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CONTEMPORARY RITUALS AND THE CONFUCIAN TRADITION: A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

ABSTRACT

After defining what I mean by “rituals,” I list some benefits claimed for rituals by Confucians, but then go on to develop utilitarian, existentialist, liberal, radical, and Confucian critiques of rituals. (The Confucian critiques are particularly poignant. Rituals can hinder, rather than forward the goals of the Confucian tradition.) The drawbacks of rituals are not merely historical accidents; they grow out of essential features of rituals and are ineliminable. Yet there is hope. Because the drawbacks appear when rituals decay, they can be ameliorated by fostering the creation of new rituals as alternatives to the old ones.

I. INTRODUCTION

Rituals (*li*) are absolutely central to, and esteemed by, the Confucian tradition. What do contemporary Western ethicists think about rituals? One window onto the thinking of Western philosophers is *Philosopher's Index*. During the last five years, the only peer-reviewed articles and books listed in *Philosopher's Index* that mention rituals in the title or abstract, are works of non-Western philosophy, philosophy of religion, or social science.¹ Author-meets-critic sessions at the division meetings of the American Philosophical Association and the accompanying group meetings are another indicator of contemporary philosophers' interests. Aside from works of non-Western philosophy and philosophy of religion, these author-meets-critic sessions covered eighty-five books about ethics and/or politics during the last five years. The word “ritual” appears in the index of only one of these books (and that because of the book's connection to social science).² Contemporary Western ethicists do talk about habits, practices, and ceremonies, but while these are related to rituals in complex ways, they are not rituals. Overall, Western ethicists are simply ignoring rituals!

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As the Confucian tradition rightly takes rituals to have an important role in moral development and practice, and because discussion of rituals is completely absent from contemporary Western ethics, Confucians seem poised to make a major contribution to Western philosophy. By contributing their thoughts about rituals to the current dialog among Western ethicists, Confucians could have a considerable impact. This is potentially just the sort of enrichment of one tradition by another that makes comparative philosophy worthwhile.

But giving something without ensuring that it is beneficial would surely be improper. Before offering the subject of rituals to Western ethicists, we Confucians must ask whether rituals really are good things. Do they make a positive contribution? Are Western ethicists wrong to ignore rituals, or would a discussion of rituals be unhelpful, or even a counterproductive distraction to the current dialogue? We should not uncritically praise rituals *en mass*. Confucians should check for problems, and if there are problems, they must be resolved. In the bulk of this article, I identify eleven positive consequences of rituals and twenty-one negative consequences. My goal is not to weigh the pros and cons in order to determine whether contemporary Confucian thought should foreground rituals proudly and offer them to Western ethicists, or background rituals as embarrassing vestiges and look for a different contribution. Rather I identify the problems of rituals so that I can propose a solution in the last part of the article. My proposal rests upon three empirical claims.³ (1) The benefits of a ritual typically occur early in its natural lifecycle; the drawbacks arise later.⁴ (2) Rituals cannot be petrified, purified, or prevented from proliferating. (3) The benefits of new, vibrant rituals can counterbalance the drawbacks of aging, degenerate, rituals, for the new rituals can outcompete the old. My proposal is to foster, rather than hinder this competition.

The definition of ritual is contested, and indeed the English word “ritual” is an imperfect translation of *li*. Providing a precise, uncontroversial definition of “ritual” is a task beyond the scope of this article.⁵ Luckily a precise, uncontroversial definition of “ritual” is unnecessary, for there is substantial agreement about numerous examples of rituals. A few stipulations about what I shall, and shall not mean by the term “ritual” will be sufficient to launch a discussion of ritual’s pros and cons.

Some rituals are mandated by law, or described in etiquette books, or clustered around lifecycle events, but not every rule of law or etiquette specifies a ritual, and some rituals are common fixtures of our everyday lives without legal or polite status. The Confucian tradition is not concerned with the personal grooming “rituals” of individual people, or the idiosyncratic “rituals” individual families

concoct in order to get their kids to sleep, or the handshake “rituals” of secret societies. Rather rituals are known, at least in outline though not necessarily in detail, by almost everyone in the society. Some rituals emerge spontaneously and unconsciously from a group dynamic; others are deliberately designed by individuals. My focus will be contemporary American rituals rather than rituals embedded in the culture of ancient China (or modern China, for that matter) because my overarching project is to make the Confucian tradition relevant to contemporary American society.

Some social scientists take the class of rituals to be a hodgepodge with no significant commonalities.⁶ Other social scientists take rituals to be magical attempts to persuade or force the gods or nature to bestow rain, children, health, etc.⁷ But the Confucian tradition, along with a third group of social scientists,⁸ takes rituals to be essentially symbolic and evocative. The purpose of rituals is to transform people’s thoughts and feelings through symbolic actions. Rituals express and reinforce certain beliefs about the world, particularly about human relationships. They teach us about our dependence upon, and duties toward others. They are also emotionally moving. They imbue repeated actions with special feeling as well as meaning. Not everyone necessarily understands or experiences what rituals try to convey, but in this article, repeated actions that do not strive to convey beliefs or stir passions will not be considered rituals.

Is every widely known, symbolic, and evocative routine a ritual? Some Confucians stipulate that rituals are

learned human activity that is regarded as sacred seen as sacred, . . . regarded as having an authority that is not reducible to that of human individuals. . . . To regard something as sacred is to think that the proper attitude toward it is awe or reverence (*jing*).⁹

On this view, “being regarded with awe or reverence” is an essential feature of rituals. However, this view would drastically limit the number of activities that count as rituals. The proper attitude toward contemporary greeting rituals, for example, is not thought to be reverence. Thus, I shall not narrow the list by stipulating that rituals are essentially awe-inspiring.

Many Confucians seem to assume that only beneficial routines are rituals. At least they say things such as “Rituals provide X,” where X is a good thing. Confucius, himself, describes rituals in a very positive light, of course. Xunzi goes further, “By ritual, Heaven and Earth harmoniously combine. By ritual, the sun and the moon radiantly shine; . . . Is not ritual perfect indeed!”¹⁰ But many widely known, symbolic, and evocative routines do not provide benefits, and some are thoroughly pernicious from the get-go. For example, a common initiation “ritual” among teens is shoplifting. Following the Confucian

tradition, I shall use the term “ritual” to refer only to widely known, symbolic, and evocative routines that are at least initially beneficial. However, I shall not go along with those who use the term “ritual” to refer only to thoroughly and constantly beneficial rituals. Restricting the term “ritual” in this way would beg the question of whether problems afflict rituals.

I shall describe the benefits of ritual briefly, without much elucidation or example because these benefits are already well canvassed throughout the literature. Similarly, rather than thoroughly developing a few criticisms of ritual, as others have already done, I shall sketch a covey of critiques in order to get a sense of the overall picture.¹¹ My aim is to assemble a comprehensive collection of consequences of rituals.

II. BENEFITS OF RITUAL

Rituals force us to pause in the midst of our activities. A check that temporarily prevents us from pressing forward aggressively with our own, often self-centered projects allows us the opportunity to reconsider and then refrain from self-destructive acts and from ignoring or exploiting others. A *chance to think twice* about whether our activities fit or frustrate our long-term goals or those of others is no bad thing. Moreover, in this hurly-burly world, a change of pace may be simply intrinsically enjoyable. Both we and those we encounter can benefit from an enforced quiet time.

Rituals *encode the wisdom of the past*. Certain ways of seeing the world and of doing things have been found to be fruitful. These are passed down through the ages partially by rituals and their accompanying explanations. “*Li* are life forms transmitted from generation to generation as repositories of meaning, enabling the youth to appropriate persisting values and to make them appropriate to their own situations.”¹² Rituals keep us from having to reinvent the compass.

Rituals structure novel and/or stressful and/or complex situations, enabling people to *move smoothly and easily* through those situations.¹³ Awkwardness, blunders, and wrongdoing are all significantly reduced when one just follows the relevant ritual. Moreover, by removing the need for working out what to do, rituals streamline various processes even in ordinary situations. Thus, they help get things done more efficiently. As Xunzi says, they “enable accomplishments.”¹⁴

Rituals provide individuals with a sense of rootedness. Because rituals are relative to relationships, they remind us of, emphasize, and make us comfortable with our place in our family, our roles, and our society. As the Confucian tradition emphasizes, rituals make it easier for us to do what we should do as siblings, spouses, friends, parents and

children, rulers and ruled. By providing detailed instructions for dealing with various situations, rituals help us *feel and function well in the five relationships*.

Rituals are necessary, or at least *useful in self-realization*. Through performing rituals we discover, display, and reinforce the social components of our selves. We sensitize ourselves to the values inherent in our relationships, and commit ourselves to the pursuit of these values.¹⁵ Rituals also aid us in expressing our non-social components. Rituals do not specify every detail of their performance; rather, they provide boundary constraints within which we may express our individuality safely. Thus, rituals enable us to make ourselves into the person we want to be.¹⁶

Probably the most important function of ritual for Confucians is moral cultivation by which I mean improving passions, desires, perceptions, beliefs (especially values), reasoning, and actions. Rituals can do all of this. To begin with, they train us to want and feel certain things. Moreover, rituals guide the expression of desires and passions, particularly in stressful situations. "Ritual begins in that which must be released, reaches full development in giving it proper form, and finishes in providing it satisfaction."¹⁷ For example, funeral rituals ensure that the survivors grieve for the right people, at the right time, to the right degree, etc. Overall, rituals can *produce and express good desires and passions*.¹⁸

Desires and passions foreground certain facts and background others. So do explanations of rituals. Thus, rituals and their explanations structure the ways in which we appropriate the world. They generate perceptions, reasons, and beliefs. Thus rituals can improve people's attitude toward themselves, toward others, and toward society as a whole. Rituals can help people see the world well, and *provide right beliefs, reasoning, and perceptions*. Xunzi says that ritual "makes clear what is ye."¹⁹ The Neo-Confucians "think of ritual, and lesser learning more generally, as supporting one's ability to focus and attend to both one's immediate situation and its larger context."²⁰ Indeed, some rituals have a significant religious dimension. The performance of such rituals is explicitly meant to disclose the sacred embedded within the world. To put it secularly, these rituals foreground what is valuable in life. They save us from becoming lost in the mundane and distracted by our many, petty tasks and concerns.²¹

In addition to providing moral passions and cognition, rituals can *provide morally good habits of action*. Supplemented by law enforcement, rituals improve the way in which people act. As Confucius says, "If you guide them with Virtue, and keep them in line by means of ritual, the people will have a sense of shame and rectify themselves."²² That is, rituals not only help people to internalize the

right values, they also bring people's behavior into line with these values.

“With *li*, people . . . form an interpersonal harmony. Hence the effect of *li* on government is one of harmony coming of itself, rather than order imposed from outside.”²³ Rituals *enhance social harmony* in several ways. They help to hold society together by creating bonding experiences and shared practices among groups of various sizes ranging from pairs to nations. Because they are shared, rituals make us feel as if we belong to a community. Second, rituals standardize the way in which people think, feel, and act. They reduce deviance. Third, rituals constitute boundary constraints on action within relationships, enforcing patterns of respect.²⁴ Finally, rituals reduce chaos by the orderly allocation of goods, and by moderating the desires of people so that they will be satisfied with whatever they are allocated. Indeed, Xunzi claims that rituals originated as a way of preventing scarcity from leading to conflict, anarchy, and poverty.

Humans are born having desires. . . . If there is no measure or limit to their seeking, then they cannot help but struggle with each other. . . . Then there will be chaos, and . . . they will be impoverished. The former kings . . . established rituals and *yi* in order to allot things to people, to nurture their desires, and to satisfy their seeking.²⁵

Many rituals are formal or informal performances. They focus the attention of audiences upon individuals. By thus encouraging us to put ourselves in the place of others, rituals help us to identify with others. Moreover, many rituals are expressions of deference. They engender humility as well as respect for others. Overall, they *enhance our relationships* with other people.

Some rituals have a significant aesthetic dimension; their performance is a work of art. This aesthetic aspect of ritual not only supplements the effectiveness of rituals in all other respects, it has intrinsic value as well. Whether one performs or watches, rituals *add beauty to life*.

Overall, ritual works to ornament happiness when serving the living, to ornament sorrow when sending off the dead, to ornament respect when conducting sacrifices, and to ornament awe-inspiring power when engaged in military affairs.²⁶

Some skeptics might try to deny that rituals can have some or all of these benefits. Others might insist that non-ritual practices can produce the same benefits more efficiently and/or more reliably. (Perhaps role-playing games produce more empathy than do rituals, for example.) But I shall simply grant that rituals can produce these benefits better than the currently available alternatives. My criticism is that they do not always do so. Indeed, they often do much worse things, instead.

Intriguingly, the praise of rituals as mentioned previously suggests the critiques in the following sections because the drawbacks of rituals turn out to result from the same features as their benefits. Perhaps it should come as no surprise that the light and dark of rituals are flip sides of the same coin. Rituals can be beneficial because they are powerful artifacts, but powerful things are dangerous.

III. UTILITARIAN CRITIQUES

I begin with something straightforward. One advantage of rituals is that they stop people from proceeding directly with their non-ritual activities. However, “prolonged mourning entails prohibiting people from pursuing their vocations for an extended period of time.”²⁷ While pausing in life can provide an opportunity to do good things, it can also be simply a *waste of time*. Indeed, rituals are often not used for reflection, or centering, or smelling the roses; they are often simply endured while glancing at one’s watch. In the modern world, many people do not have enough time to do all of the things that they need to do. They are working two jobs, helping their children with homework, visiting their parents in nursing homes, etc. For many people, time is a scarce, precious resource. Moreover, while some rituals take just a bit of time, others consume great gobs of it. Planning a large, formal wedding, for example, is not the work of a mere moment. So this is not a trivial criticism of rituals, although worse are coming.

Rituals often consume significant other resources, too. As Mozi says, “Lavish funerals entail burying a great deal of wealth,”²⁸ Xunzi acknowledges this. “Ritual takes resources and goods as its implements.”²⁹ Sometimes the resources consumed are humongous. For example, the average cost of a wedding in the United States is \$27,800.³⁰ The average cost of a funeral is \$6,500.00, not including cemetery costs.³¹ For most of us, this is not petty cash. The cost of rituals can be a burden. Of course, sometimes large expenditures of resources produce large gains, but sometimes not. Often, rituals are just a *waste of resources*.

Van Norden allows that rituals which deprive people of necessities are problematic, but he holds out a role for rituals that consume only surplus resources.³² However, rituals are unlike luxury goods. People have the option to not buy luxury goods without social or legal penalty, but they do not always have a penalty-less way to opt out of performing rituals. Thus, some rituals *pressure poor people*. The poor must either defy social and/or legal pressure to perform expensive rituals, or spend beyond their means.

Everyone need not have a fancy wedding or funeral. However, even when the poor do have an opt-out option or a cheaper alternative to an expensive ritual, the very existence of expensive rituals makes the poor feel deprived and inferior, and gives the wealthy a sense of entitlement and superiority. Even among the middle class, the lesser feel their lesser status as they stretch to find the money, while the greater who need not stretch feel haughty. So expensive rituals *instill vices*: jealousy and low self-esteem in some, disdain and hubris in others.

One might dodge these critiques by rejecting the Utilitarian perspective (à la Bernard Williams) in favor of a theory more conducive to the ground projects of individuals. But such a move suggests a set of different critiques.

IV. EXISTENTIALIST CRITIQUES

Rituals attempt to force everyone's passions and thoughts into the same channels by forcing everyone's activities into the same routines. But we are not a one-size-fits-all species. We have different abilities, needs, goals, etc. While certain patterns of behavior, feeling, and thought help some, they harm others. Some people are well served, but others are badly served by particular rituals. While traditional funerals help some people grieve, for example, they drive others nuts. Those people who are allergic to traditional funerals would be better off finding their own way of grieving, rather than being pushed to grieve in ritual ways that are counterproductive for them. Overall, rituals are *hostile to individuality*. They ignore the important fact that people are different.

By guiding our passions and actions into socially acceptable channels, rituals reduce deviant thoughts, feelings, and behavior. They increase conformity to social norms. But unquestioning conformity is a sort of inauthenticity. To own one's choices one must choose thoughtfully among several live options. As Nietzsche might say, rituals *create herd animals*. It is one thing to challenge one's culture as a rebellious teen, and then return to it by choice in adulthood, but it is quite another to be carefully steered by ritual from accepting child to conventional adult without dissent or even deliberation.

Rituals cluster around, and smooth over emotionally wrenching events. They reduce or manage our anxiety, anguish, and alienation in response to shocking experiences like betrayal, bankruptcy, and particularly bereavement. They shape and soothe our passions and moods, softening dread, depression, and despair. But negative passions have positive functions. The deep and meaningful aspects of life tend to become covered over. We are not constantly and intensely

aware of the important things; instead, the hurly-burly of deadlines, meetings, shopping, email, etc., pushes the matters of major significance into the background. Meanwhile, defense mechanisms such as denial, dissociation, and displacement distance us from troubling truths and passions. Boundary experiences and the unsettling passions and moods that they generate perform the enormously important function of shaking us out of everyday evasions. They bring us face to face with the matters that matter, revealing at least for a moment the meanings of our lives. Betrayals focus our attention upon the value of our remaining friends; bankruptcy reminds us that money is not everything; the deaths of others remind us of our own mortality; and so on. By ameliorating existential crises, rituals *mute the wake-up calls of boundary experiences*.

As the Confucian tradition emphasizes, rituals root us in the five relationships. They encourage us to slip into, feel at home in, and identify with these and other stereotypical relationships without reflection or choice. But this is bad faith with respect to relationships. Whereas authenticity requires that people face their freedom to chose their relationships or opt out of them, rituals *create an inauthentic relational self* consisting of relationships that we fall into rather than choose.³³

Rituals do not just reconcile people to the way things are; by guiding people along a certain path through life, by presenting the ritual way of doing things as the *dao* rather than as one *dao*, rituals conceal from people that things could be different. In particular, people themselves could be different. Existentialism emphasizes that our selves are our own creations. We are our chosen projects (including, but not limited to our relationships) interpreted in light of our past, and our past interpreted in light of our chosen projects. Thus, by changing our projects we can become different people. However, rituals *hide the possibility of self-transformation*. This second sort of bad faith attacks our very humanity, for our essence is the ability to change not only who we know, but also who we are.

One might dodge this set of critiques by rejecting the Existentialist perspective. The individualism of existentialism clashes with the relational self of the Confucian tradition, anyway. And issues of human rights and well-being make existentialist concerns for authenticity seem trivial and selfish. But rituals pose major problems for liberalism, too.

V. LIBERAL CRITIQUES

We internalize values as we practice rituals. But even if the values inculcated are the right ones, there is something troubling about the

incentives by which they are inculcated. Why do people practice rituals? Some rituals are enforced by the government; perform them or guys with guns show up at your door. Most rituals are encouraged by social pressure; perform them or endure various social sanctions. People who are reluctant nevertheless often engage in ritual action because of their fear of being shamed.³⁴ Now these incentives are incompatible with liberalism and pluralism. They *violate liberal neutrality*. Neither the state nor society should be in the business of endorsing, let alone inculcating one set of values rather than another (except for the minimal respect-for-persons necessary for social interactions).

Rituals inculcate values through repetition and passion rather than reason. They do not use explanation and persuasion to transmit values, but rather they slip values into people under reason's radar. Moreover, many rituals condition people from childhood when they are unable to think critically about values. Overall, rituals *indoctrinate*.

Many rituals do enhance our respect for others. But rituals do not encourage egalitarian respect-for-persons; rather, they encourage respect for people *qua* husband, *qua* teacher, *qua* ruler, etc. People are to be respected insofar as they stand in relationships with others. But relationships are seldom symmetrical. In the five relationships, for example, superiors are duty-bound to care for inferiors, but not to respect them. Those on the top get the respect; those on the bottom do the respecting.

The gentleman . . . loves its differentiations. What is meant by "differentiations"? I say: It is for noble and lowly to have their proper ranking, for elder and youth to have their proper distance, and for poor and rich, humble and eminent each to have their proper weights.³⁵

Indeed, rituals often encourage respect for some by discouraging respect or even encouraging disrespect for others. As Xunzi acknowledges, "Ritual . . . takes elevating some and lowering others as its essentials."³⁶ And of course whatever fosters inequality also fosters the vices that accompany it, as I mentioned previously.³⁷ Xunzi acknowledges that rituals lead to class differences and class consciousness, but maintains that this is unproblematic when these differences are based upon differences in moral character. Perhaps so, but the real world is not a meritocracy. Rituals *foster hierarchical social structures* based upon money, power, status, race, gender, etc.

Rituals do show us our place in the social world, but they also keep us in our place. Not only are hierarchies created and enhanced by rituals, they are preserved by rituals in several ways. First, rituals cause people to internalize their social status. We identify with our class.

Second, rituals reconcile lower class people to their situation. They are an opiate. "By ritual, compliant subordinates are created."³⁸ Third, each class has its own rituals, so moving from one class to another requires jettisoning one set of rituals and learning another. Thus, rituals make reeducation a requirement of social advancement. But reeducation is difficult. Truck drivers can learn to behave like professors, but it is not easy. Overall, rituals *hinder social mobility*.³⁹

To dodge this set of critiques one might have to reject Liberalism altogether. But even this draconian move will not escape a further batch of political critiques.

VI. RADICAL CRITIQUES

Rituals adjust desires, but they do not necessarily make people desire what would be best for themselves (or for others) or what is deserved. Rather, rituals reconcile people to what they have.⁴⁰ Of course, sometimes it is good to be content with what one has, but desires are often incentives to improve one's lot and the lots of lots of others. Dissatisfaction can drive both material and moral progress. Only those unreconciled to disease develop antibiotics. Only those unreconciled to oppression seek justice. The point of consciousness-raising is to make people dissatisfied with the status quo. By reducing desires and/or diverting them into unproductive activities, rituals *stifle the motivation to improve*.

Inculcating values is indeed an important part of socialization. But it can easily get out of hand and produce a mindset that is unquestioning, a person of blind faith. Following rituals tends to *stifle questioning and creativity*. As philosophers, we should be particularly worried about this failure mode of rituals, for close-minded conformity is just what philosophy is supposed to prevent or cure. Rituals can be the chains and blinders on the prisoners in Plato's cave, but philosophers are supposed to be spelunkers armed with bolt-cutters.⁴¹

Yet another way in which rituals are inherently conservative is that they preserve society's past. But rituals *encode the folly of the past* as well as its wisdom. More precisely, rituals sometimes perpetuate patterns that become problematic as society changes. For example, the traditional bachelor party (complete with stripper) is a ritual that might have been useful once, back in the day (if there was ever such a day) when grooms were naïve virgins who needed a bit of inhibition-loosening and sexual coaching. But now this ritual just produces grooms who enter upon marriage hung-over and with damaging gender stereotypes.⁴²

The fact that many rituals are associated with organized religion is revealing. Confucians should be appalled. After all, in the modern world many of the paradigmatic Confucian rituals (e.g., funeral rituals) have been captured and impressed into the service of aggrandizing alien gods. The exploitation of ritual by organized religion is just the tip of the iceberg. Because they encourage people to see things certain ways, hold certain beliefs, and feel certain passions, rituals are effective *tools of manipulation* ready to the hand of would-be manipulators.⁴³ Rituals are easily and often co-opted by government, individuals, corporations, and other powerful institutions. For example, the rituals surrounding the display of the American flag are used to enhance support for government policy through the manipulation of passionate loyalty.⁴⁴ The rituals associated with the traditional family are used by husbands to acquire and consolidate power over wives. The rituals surrounding weddings and funerals are exploited and manipulated for profit by various vendors in the wedding and funeral industries.⁴⁵ “There is a fine line between appropriate deference to the tradition and a cultural dogmatism that has too frequently been in the interests of particular groups.”⁴⁶

I do not see how this set of critiques can be dodged by a plausible change of perspective. Worse yet, a final batch of critiques show that rituals can even undermine the fundamental projects of the Confucian tradition.

VII. CONFUCIAN CRITIQUES

Rituals do make novel and/or stressful and/or complex situations go more smoothly. But that can be a bad thing. According to the Confucian tradition, one of the main functions of rituals is to produce moral progress by prompting people to be properly thoughtful and emotional. But sometimes rituals do the opposite. Consider the ritual of a man buying flowers for his wife in order to apologize for some offence. Without this ritual, he would have to think about how to apologize. Giving a gift would be just one of several options, and even if he chose that option, he would then have to consider what gift to give. This would, in turn, lead him to think about the feelings and desires of the offended woman, and maybe evoke some appropriate feelings and desires on his part. Thus, the buying-flowers ritual is an obstacle to appropriate thinking and feeling. In general, by enabling people to move comfortably through tough situations, rituals can *hinder the thoughtfulness and passion* that such situations would otherwise evoke.

Another function of rituals is to strengthen the bonds of families and communities. But rituals also *create barriers to personal relationships*. In pluralistic societies the beliefs expressed by particular rituals are not universally shared. Thus by creating an in-group, rituals also create an out-group.⁴⁷ They add to the balkanization of society. Indeed, the rituals of some groups offend or harm other people.⁴⁸ Ubiquitous Christmas decorations, music, parties, clothing, and greetings offend some non-Christians, for example.

In some ways rituals enhance social harmony, but in other ways they can *undermine social harmony*. They root us in the past. But sometimes a society moves on while its rituals remain unchanged. This may reveal or cause injustices and discord, frustrating a fundamental goal of the Confucian tradition. For example, as our society becomes less sexist, the fact that the bride's family ritually pays for the wedding is increasingly recognized as unjust, and thus is increasingly a cause of conflict.⁴⁹ Indeed, many rituals that once made sense now make trouble.

As parents know, while just decisions sometimes solve problems, justice often takes time and makes trouble. Rituals are often deployed to produce orderliness at the expense of justice. That is, they are *often unjust* just because they seek orderliness. For a common, low-stakes example, consider the rituals of paying the check at a restaurant. Often one person pays the whole check or the amount is divided equally among a group of diners. This is easier than calculating the precise amounts, but it is unjust because some people end up overpaying while others underpay. High-stakes examples arise when, as I argued previously, rituals are co-opted by those in power. By augmenting the power of the powerful, rituals often sustain and amplify existing injustice, preserving the status quo from the messy disorder of change.

VIII. DIAGNOSIS AND SOLUTION

Van Norden mentions several of these critiques (tools of manipulation, reactionary, unjust, socially disruptive), and then lists some correlated benefits to forestall the conclusion that all rituals are thoroughly bad. For example, he insists that although some rituals become tools of oppression, others become weapons against oppression.⁵⁰ I agree that many rituals are beneficial rather than detrimental. However, my claim is not that every ritual is always problematic, but rather that most rituals eventually become problematic. A few counterexamples do not disprove a claim about what usually happens. Pointing out that some rituals do good things does not refute my thesis that many rituals do bad things.

It might be tempting to hold onto the Pollyanna-ish belief that only a few bad-apple rituals are afflicted with these problems. It would be comforting to think that the overwhelming majority of rituals are just fine. However, look around. Most of the rituals in our society are afflicted with most of the drawbacks that I have listed. Commercialism, hierarchy, bad faith, resistance to change, injustice, etc., are ubiquitous, and rituals are everywhere complicit.

Despair not! We need not and should not say with Spike, “From now on there’s going to be a lot less ritual and a lot more fun.”⁵¹ Rather than giving up on rituals, we should identify the source of these problems and develop a strategy for minimizing them.

Ritual’s advantages and disadvantages both grow out of the same features, and these features are parts of ritual’s very nature. The pros and cons are inseparable and inherent. Because rituals persist for years, they connect us to the past. This can be both good and bad. Because rituals provide formulas for what to do, think, and feel, they make difficult situations easier. This can be both good and bad. Because rituals are symbol- and passion-amplifiers they can call forth from us resources and respect. This can be both good and bad. And so on. But rituals do not become good and bad randomly or simultaneously. Rituals typically start out robust and beneficial, and then decline and fall into meaninglessness or worse. Of course Confucius himself, and other Confucians do not endorse degenerate rituals, but rather vibrant rituals practiced in beneficial ways. The Confucian tradition celebrates near-ideal rituals at the beginning of their lifecycles. But rituals are powerful, and power corrupts.

The best ethnic restaurants begin as mom-and-pop operations with tacky décor, paper menus, low prices, lots of atmosphere, and great spicy food. Décor and menus gradually improve, prices rise, atmosphere and food become bland and inauthentic. Well-heeled patrons and matrons replace the initial aficionados and countrymen. Eventually, the restaurant folds or is bought out by a chain. I suggest that rituals follow a parallel natural lifecycle. The best rituals begin as short, easy, cheap, meaningful, emotion-laden practices. They gradually become more elaborate and costly, less meaningful and moving. Eventually, they become mere distracting wastes of time and money, or they are pressed into the service of the rich and powerful.

Why do rituals lose meaning and power over time? Here are a few of the many causes. Because they are inculcated in childhood and become automatic by adulthood, many rituals are never critically examined. Rather than leading people to reflect, they are experienced as just “the way things are done.” Second, after a while rituals come to

evoke nothing because they become too familiar and routine. Third, the memory of events within a society tends to fade. Insofar as the significance of a ritual is tied to these events, that significance also fades.

The Confucian tradition's traditional solution is threefold. Inoculate against new rituals, reform corrupted rituals, and allow uncorrupted rituals to change only in authorized ways. I fear that all three parts of this solution are impractical. First, the emergence of new rituals cannot be forestalled. Individual rituals can, with great difficulty, be excluded or excised from a culture, but rituals are like Mencian shoots; as soon as some are barred or removed, others emerge. Second, reforming decayed rituals would require deliberately reattaching the original meanings and passions to many currently meaningless, passionless routines, or to routines that have acquired problematic new meanings and passions. But how is this Herculean task to be accomplished? Individual rituals can painstakingly be resuscitated, but restoring thousands of rituals is hopeless. Third, vigilantly shielding uncorrupted rituals from decay would be perilous, even if it were possible. It is more likely to lead to ossification than preservation of vibrant rituals.

My own solution depends upon the powerful tendency of people and cultures to generate new rituals. I suggest that we harness this tendency. We can minimize the problems inherent in rituals' lifecycle by maximizing the continuous creation of new rituals. As rituals decay and lose their grip on certain sorts of situations, various people turn to various different approaches. Society begins to shop in Mill's "marketplace of ideas." As old ideas, institutions, and practices are revealed as bad by the decay of their supporting rituals, new, good ideas, institutions, practices, and rituals emerge. Propping up old rituals and putting down new ones slows the process, but does not stop it. This process is going to happen anyway. We can stand in the way or get out of the way, but I suggest that we lead the way.⁵²

Consider the handshake, a ritual described with approval by Fingarette.⁵³ Whatever it used to mean (perhaps that the shakers hold no weapons and thus pledge peace), the handshake no longer has real meaning or emotional impact.⁵⁴ Luckily, alternative greetings such as the high five, the cheek kiss, the hug, the nod, and the (terrorist) fist bump are now emerging. We should not ban handshakes; let those who want to shake, shake. Neither should we demand handshakes. Rather my suggestion is that we encourage promising alternatives by example, by public approval, by inventing new greetings, by presenting various options to our children, etc.

To put the contrast in Mencian metaphor, rituals are like plants. New rituals keep coming up while old rituals die off or grow twisted. The traditional solution is agricultural—preserve old rituals, straighten them when necessary, and spray new rituals with weed-killer. Contrariwise, my solution is a forestry approach—ignore dead or twisted rituals while watering whatever promising new ones come up.⁵⁵ “Let a hundred flowers blossom!”⁵⁶

On my interpretation of Confucius’s project, fostering new rituals to supplement and eventually outcompete the old ones is a very Confucian solution. Some argue that Confucius was open to modifying rituals by citing his statement that, “A ceremonial cap made of linen is prescribed by the rites, but these days people use silk. This is frugal, and I follow the majority.”⁵⁷ But this passage offers only a feeble defense of Confucius’s flexibility. First, Confucius seems to allow only trivial changes. In the next sentence, he rejects a new bowing position, after all. Second, this one remark in which Confucius allows a ritual to be tweaked must be balanced against several remarks in which Confucius seems completely opposed to change. He says for example, “I transmit rather than innovate.”⁵⁸

Here is a better defense. Many religious traditions gain authority by attributing their doctrines to revered, mysterious, ancient founders. Similarly, political theorists bolster their theories by appealing to an earlier, mythical social compact or utopian golden age. I suggest that Confucius is doing something similar. Rather than trying to preserve or restore old rituals, he is actually introducing new ones by assigning new meaning and emotional content to decayed rituals. (As expressing beliefs and passions is an essential feature of rituals, two sets of similar physical motions in similar social contexts that generate different meanings and/or feelings are two different rituals. So technically speaking, attaching new meanings and passions to a routine produces a new ritual rather than a reformed version of the old ritual.⁵⁹) Thus, Confucius is more than flexible; despite his denial, he is innovative. I suggest that Confucius deliberately mis-describes his project as rejuvenating old rituals originating in a mythical era of Sage-Kings in order to confer an aura of legitimacy upon the new rituals that he is creating.⁶⁰

In conclusion, the Confucian tradition does not err by emphasizing the importance or the positive effects of ritual. Rather, it goes wrong insofar as it neglects their negative effects, and insists on only scrupulously guarded, glacially paced change. Instead, we should return to the real (rather than the rhetorical) vision of Confucius. We should do what we can to nurture the natural emergence of promising new rituals, and allow them to compete freely with decayed ones.

IX. RELATIONSHIPS AMONG FEATURES, PROS,
AND CONS OF RITUALS

Features of Rituals	Pros of Rituals	Cons of Rituals
		Mohist, utilitarian critiques
Enforce quiet time	Chance to think twice	Waste of time
Use resources	None	Waste of other resources
Use resources	None	Pressure the poor
Use resources	None	Instill vices of wealth and poverty
		Existentialist critiques
Shared experiences and practices	Build relationships	Hostile to individuality
Shape thought, feeling, and action	Enhance social harmony	Create herd animals
Structure tough situations	Help people move smoothly in tough situations	Mute the wake-up calls of boundary experiences
Create and support relational self	Function well in relationships	Create inauthentic relational self
Create and support relational self	Function well in relationships	Foster bad faith with respect to self-transformation
		Liberal critiques
Shape thought, feeling, and action	Moral cultivation	Violate liberal neutrality
Shape thought, feeling, and action	Moral cultivation	Indoctrinates
Enhance respect for people <i>qua</i> role-holders	Enhance social harmony	Foster hierarchical social structures and vices
Inculcate values	Enhance social harmony	Hinder social mobility
		Radical critiques
Inculcate desires	Improve desires	Stifle motivation to improve
Inculcate values	Improve values, add beauty	Stifle creativity and questioning
Continue past practices	Encode wisdom of the past	Encode folly of the past
Inculcate values	Improve values, add beauty	Often tools of manipulation
		Confucian critiques
Structure tough situations	Help people move smoothly in tough situations	Hinder thoughtfulness and passion
Shared experiences and practices	Build relationships	Create barrier to relationships
Continue past practices	Encode wisdom of the past	Undermine social harmony
Allocate goods	Enhance social harmony	Often unjust
Create and support relational self, boundary constraints	Self-realization	None

ENDNOTES

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1. Accessed February 13, 2012.
2. *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* (2008–2012), vols. 81–5. Titles and authors of these books are available upon request.
3. Indeed, this article is littered with empirical claims. Each is a claim about what happens for the most part; all of these claims have exceptions.
4. See Stephen Angle, “A Productive Dialogue: Contemporary Moral Education and Neo-Confucian Virtue Ethics,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38 (Supplement to 2011): 183–203. (My thanks to Linyu Gu for calling this article to my attention.) Some benefit-burden pairs occur simultaneously rather than sequentially. For example, rituals tend to shield people from situations of temptation, thus reducing immoral action. But by doing so, rituals reduce people's opportunities for practicing resistance to temptation, thus hindering moral development. I shall not consider simultaneous benefit-burden pairs in this article.
5. Some rather different descriptions of ritual (*li*) include: “The word *li* ‘ceremony’ embraces all rites, custom, manners, conventions, from the sacrifices to ancestors down to the detail of social etiquette. *Li* in social intercourse corresponds to a considerable extent with Western conceptions of good manners” (Angus C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* [Chicago: Open Court, 1989], 11). “*Li* are those meaning-invested roles, relationships, and institutions which facilitate communication, and which foster a sense of community” (Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius* [New York: Random House, 1999], 51). *Li* are “authoritative observances that are to guide the choreography of behavior . . . normative patterns of conduct” (May Sim, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 5, 7). “I take ritual (*li*) to encompass all conventions, all learned signs and sign-shaped behaviors” (Robert Neville, *Ritual and Deference* [Albany: State University of New York, 2008], 29). See also Bryan Van Norden's definition in the following.
6. William R. Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).
7. James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Macmillan, 1900).
8. John H. M. Beattie, “On Understanding Ritual,” in *Rationality*, ed. B. Wilson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970), 240–68; Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995); A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, “Religion and Society,” in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (New York: Free Press, 1952), 175–6; Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
9. Bryan Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism in Early Chinese Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 102, 317. See also Antonio S. Cua, *Human Nature, Ritual, and History* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 187; Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1972), 1–17.
10. *Xunzi*, 19: 130–44. Citations will refer to chapter and line numbers in *Xunzi*, trans. Eric Hutton, in preparation. Some contemporary Confucians also talk as if all rituals are beneficial. “As the body language of *ren*, *li* (by definition) has to be good” (Mary I. Bockover, “Confucian Ritual as Body Language of Self, Society, and Spirit,”

- Sophia* 51, no. 1 [2012]: 177–194). See also Ames and Rosemont’s description of ritual in note 6.
11. Most of the critiques in the following are not new. Some were advanced in ancient times; others have been raised by contemporary Confucians. A few I have not seen elsewhere.
 12. Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius*, 51.
 13. Chung-ying Cheng, *New Dimensions of Confucian and Neo-Confucian Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 299. (My thanks to Linyu Gu for reminding me of this book.)
 14. *Xunzi*, 2: 37–49.
 15. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking through Confucius* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 85–100, 170.
 16. James Behuniak, “Form and Uniqueness,” *Confucius Now*, ed. David Jones (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), 52; Wei-ming Tu, “*Li* as Process of Humanization,” *Philosophy East and West* 22, no. 2 (1972): 187–201.
 17. *Xunzi*, 19: 120–2.
 18. Chenyang Li, “Xunzi on the Origin of Goodness: A New Interpretation,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38 (Supplement to 2011): 60. (My thanks to Linyu Gu for calling this article to my attention.)
 19. *Xunzi*, 19: 439–40.
 20. Stephen C. Angle, *Sagehood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 146.
 21. Beliefs, reasoning, and perceptions shape our passions, too. The passions and cognitions are reciprocally influential.
 22. *Analects*, 2: 3. All Confucius quotations are taken from *Analects*, trans. Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003).
 23. Cheng, *Neo-Confucian Philosophy*, 323.
 24. Cua, *Human Nature*, 165.
 25. *Xunzi*, 19: 1–9.
 26. *Ibid.*, 19: 426–9.
 27. Mozi, “For Moderation in Funerals,” trans. Philip J. Ivanhoe, in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 2nd ed., eds. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Bryan Van Norden (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2001), 83.
 28. *Ibid.*, “For Moderation in Funerals,” 83.
 29. *Xunzi*, 19: 181.
 30. The Knot (<http://wedding.theknot.com/wedding-planning/wedding-budget/qa/what-does-the-average-wedding-cost.aspx>).
 31. National Funeral Director’s Press Release, October 6, 2010 (<http://www.nfda.org/news-a-events/all-press-releases/2192-nfda-releases-results-of-2010-general-price-list-survey.html>).
 32. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism*, 173–4.
 33. Michael Martin, “Ritual Action (*Li*) in Confucius and Hsun Tzu,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 1 (1995): 16.
 34. *Analects* 2.3, quoted previously. See also Chad Hansen, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 64.
 35. *Xunzi*, 19: 20–4.
 36. *Ibid.*, 19: 183–4.
 37. Hierarchy is Xunzi’s solution to the problem of scarcity. If everyone had equal authority and expensive taste, some people would be unable to satisfy their desires. Hierarchy ensures that most people have minimal authority and inexpensive taste, and ritual produces hierarchy. Thus, Xunzi acknowledges the fact that ritual fosters hierarchical social structures, but takes this to be an advantage of ritual (*Ibid.*, 9: 70–85). I think that better solutions to the problem of scarcity are available.
 38. *Ibid.*, 19: 137.
 39. I shall mention some other ways in which rituals create barriers in the following. Conversely, mastering rituals offers an opportunity to advance (*Ibid.*, 9: 8–13).
 40. Martin, “Ritual Action (*Li*) in Confucius and Hsun Tzu,” 21.
 41. Some commentators maintain, on the contrary, that rituals enhance creativity. We contribute novel meanings and values to rituals. But this seems to be more a pious

- hope than a fact. These commentators do not explain how continual tweaking keeps rituals fresh. See Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, 88; Sor-hoon Tan, “Three Corners for One: Tradition and Creativity in the Analects,” *Confucius Now*, ed. David Jones (Chicago: Open Court, 2008), 59–77. Conversely, Goldin thinks that there is only one right set of rituals because they conform to human nature. See Paul R. Goldin, *Rituals of the Way* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 73–74.
42. Rosemont acknowledges that societies that cleave to ritual will be “relatively unchanging from generation to generation, with little hope for a better life in the future.” He suggests that by paying this price society would gain “maximal security and minimum happiness guaranteed to all.” I must respectfully disagree. See Henry Rosemont, “State and Society in the *Xunzi*,” *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, ed. T. C. Kline and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), 30.
 43. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 211–3.
 44. *Xunzi*, 19: 31–35.
 45. Maurice Bloch, *Ritual, History and Power* (Atlantic Highlands: Athlone Press, 1989), 41–42, 78–81, 122–3.
 46. Hall and Ames, *Thinking through Confucius*, 310; Cua, *Human Nature*, 72. Neville, *Ritual and Deference*, 110.
 47. Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 122.
 48. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism*, 355.
 49. Clifford Geertz, “Religion as a Cultural System,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 169.
 50. Van Norden, *Virtue Ethics and Consequentialism* 102–7, 355.
 51. Joss Whedon, “School Hard,” *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, episode 2.1.
 52. “Part of the contemporary Confucian agenda is the identification and criticism of the dysfunctional rituals that are in place and the areas where rituals are simply lacking. A related part of the agenda is to devise, institutionalize, and teach improved rituals that address the situation” (Neville, *Ritual and Deference*, 102).
 53. Fingarette, *The Secular as Sacred*, 9–10.
 54. Indeed, the refusal to shake is now much more meaningful and emotionally significant than a shake.
 55. One benefit of ritual is that it constitutes a link to the past. A drawback to my solution is that it unfortunately undermines that link.
 56. Mao Zedong, “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People,” *People’s Daily*, June 19, 1957.
 57. *Analects*, 9.3.
 58. *Analects*, 7.1. See also *Analects*, 12.1; Sim, *Remastering Morals*, 179.
 59. All ritual-individuation yields fuzzy boundaries at best. Precision is for the gods.
 60. “[R]itual ‘invents’ tradition in order to afford a sense of legitimized continuity with the past and to evoke tradition as fixed. In the fixity of ritual’s structure lies the prestige of tradition and in the prestige lies its power” (Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 120).

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