our thoughts will contribute a philosophical framework to creatively pursue the many specific activities that it implies, those in turn can be expected to spark a virtuous cycle for individuals, for society, and for the world around us.

Back in Tokyō’s Nezu Museum, you finish your bowl of tea. The green of the surrounding garden is now within you, where it has always been in the first place.

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