

THESIS

THE CONFUCIAN SELF:
AN INQUIRY INTO THE SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS OF KONGZI'S ANALECTS

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ABSTRACT

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Within ancient Chinese philosophy, the *Analects* of Kongzi is one of the most widely studied texts, having been read, re-read, and drawn upon for centuries. The text can offer worthwhile insights on its own grounds and may also provide a source of relevant discourse for contemporary investigations. The project at hand is an attempt to construct a plausible and consistent interpretation of the *Analects*, one which illuminates Kongzi's underlying conception of the self. To ground the text on an internally consistent interpretation, we will first look to two fundamental concepts within the text, *li* and *ren*. After establishing this groundwork, we will look more closely at Kongzi's conception of the self by examining his account of moral self-cultivation. As it will turn out, Kongzi's conception of the self is deeply relational; moral cultivation can only take place within a society and is performed for the purpose of bringing about the flourishing of both the individual and the community. We will conclude by offering some insights regarding the comparative possibilities between Kongzi's conception of the self and contemporary feminist theories of selfhood.

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INTRODUCTION

Looking back to classical Chinese texts is an equally difficult and rewarding task. Modern approaches to these texts face not only linguistic and historical challenges but must also overcome certain Western philosophical assumptions if one wishes to do the texts justice. The *Analects* of Kongzi is one of the most widely studied texts throughout the history of China; this alone should give Western readers a good reason to consider the text as meriting inquiry. Such texts that have been read, re-read, and drawn upon for centuries can offer worthwhile insights on their own grounds and may also provide a source of relevant discourse for contemporary investigations. The *Analects* presents readers with countless possible avenues of inquiry, including discussions of morality, virtue, politics, cultivation, and well-being. The project at hand is an attempt to construct a plausible and consistent interpretation of the *Analects*, one which illuminates Kongzi's underlying conception of the self.

This project was motivated by a desire to look outside of traditional, Western, atomistic conceptions of personal identity and selfhood. Within ethics, legal philosophy, and philosophy of mind, Western philosophy has often worked under an assumed conception of self; one that is atomistic, autonomous, individualistic, and often ignores the relational and social aspects of selves.¹ We do see some social conceptions of the self throughout Western history, in Aristotle and Hegel, for example, and more recently in the works of feminist philosophers who are challenging atomistic conceptions of self. This project is an attempt to spell out what seems to underly Kongzi's understanding of the self (which will turn out to be a deeply social account of

¹ See Brison, S. J. (2017). Personal identity and relational selves. In *The Routledge companion to feminist philosophy*. (Garry, A., Khader, S. J., & Stone, A., Eds.). (pp. 218-230). Routledge.

the self), with the goal of offering a plausible reading of the *Analects*. I also hope to present the text as containing a conception of the self which can be contrasted with that of the often-found atomistic Western account. However, while I hope that my interpretation lend itself to comparative work, this is outside of the scope of the project at hand. Further research on the *Analects* could include a comparative analysis, either against atomistic accounts or in comparison with relational feminist accounts.

Compiled after his death in 479 BC, the *Analects* is a collection of ethical, social, and political thought attributed to Kongzi. While there exists a question of the true authorship of the *Analects*, the current project is concerned not with the history of the text but with the philosophy presented within. It is altogether possible that the *Analects* was authored and edited by a multitude of individuals.² However, in referencing Kongzi's account, we do not refer to a historical individual's actual views, but to his views as they appear in the text (much like Socrates' views are depicted in Plato's works).

In the *Analects*, Kongzi articulates the position that the flourishing of individuals and the flourishing of their society are interdependent. As we will show, Kongzi is fundamentally concerned with the relationship between the individual and the community, and how moral self-cultivation is tied to this relationship. Understanding the relationship between an individual and her society, and the flourishing of both, requires an understanding of what individual selves are like, and how they can change and develop.³ Whatever Kongzi's conception of the self is, it will have implications for the form that a community ought to take, and the role that the self plays in

² See Hunter, M. & Kern, M. (eds.) (2018) *Confucius and the Analects Revisited: New Perspectives on Composition, Dating, and Authorship*, Leiden: BRILL.

³ Throughout this project, I have opted to assign both *she/her*, *he/him*, and *they/them* pronouns to the hypothetical moral agents to whom I refer. While sagehood was *de facto* reserved for only men in Kongzi's time, there is nothing about the structure of Kongzi's arguments that precludes women from undergoing cultivation and becoming sages. (See also: Ivanhoe & Wang (2021) Two Korean Women Confucian Philosophers: Im Yunjidang and Gang Jeongildang. *Journal of Confucian Philosophy and Culture*, 36, pp. 29–53).

an individual's development. Although Kongzi does not address his conception of the self directly, it is clear that his project cannot successfully be understood without first gaining a deeper understanding of how he views the self, implicitly or explicitly.

Our attempt at gaining insight into Kongzi's conception of the self must begin with a robust interpretation of the *Analects*. Constructing a plausible and consistent interpretation of the more obvious and fundamental aspects of the text will be the most accommodating path to an understanding of the self within the text. While we can acknowledge that Kongzi's work is elusive and perhaps puzzling at times, we must grant that the text is internally consistent until we discover otherwise. If the text turns out to be internally inconsistent, then there is not much philosophical value to be drawn from it as a whole. We see, however, that myriad authors have read the text as internally consistent throughout the past 2,000 years of history; we will thus begin with such an assumption for our project, as well. As such, a loosely systematic approach should prove the most rewarding for the task at hand.

The lens of this project is to read the *Analects* as revealing the relationship between individuals and their broader community. Kongzi is concerned with the ways that individuals may undergo moral cultivation, and how the interplay between individuals and their community can facilitate such a process. Without a community, personal moral cultivation is impossible; an individual can only flourish within a society, and in turn, the society can only flourish at the hands of its members. While such a symbiotic relationship is not the only possible interpretation, it is an eminently plausible one, and it allows for substantive philosophical inquiry into the nature of the self and its implications for broader political questions. If we can construct a consistent interpretation of the text through this lens, then we will be well-equipped to examine Kongzi's underlying conception of the self. As such, this relationship is the lens through which

we will carry out our interpretation, concerning both the broader themes and the more specific question of selfhood within the *Analects*.

To understand Kongzi's project, we will look first at the two concepts of *ren* 仁 and *li* 禮. Both are fundamental to self-cultivation, and both illustrate the important relationship between the individual and her community. *Ren*, most commonly translated as benevolence, humaneness, or goodness, can be understood in the *Analects* as the ultimate goal of self-cultivation; it is the virtue toward which cultivation aims. To act in a *ren* fashion is to act out of the proper motivations, and to properly engage with the world. The value of understanding *ren* to our project is that it highlights the necessity and importance of others in the process of moral cultivation. One cannot become *ren* in isolation, and to attempt to do so would be antithetical to the virtue. Kongzi's account of *ren* thus provides insight into the self insofar as it highlights an individual's development through self-cultivation, as well as the role played by the community in the cultivation of the self.

The second core concept which will frame our discussion is *li*. Often translated as rituals or rites, *li* refers to the norms and standards of proper behavior, concerning, for example, ceremonial conduct and social etiquette. In the *Analects*, *li* regulates a broad variety of social interactions. For Kongzi, *ren* is more primary than *li*, insofar as *li* is an aspect of cultivation required to become *ren*. This conception is distinct from later Confucian thinkers like Mengzi (372-289 BCE) and Xunzi (c. 310 – c. 238 BCE), who describe *ren* as more constrained, such that neither *ren* nor *li* is primary. Rituals are a way for the agent to convey mental or emotional states to others, and Kongzi shows great concern that these actions be understood and performed properly. In fact, the flourishing of the community relies on the proper presentation of these behaviors and actions, and personal self-cultivation requires the same. An important aspect of *li*

that will come out of our interpretation is that each ritual endeavors to convey an underlying meaning, one that is more fundamental and important than the ritual's formal elements. The performance of a ritual works to convey the agent's emotions and internal states, while also developing the agent to experience the proper internal states in all situations. While proper performance of *li* demands that each agent undergoes a sort of internalization of these underlying meanings, it is ultimately a deeply social process. We see, once again, that the self can only be developed well, or at all, through the interaction with a community.

Insofar as Kongzi is concerned with self-cultivation, we know that he has some implicit conception of a self. Any direct commentary on this account is absent, however. As such, we will attempt to construct an account of the self in the *Analects* by utilizing our work on *ren* and *li* as a guide and framework. We will identify how the self is understood through its relationship to the community, insofar as the community allows, and is required for, the self to reach its ultimate state of cultivation. Any discussion of the self in the *Analects* is thus inextricably tied up with its relationship to the broader society.

What we cannot expect of the *Analects* is a metaphysical or phenomenological account of the self, the kind which concerns much contemporary scholarship on the topic. To expect a detailed account of embodiment, self-consciousness, or of personal identity, for example, would be to ask the wrong questions. It may well be possible to suggest a detailed metaphysical account of selfhood that is compatible with the *Analects*; however, doing so would be to import more into Kongzi's account than he himself presents. It is also unnecessary for the present project; what interests us is how we can understand Kongzi's account of the self insofar as it relates to the broader community. Furthermore, this project is an attempt to interpret the text in isolation; we want to read it as internally consistent, and to interpret the text on its own grounds, rather than

importing Western philosophical assumptions into our analysis. At times, Mengzi and Xunzi's work will be utilized to bolster or clarify our interpretations, as these thinkers closely succeeded Kongzi and can be assumed to have a clear understanding of his work.⁴ I also rely on the work of some contemporary scholars of Confucianism, but try to do so only when necessary with the hope that I can avoid importing any contemporary theories into the text, as well as avoid assigning any positions to Kongzi that are implausible for him to have held.

Using our foundational interpretation of *ren* and *li*, we will build our analysis of Kongzi's underlying conception of the self. This will begin by establishing a very basic claim: that Kongzi has a conception of humans as having a mental life. This claim must be addressed because it contradicts some contemporary interpretations of the text. From this foundation, we will frame Kongzi's account of moral self-cultivation as a process which develops an agent's *disposition* (or set of dispositions); this important step will be the most favorable method to uncover Kongzi's underlying conception of the self. There are three aspects of this change in one's disposition best suited to bring out Kongzi's account: emotions, spontaneous actions, and motivations. For each of these aspects, we will bring to light the specific changes that we see in an individual as they go through the progressive stages of cultivation.

Regarding emotions, we will see that cultivation requires that one feels the proper emotion to the appropriate degree in response to a situation. Such emotional reactions must be developed; that is, people are not guaranteed to be born in such a way that they feel the proper emotion (e.g., respect, sorrow, or reverence) in the appropriate situations to a fitting degree.

Moral agents must therefore be cultivated into feeling the correct emotion, to the correct

⁴ Mengzi and Xunzi's commentary on Kongzi's writing shouldn't be taken as definitive, however. As we will show throughout the project, there exist some disagreements between the three authors. For the most part, however, they offer a valuable resource for interpreting certain concepts within the *Analects*.

magnitude. When these students study ritual, they eventually learn the underlying meaning or purpose of each ritual; the hope is that each student internalizes this meaning such that the proper emotion follows naturally. To carry the proper emotional disposition is crucial, as the expression of a ritual is incomplete without such an emotional state. As will be established in the discussion of *li*, rituals are tools for communication between members of a community, and one aspect of this communication is to reveal an agent's emotional state. The development of one's spontaneous emotional states thus reveals a deeply relational aspect of cultivation, insofar as emotions not only reveal an agent's level of internalization of the teachings, but they also allow for proper ritual communication between members of a community. For Kongzi, this is a necessary feature of a flourishing society.

Furthermore, understanding the change in an agent's spontaneous actions is an important piece of our interpretation, one which requires a bit of work. Kongzi's account moral cultivation requires that the fully cultivated individual is able to act out of the underlying meaning of ritual in a spontaneous manner. Spontaneous actions are those which do not require deliberation before being carried out, and the *Analects* describes cultivated individuals as acting out of a specific sort of cultivated spontaneity. It will turn out that an agent's spontaneous actions and desires develop substantially as a result of cultivation, and this alteration reveals something about Kongzi's underlying conception of the self. As we will show, spontaneous actions are a reflection of an agent's beliefs, desires, and inclinations, and in altering these aspects of one's disposition, moral cultivation brings about a development of the self. Insofar as this development is one which grounds the agent in the understanding that their flourishing is tied up with the flourishing of the community, Confucian moral cultivation brings about an expansion, or a broadening, of the self.

Finally, we will turn to the development of an agent's motivations and reasons for action throughout the stages of moral cultivation. Again, this presents a shift in an agent's disposition; it involves the development of one's motivational set. According to Kongzi, most people tend to be born with self-interested desires for material goods; these motivations, however, are inimical to an individual's and the society's flourishing. The cultivated individual comes to learn that acting from virtue is what truly bring about well-being; thus, their motivational set develops such that virtuous motivations will always override any unvirtuous ones. The process of moral cultivation strengthens one's virtuous motivations and weakens the self-interested ones, until the agent is able to always act virtuously when freely following their strongest motivations. This development of a moral agent's motivational set will reveal, once again, that there is something about the self that changes through the process of cultivation, and that the proper cultivation of a person involves an expansion of the self.

By addressing these developments in an agent's disposition, we will uncover parts of Kongzi's underlying conception of the self. While his conception is rendered implicit throughout the text, we can look to these changes in one's disposition to bring his implicit conception to light. If we can understand how a person changes while undergoing cultivation, and if these changes are extensive enough, then not only will we be able to construct a plausible interpretation of what Kongzi understands as constituting the self, but also how the self might develop while undergoing cultivation. More specifically, we will show that an agent undergoes change to such an extent that the way they view and interact with the world changes drastically, along with the way that they are connected to other members of their society. When undergoing moral cultivation, the Confucian agent undergoes an expansion, or a broadening of the self,

insofar as they come to understand that their own flourishing is inextricably tied up with the flourishing of their community.

By grounding my interpretation of Kongzi's conception of the self in a consistent reading of the text as a whole, I hope to present a plausible and consistent reading that is built upon the foundations of the text. While the *Analects* has undergone extensive discussion throughout its history, this project ties together different concepts throughout the text to show how they come together to form a plausible reading of Kongzi's underlying conception of the self.

I also hope that this project lays a foundation for further research moving forward. The *Analects* is a rich and extensive text, and given the scope of this project, there are certain areas of the text that I was unable to address or incorporate. For example, more could be said about Kongzi's arguments about the importance that music plays in moral cultivation, as well as the studying of certain foundational texts. Furthermore, I will briefly address how Kongzi's account compares to contemporary feminist accounts of selfhood. I hope that my interpretation leaves open the possibility of more in depth comparative work, whether that be with contemporary feminist accounts of selfhood, or against a Western, atomistic account.

CHAPTER 1: RITUAL

Speaking broadly, Kongzi believes that a harmonious, flourishing society is to be achieved by following the practices of the sage kings of a golden age of the past. Kongzi believes that the sage kings “had devised a comprehensive family, social, and political system that harmoniously located individuals in a greater cosmic order” (Ivanhoe, 2000, p. 1). This system involves a process of moral self-cultivation by way of studying the texts and rituals of the sage kings (with the help of teachers) and following their practices and their lessons in all aspects of one’s life (Ivanhoe, 2000). There is much involved in this moral cultivation, and the goal is for each individual to develop their character and dispositions in accordance with these lessons and practices. Let us look more closely at what is involved in these practices, with a focus on the social aspects that can be identified in Kongzi’s theory of moral cultivation, in order to explore how it is that the *rites* might lead to the flourishing of a community.

The rites (*li* 禮) are an important concept in the *Analects*, one that will help us explore the foundations of Kongzi’s account.⁵ The term refers broadly to the norms guiding and regulating human behavior. This includes not only ceremonial conduct but general social etiquette. Practically, these rituals are an outline of proper behavior and prescribe how one should act in almost all areas of social interaction. More deeply, however, each ritual conveys a certain underlying meaning or significance, and the process of moral cultivation requires the agent to fully understand and internalize these underlying meanings. As Ivanhoe (2000) explains, “the rites were not intended merely to elicit particular kinds of behavior, the goal was to instill certain sensibilities, attitudes, and dispositions in the practitioner” (p. 4). For the individual, practicing

⁵ The terms “rituals” and “rites” will be used interchangeably to refer to the concept of *li*.

rituals is a tool for learning, understanding, and internalizing the significance underlying each ritual.

More broadly, however, a fundamental aspect of rituals is their social purpose. Rituals are, in a sense, tools for communicating with one other. In describing the later Confucian Xunzi's account, Neville (2008) writes that "Xunzi understood ritual to be so pervasive and basic as to determine styles of movement, gestures for communication, language, the habits forming social institutions, and the formal and informal dances of social intercourse" (pp. 18-19). Most social interactions, on the Confucian account, involve some form of ritualized behavior. Understanding and properly performing ritual is thus a tool allowing members of a community to convey their emotions and mental states to one another. Properly performing ritualistic action requires not only that the performer understands the ritual, but that others are familiar with the ritual and its significance as well, such that the interaction is meaningful for all involved. In this sense, rituals are inherently social or relational, insofar as they are acts that convey meaning to others. Although Kongzi endorses the practice of ritual in private to promote habituation, a ritual loses much of its meaning without the presence of other individuals who understand the ritual's implication and what it is intended to convey. As it will turn out, this communication, performance, and understanding of rituals is necessary for individuals and their broader community to flourish.⁶

Before we look more closely at the details of ritual, let us spend a moment translating the practice of ritual into a modern perspective. At first glance, the demands of ritual propriety might seem stringent or even oppressive to a western reader. For example, *Analects* 10.6 deals with a variety of rituals concerning attire, in which Kongzi writes:

⁶ This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

The gentleman did not use reddish-black or maroon for the trim of his garment, nor did he use red or purple for his informal dress... His informal fur robe was long, but the right sleeve was short. He required that his nightgown be knee-length.⁷

For Kongzi, even the small details of one's garments hold moral significance, which might strike the modern reader as unnecessarily detailed and demanding. However, a moment of reflection reveals that we have similar standards today. The garments we wear while at home are markedly different from those we might wear to a funeral or a job interview (Ivanhoe, 2000), and we understand someone wearing pajamas or leisurely attire to a wedding as revealing something troublesome about their character or attitude.⁸ In this example, one might read the agent as having a lack of respect for the ceremony and all those who are participating; even today, our attire can be a way to "express certain attitudes" (Ivanhoe, 2000, p. 7). Wearing the proper clothes for the proper occasion signals to those around us that we respect them and the spaces we occupy. Being well-dressed when attending a graduation or funeral communicates our respect for the people involved and shows that we take the occasion seriously. This is all to say that Kongzi's conception of ritual propriety is not too far removed from general Western assumptions about etiquette and proper social behavior. For Kongzi, the color and length of one's garment can communicate respect or lack thereof in the same way; there may be a difference in scope, but not in kind.

We can now look more closely at what is involved in the cultivation of ritual. Studying and following the conduct of ritual is a crucial step in a person's education and development. In the early stages of childhood, one's education consists primarily of imitating proper behavior.

⁷ Unless otherwise stated, all passages of the *Analects* included in this chapter are based on Slingerland's (2003) translation, modified when appropriate.

⁸ Of course, the specifics of this example can vary across cultural contexts.

Because one is too young to apprehend the social significance of ritual, one is trained to act in accordance with ritual in a somewhat blind fashion. Lai (2006) illustrates this point as follows:

[Especially in pre-social and pre-rational stages of early childhood] it is understood that...a child does not have the resources to consider objectively his actions and their implications. Hence, imitation of the positive and exemplary behaviors of role models is a primary aspect of learning. (p. 69)

This early education helps to reinforce ritual propriety and a recognition of the social positions of others, particularly an adherence to filial piety in the early stages of life. Children begin their education by imitating the behavior of their parents and teachers, such that they habituate these actions until they come easily and naturally. Practitioners in the early stages of their moral education come to understand proper behavior and ritual for a given situation and are habituated to carrying out this behavior. What is lacking, however, is an exact understanding of *why* they are carrying out the ritual and the underlying significance of the behavior. Proper ritual expression also requires that the agent has a certain internal, emotional state or attitude, which is usually missing in children or new practitioners. Their habitual carrying out of ritual is purely behavioral, insofar as the proper motivation, understanding, and attitude are missing.

The later stages of cultivation require the practitioner to move beyond simple habituation and mimicry of role models. Once they are further along the path, students are expected to study and appreciate the fundamental underlying meaning that rituals convey. The fundamental meaning of a ritual is held both within the mental state of the agent, as well as in what it expresses to others. For a ritual to be properly carried out, the agent must have the proper disposition, and the performance of the ritual must communicate this attitude to others. These two underlying aspects of ritual are integral to our discussion moving forward.

Modern practices of etiquette can serve to exemplify this concept. Karen Stohr (2012), in her discussion of the moral significance of manners, describes modern rules of etiquette as

“communication devices through which we express moral attitudes and aims, like showing respect for others and consideration for their needs” (p. 43). If our modern etiquette practices serve the purpose of communicating respect or some other emotional attitude, then we can liken them to the Confucian ritual. Erin M. Cline (2016) offers an excellent example of this kind of modern ritual:

Addressing and greeting an older family member or a teacher in the proper manner is not only an expression of respect and appreciation for them; [...] it reminds us of our relationship with that person, the things she or he has done for us, the ways in which she or he is a role model for us, and so on, which can shape our character in subtle ways by contributing to the cultivation of virtues like reciprocity and humility. (p. 247)

Much like traditional Confucian rituals, our practice of proper greetings has a certain internal meaning; it displays the internal emotional state of the agent (e.g., a state of respect or humility), while also communicating this emotion to others. Such instances of etiquette thus exemplify the two fundamental aspects of the Confucian ritual that practitioners learn to grasp in the later stages of cultivation.

To continue our discussion of *li*, let us clarify what would constitute an improper execution of ritual. Kongzi recognized that it is possible to be habituated into following the behavioral acts of ritual, to imitate others in their practice of ritual, and to act in accordance with ritual, without fully understanding what the ritual is intended to convey. This is how the early stages of one’s moral education should progress, but Kongzi explains that such ritual practice is not the ultimate goal of cultivation.

Someone asked, ... “Well, then, do you mean to say that Guan Zhong understood ritual?”

The Master replied, “The lord of a state erects a wall in front of his gate, and Guan did the same. The lord of a state, when entertaining other lords, has a stand upon which to place the drinking cups after the toast, and Guan also had one of these. If Guan understood ritual, who does not understand it?” (3.22)

Guan Zhong was criticized by the Confucians for lacking in virtue.⁹ We see in this passage that his behavior is in accordance with ritual; however, Kongzi notes that if we take mere accordance as the standard for understanding ritual, then everyone could be said to understand ritual. That is to say, most people could meet the standard of simply following the formal and behavioral elements of ritual without much difficulty. This, however, is not what it means to understand ritual.

Full cultivation goes beyond a mechanical adherence to rituals in one's behavior. Kongzi advocates for these lessons and practices to be internalized in such a way that one acts out of a cultivated understanding of what the rituals are intended to convey (Ivanhoe, 2000). *Analects* 3.26 illustrates this point further:

The Master said, “Someone who lacks magnanimity when occupying high office, who is not respectful when performing ritual, and who remains unmoved by sorrow when overseeing mourning rites—how could I bear to look upon such a person?”

Kongzi clearly disapproves of following ritual without the accompanying emotional substance; simply following ritual form without the proper emotional attitude is thus a sign that one has not completed their education.¹⁰ Each ritual requires that the practitioner understands the meaning and significance that the ritual is intended to convey, and that she internalizes the reasons for carrying out the ritual.

Furthermore, strict adherence as well as excessive flexibility when performing ritual are marks of an uncultivated individual. Once we understand that rituals have a certain underlying meaning, we can see why Kongzi encouraged flexibility for those in the later stages of

⁹ During the seventh century BC, Guan Zhong served as the prime minister of Duke Huan of Qi. While Guan Zhong is credited with strengthening and protecting the Qi state and being an effective statesman, the Confucians often remarked on his moral shortcomings. Slingerland (2003) comments: “Confucius admired his skill and achievements, but had doubts about his moral worthiness” (p. 250). Xunzi writes on Guan Zhong and other hegemon: “They relied on the appearance of being *ren*, but walked the path of obtaining profit. They are heroes for petty men. Simply how could they be worthy of praise in the school of the great gentleman!” (7.47-50, from Hutton, 2014, p. 48.)

¹⁰ *Analects* 2.7 provides a further example, which will be discussed later on.

cultivation yet advocated for strict adherence for those in the early stages. According to Kongzi, the formal aspects of a ritual can be altered so long as the fundamental meaning of the ritual is maintained. Young students, however, do not yet have access to this fundamental meaning and are thus better off following ritual in a strict manner. What sets truly virtuous behavior apart from this mere habituation is the ability to apprehend when to break or amend certain norms; a kind of judgement that comes out of a deep understanding and internalization of the meaning and purpose of these norms.

Flexibility regarding the formal, outward particularities of ritual is acceptable only for those who have the foundational knowledge in place, and who have been appropriately educated and habituated in ritual propriety, such that the underlying meaning of the ritual is deeply understood. We can best introduce this distinction by look to Mengzi, who saw himself as following in Kongzi's footsteps and who wrote in 4A17:

It is the ritual that men and women should not touch when handing something to one another, but if your sister-in-law is drowning, to pull her out with you hand is a matter of discretion.¹¹

Mechanical adherence to ritual might suggest that a man pulling out his drowning sister-in-law is ritually improper. The cultivated person, however, is able to judge that the underlying meaning of this ritual doesn't extend to such a scenario. Mengzi calls this judgement discretion, and it is the sort of wisdom that comes from extensive cultivation. Van Norden (2008) offers a contemporary analogue of such a case: "a prudent professor will avoid even casual physical contact with students, but this would hardly inhibit him or her from performing CPR if it were needed" (p. 97). Mengzi's example might strike the reader as a rather obvious one, insofar as it seems like common sense to forego the formal elements of ritual in order to save a life.

¹¹ Unless otherwise stated, all passages of the *Mengzi* included in this chapter are based on Van Norden's (2008) translation, modified when appropriate.

However, the example serves to illustrate a deeper point about the sort of judgement that is developed through moral cultivation and shows that mechanical adherence to ritual standards is a sign that one has yet to be fully cultivated.

To return to the *Analects*, 9.3 provides an excellent example of such judgement regarding ritual flexibility:

The Master said, “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. To bow before ascending the stairs is what is prescribed by the rites, but these days people bow after ascending. This is arrogant, and—though it goes against the majority— I continue to bow before ascending.”

In regard to the ceremonial cap, we see that Kongzi is concerned with the meaning underlying the ritual, rather than the specifics of carrying out the ceremony. He recognizes that a change in fabric will not alter the ceremonial significance of the cap; what matters to the practice of this specific ritual is the covering of the head, rather than the material of the cap. A silken cap still expresses the meaning of the ritual, as the meaning is an aspect internal to the ritual. Alterations in the details and complexities of the cap will not affect the expression of this internal meaning. Slingerland (2003) explains that “rites are expressive of a certain sense or feeling, and thus an alteration in the actual rite is permissible if it will not—in the opinion of one who has fully mastered the rites—alter its essential meaning” (p. 87). Thus, someone who has acquired an appropriate amount of knowledge and education in ritual may bend the specifics of ritual to a certain degree.

However, changing the second kind of ritual behavior, bowing *after* instead of *before* ascending the stairs, alters the essential meaning of the ritual. Bowing expresses a certain internal meaning; to bow *before* ascending is a request for permission to ascend, and thus communicates respect, as well as an understanding of one’s place in the societal hierarchy (Slingerland, 2003).

Someone well educated in ritual would recognize the importance of bowing before one ascends, because it conveys that one is asking permission to ascend, whereas bowing from the top of the steps has assumed this permission. Changing the second kind of ritual behavior, bowing after instead of before ascending the stairs, alters the essential purpose of the ritual. Such a change is no longer ritually proper, as we have lost the appropriate meaning that the ritual is intended to convey. We can thus note, once again, that while evoking a certain behavior in the practitioner, the rites are more so meant to impress particular “sensibilities, attitudes, and dispositions” (Ivanhoe, 2000, p.4) upon the practitioner, as well as upon others. The cultivated individual has developed the sort of disposition which allows him to judge the kinds of ritual actions which are necessary to express the fundamental meaning of the rites, and which ones can be altered without sacrificing this expression.

For Kongzi, an alteration of a ritual’s formal aspects or particularities is acceptable so long as these internal aspects of the ritual are maintained, and so long as the proper ends of the ritual are met. To speak of altering a ritual without altering its meaning refers to both the agent’s internal state as well as its external communication being maintained. In our example of proper greetings toward a teacher, the formal elements of the greeting may be altered so long as the agent’s feelings of respect are still properly communicated. Importantly, the ability to judge which ritual actions may be amended is only fully obtained by those far along the path of moral cultivation. Someone who is in the early stages of moral cultivation is thus required to maintain the prescribed formalities and particularities of ritual to ensure the proper communication of their mental states, and to further the development of the proper mental states.

We may note here that there exists a somewhat individuated aspect to the rites. Cultivating an understanding of ritual and habituating oneself to act in accordance with ritual can

be construed as a personal development. It requires practice and learning by the individual, insofar as the agent must understand and internalize the underlying meaning and purpose of the ritual being performed. This piece of one's cultivation is, in some sense, individuated, insofar as only the individual knows whether or not they have grasped the meaning of the ritual. However, it would be wrong to paint this process as purely individuated. The purpose of this internalization is such that the agent can better perform the various rituals, which allows for more harmonious and proper social interaction. As such, we see in the *Analects* that this process is highly social and relational; the ultimate goal of an individual's cultivation is to foster society-wide flourishing. We also see that one cannot properly develop ritual practice without the presence of a community. Mastering and acting in accordance with ritual is a necessarily social process. One learns the rites within a society and from others, and while certain rituals can be carried out in private, many concern social behavior, and are practiced by engaging with others in a particular fashion (particularly those others who also understand the significance of the respective rituals).

One learns the rites within a society and from others. As previously mentioned, one's education begins through the imitation of the behavior of others; in this sense, the beginnings of one's moral cultivation are deeply social. These first steps begin within the family, as children begin to learn the rules of propriety from their parents. Thus, filial piety is of great concern for Kongzi. Let us look at *Analects* 4.18:

The Master said, "In serving your parents you may gently remonstrate with them. However, once it becomes apparent that they have not taken your criticism to heart you should be respectful and not oppose them, and follow their lead diligently without resentment."

Filial piety is a many-faceted virtue.¹² One way to interpret this passage is to see that while children are encouraged to challenge their parents, in the end, they are expected to take their

¹² See 2.7; this passage will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 2.

parent's word and do as they are asked.¹³ In this sense, parents are a fundamental authority in a child's life, and this seems sensible in the context of moral cultivation, in which the early stages require blind imitation. Lai (2006) emphasized this point; "The Confucian emphasis on filial piety may be understood as an essential part of the initial training phase during which repetition of correct forms of behavior is the basic mode of moral learning" (p. 71). This is exemplified in *Analects* 1.2:

Master You said, "A young person who is filial and respectful of his elders rarely becomes the kind of person who is inclined to defy his superiors, and there has never been a case of one who is disinclined to defy his superiors stirring up rebellion. The gentleman applies himself to the roots. 'Once the roots are firmly established, the Way will grow.' Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of *ren*?"

Children who learn the proper attitude and virtue of filial piety are thus able to act properly later in life, here in the sense that they understand the proper conduct for the different social relations, perhaps between ruler and minister or husbands and wives.

Importantly, learning and cultivation do not end after childhood; they are part of a life-long process and effort. Even Kongzi himself did not fully master the rules of ritual propriety until late in life as we see in *Analects* 2.4:

The Master said, "At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my place in society; at forty, I became free of doubts; at fifty, I understood Heaven's Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; and at seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without overstepping the bounds."

Notably, the importance of others in this cultivation does not diminish after childhood. Moral development remains a social process. For example, *Analects* 7.22 and 1.14:

The Master said, "When walking with two other people, I will always find a teacher among them. I focus on those who are good and seek to emulate them, and focus on those who are bad in order to be reminded of what needs to be changed in myself."

¹³ See also *Analects* 1.11, 2.5, and 4.20.

The Master said, “The gentleman is not motivated by the desire for a full belly or a comfortable abode. He is simply scrupulous in behavior and careful in speech, drawing near to those who possess the Way in order to be set straight by them. Surely this and nothing else is what it means to love learning.”

Emulation and learning from others are thus life-long tools for moral cultivation. In the early stages, our parents, teachers, and elders serve as reference points for emulating behavior and fostering proper ritual habituation. Once one has passed these early stages of habituation, however, these two passages suggest that the importance of others does not diminish. *Analects* 7.22 and 1.14 suggest that surrounding oneself with others who are also undergoing cultivation, or who are further along the path of cultivation, can greatly motivate and aid one’s learning and practice. On the other hand, being surrounded by those who lack either virtue or a desire to obtain it makes one’s efforts of cultivation much more difficult. Without community at all, however, such a development would be almost impossible.

We can thus move on to the second point. While certain rituals can be carried out in private, many rituals concern social behavior. Rites are practiced by engaging with others in a particular fashion, particularly with those who also understand the significance of the respective rituals. Let us begin by looking at an example of practicing ritual in private. *Analects* 10.7 depicts the Master conducting himself according to ritual in private:

When fasting, he would always don a clean linen robe [after his ritual bath].
When fasting, he would always alter his diet, as well as the place where he would sit when at leisure.

Although rituals such as these can be carried out in isolation, it is important to note the purpose of doing so. Private rites like the ones mentioned in this passage are performed for the purpose of habituation. Training oneself to act from ritual propriety at all times means doing so in private as well, even when there is no one else present to apprehend what the ritual is intended to convey. In the early stages of cultivation, such private rituals would serve to ensure that the ritual is truly

a habit.¹⁴ If one performs the rituals only when being observed in a social setting, then the rites are not a habit. Insofar as private rituals are performed with the intent of habituation for social settings, they are still inescapably social.

Most examples of rites seen in the *Analects* are ones concerning social behavior, as exemplified by these excerpts from Book 10:

When attending village drinking ceremonies, he would leave only after the elderly people had left. (10.13)

When summoned by his lord, he would set off on foot, without waiting for his horses to be hitched to the carriage. (10.20)

When riding past someone dressed in funeral garb, he would bow down and grasp the crossbar of his carriage. He would do so even if the mourner was a lowly peddler. (10.25)

These examples are all instances of ritual outlining conduct of expressing respect toward others. Ritually prescribed behavior is a way for the members of a community to convey their emotions and intentions to one another in the proper way, and thus we see that most rituals are concerned with the ways that members of a community interact with one another. As we mentioned previously, this expressive power of ritual requires that both parties grasp the meaning of the ritual and that the ritual evokes the proper emotion within both parties.¹⁵ What is important to note here is that ritual propriety has a fundamentally relational purpose; it allows the practitioner to have the right kind of relationship with the members of her community, such that each individual, as well as the society as a whole, are able to flourish.

¹⁴ For Kongzi, who has certainly surpassed the point of ritual being mere habit, practicing the rites in private signifies that he has internalized them to such an extent that he practices them without question, even when he is alone. His behavior comes, at all times, from ritual.

¹⁵ In Chapter 3, we will look more closely at the ways that cultivation develops the proper emotional attitudes in the practitioner.

We have thus laid out a foundational interpretation of ritual within the *Analects*. Moving forward, we will elaborate further on the specific changes which occur within a practitioner during cultivation. Specifically, we will clarify the distinction between pure habituation and internalization, while also looking more closely at the ways in which an agent's disposition is developed throughout her cultivation. First, however, we will look at *ren*, another foundational concept within the *Analects*, to ensure that we have the necessary groundwork in place for further analysis.

CHAPTER 2: BENEVOLENCE

Another core concept within the *Analects* that must be addressed is *ren* 仁. *Ren* is an all-encompassing virtue and can be described as the ultimate aim of moral cultivation.¹⁶ It has been translated by different scholars as benevolence, humaneness, or goodness. In the *Analects*, *ren* involves “righteousness, loyalty, forbearance, filial piety, and loving consideration,” (Fengbin, 1999, p. 40) and can be described as Kongzi’s highest goal and most ideal state. Different scholars have interpreted *ren* to mean different things, seeing as the *Analects* doesn’t provide a clear definition or exact meaning. However, the text provides enough information to allow for a consistent interpretation.

Although we aren’t afforded a direct definition, we do see particular aspects of *ren* described. For example, *ren* is defined in terms of other, more specific virtues and qualities in Book 13:

Fan Chi asked about *ren*.¹⁷

The Master¹⁸ replied, “When occupying your place, remain reverent; when performing public duties, be respectful; and when dealing with others, be dutiful. These are virtues that cannot be abandoned, even if you go to dwell among the Yi or Di barbarians.” (13.19)

The Master said, “Resolute, decisive, straightforward, and reticent—these qualities are close to *ren*.” (13.27)

The first passage illustrates the importance of treating others properly; reverence, respect, and duty all allude to interpersonal behavior. Thus, we see that there is a strongly relational quality to

¹⁶ The usage and understanding of *ren* changed over time; later texts like the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi* describe *ren* in a narrower sense. *Mengzi*, for example, writes that *ren* is equally as important as the rites, wisdom (*zhi* 智), and righteousness (*yi* 義). For Kongzi, on the other hand, *ren* encompasses these other aspects of cultivation.

¹⁷ While Slingerland translates *ren* as “Goodness”, for the sake of clarity and consistency I have opted to leave the term untranslated here and throughout.

¹⁸ In the *Analects*, “the Master” always refers to Kongzi.

ren. The latter passage points us more toward individual qualities. To be resolute, decisive, and straightforward are qualities that indicate the steadfast and unwavering character of the *ren* individual. However, even these qualities point to the way an individual behaves in a social setting: one acts decisively in a political context or behaves in a reticent fashion when with others, for example. The qualities of the *ren* individual as described in the *Analects* are qualities that are characteristically implemented in a social context.

As we will go on to show, the *ren* individual possesses such qualities because they understand the relevant moral considerations of any particular situation and are motivated to properly engage with others. The *ren* individual understands when to show respect, when to be dutiful, and when to show decisiveness, and is motivated to do so. To fully understand *ren* is to be motivated to act in a *ren* fashion (this point will be further demonstrated later in this chapter.) Thus, the cultivation of an individual's qualities is relevant insofar as it allows one, by providing the right motivation, to properly engage with others, and with the world.

Of note, the text also discusses the roots of *ren* in *Analects* 1.2, which helps to further develop our picture:

Master You said, [...]
“The gentleman applies himself to the roots. ‘Once the roots are firmly established, the Way will grow.’ Might we not say that filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of *ren*?” (1.2)

Taken literally, this passage implies that *ren* has its roots in filial piety and respect for one's parents and elders. More generally, however, we can interpret *Analects* 1.2 as illuminating that *ren* has its roots in our everyday actions and interactions with those closest to us. We first begin to develop through our interactions with our parents, and later within broader social groups as we grow. Filial piety and respect for our elders are components of a broader foundation, one of interpersonal relations with those close to us. If we accept this interpretation, then these can be

seen as the roots of Kongzi's project as a whole. The *Analects* is thus founded on a necessarily relational groundwork, one in which social roles and interpersonal interactions are cardinal.

Let us now turn to the path of cultivation toward *ren*. To cultivate the virtue of *ren* and work towards its attainment is a path of rigorous practice and training. The process is compared in *Analects* 1.15 to the carving of jade; a long and arduous process, as jade is quite recalcitrant and not easily carved. Kongzi himself states in *Analects* 2.4 that only at the age of seventy could he freely act how he wanted; only after fifty-five years of learning, practice, and training did his spontaneous actions and desires always align with *ren*. Even then, Kongzi is hesitant to claim that he himself has attained a state of *ren*:

The Master said, "How could I dare to lay claim to either sageliness or *ren*? What can be said about me is no more than this: I work at it without growing tired and encourage others without growing weary." (7.34)

From this passage, we gain some insight into what is required of those upon the path to *ren*; that they remain humble yet steadfast in their pursuit. We further see in Books 8 and 9 that the task of moral cultivation requires constant effort and unwavering determination, and is a lifelong and heavy burden:

Master Zeng said, "A scholar-official must be strong and resolute, for his burden is heavy and his way is long. He takes up *ren* as his own personal burden—is it not heavy? His way ends only with death—is it not long?" (8.7)

The Master said, "[The task of self-cultivation] might be compared to the task of building up a mountain: if I stop even one basketful of earth short of completion, then I have stopped completely. It might also be compared to the task of leveling ground: even if I have only dumped a single basketful of earth, at least I am moving forward." (9.19)

The development of *ren* is thus quite literally a lifelong pursuit, one which terminates only at the end of one's life, and that there is no point at which one can give up their practice. Given the difficulty of the path to cultivation, the *Analects* identifies only a select few individuals as having attained *ren* to the fullest extent:

The Master said, “I have yet to meet a person who truly loved *ren* or hated a lack of *ren*. One who truly loved *ren* could not be surpassed, while one who truly hated a lack of *ren* would at least be able to act in a *ren* fashion, as he would not tolerate that which is not *ren* being associated with his person.

Is there a person who can, for the space of a single day, simply devote his efforts to *ren*? I have never met anyone whose strength was insufficient for this task. Perhaps such a person exists, but I have yet to meet him.” (4.6)¹⁹

Not only have very few individuals attained *ren*, but it is also challenging to attribute *ren* to others. Kongzi is hesitant to ascribe *ren* to his disciples, as it is tricky to evaluate whether someone is truly *ren*. While *ren* is inherently a relational virtue, the attainment of *ren* also requires internalization; the mere outward expression of *ren* does not guarantee that the agent has properly internalized the meaning of *ren*. In some sense, then, *ren* is also an internal state,²⁰ and the internalization of *ren* will only reliably manifest itself outwardly over a lengthy period of time. That is to say, only by observing someone’s actions over a prolonged measure of time can one accurately ascertain whether an individual has, in fact, acted in a *ren* fashion and has acted for the right reasons (that is, that they have acted from *ren*, not merely in accordance with *ren*.)

Let us explore this a bit further. The full attainment of *ren* requires its *internalization*, which involves the understanding that *ren* actions are valuable in themselves. This is a point which was addressed in our discussion of *li*; merely acting in accordance with *ren* falls short of what is required. Instead, an agent must act out of *ren*, or out of a deep understanding and internalization of *ren*. However, to judge whether or not someone has is acting out of an internalization of *ren* is rather difficult.

¹⁹ This passage has further implications; that every person is capable of cultivation. We are all born with the strength and capacity to undergo the process, which aligns with both Mengzi and Xunzi’s arguments that everyone has the potential to become virtuous.

²⁰ That is not to say that *ren* is purely internal. *Ren* is inherently a relational virtue, yet it requires that the individual holds the proper emotions, motivations, and reasons for acting. In this sense, there is a proper internal state required of the *ren* individual.

In the *Analects*, Kongzi describes that those who act out of *ren* are acting in a way that will ensure long-term flourishing,²¹ whereas the uncultivated individual seeks to satisfy their own short-term interests. It is fully possible that at times, the proper action is in line with one's short-term interests. In most cases, however, the proper action will be the one which ensures overall, long-term flourishing even if it, at times, requires sacrificing short-term benefit. Those who have not internalized *ren* will, at times, go against the appropriate action in their pursuit of short-term interests. As such, it seems clear that only an assessment of life-long action can provide good reason to believe that someone is in fact *ren*.

Let us turn to Book 5 for an example of such an assessment:

Meng Wubo asked, "Is Zilu *ren*?"

The Master replied, "I do not know."

Meng Wubo repeated his question.

The Master said, "In a state of one thousand chariots, Zilu could be employed to organize the collection of military taxes, but I do not know whether or not he is *ren*." [...]

"What about Zihua?"

"Standing in his proper place at court with his sash tied, Zihua could be employed to converse with guests and visitors, but I do not know whether or not he is *ren*." (5.8)

This passage illustrates Kongzi as reticent to ascribe *ren* to Zilu or Zihua, despite their actions aligning with the actions of a *ren* individual. The passage thus exhibits that while one may not be fully *ren*, one may still act in accordance with *ren*. In this example, Zilu and Zihua act in accordance with *ren*, yet Kongzi remains uncertain on their attainment of *ren*. Again, the evaluation of whether an individual has cultivated a *ren* state is suggested, in the *Analects*, to be

²¹ In the early stages of cultivation, acting in accordance with *ren* will ask the agent to sacrifice their short-term interests, or rather, to sacrifice what they perceive to be in their best short-term interest. As we will discuss in Chapter 3, however, a fully cultivated individual comes to find joy in acting out of *ren*. For these more developed agents, acting virtuously no longer requires sacrifice, insofar as the practitioner understand why they are acting a certain way and why it is worthwhile to act in a *ren* fashion.

possible only at the end of one's life; a time in which the full scope of one's actions is available for scrutiny.

Analects 8.3 does, however, offer an example of someone who has demonstrably ascertained *ren*. The passage tells us of Master Zeng on his deathbed, who desperately asks his disciples to uncover his hands and feet. Slingerland's (2003) commentary offers some insight into this lament:

“The purpose of uncovering the feet and hands is to see that they remain unharmed — not a given in early China, where amputation was a common punishment. Master Zeng was particularly known for his filial piety, one of the main principles of which was preserving one's body intact. . . It is only now, on his deathbed, that Master Zeng can be sure to have made it through life without disrespecting his parents in this fashion.” (p. 79)

Master Zeng was dedicated to observing filial piety through to his last moments, and he ends his life knowing he had not failed to properly respect his parents. His behavior is indicative of proper internalization of interpersonal relations and filial piety. For Kongzi, this is a strong indicator that Master Zeng is, indeed, *ren*.

This proper internalization is a critical aspect of *ren* in the *Analects*. As previously mentioned, Kongzi was hesitant to accredit Zilu or Zihua with *ren*, despite their actions aligning with those of a *ren* individual. There is thus a possibility that one acts in accordance with *ren*, even when they have not properly internalized the virtue. This distinction is quite critical: there is a difference between acting in accordance with *ren* and acting out of, or from, *ren*. In discussing *Analects* 14.6,²² the Qing Dynasty commentator, Huan Maoyong explains the following:

“Potentially, there are also occasions when a petty person does something that is *ren*, but this

²² *Analects* 14.6: The Master said, “Certainly there are those gentlemen who are not *ren*, but there has never been a petty person who is *ren*.”

does not change the fact that he is, in the end, still a petty person.²³ Any *ren* displayed by a petty person is temporary and superficial because his heart remains firmly opposed to *ren*” (in Slingerland, 2003, p. 156). While the petty person lacks the proper internalization of *ren*, it is conceivable that they may act in accordance with *ren* from time to time.²⁴

Those who act *out of ren* are those who are willing to forego short-term self-interest in favor of long-term flourishing. The petty person, on the other hand, is either willing to act against *ren* in order to fulfill some short-term desire or will utilize an appearance of *ren* in an instrumental fashion in order to satisfy short-term interests. However, those who treat *ren* as a tool for other goals will never be able to achieve it. To use virtue as a tool is an impossible task; when virtue is pursued only for its instrumental value, it cannot be attained. Such an attitude shows a deep misunderstanding of *ren* within the agent, as well as an improper motivational set. Kongzi writes that only those who understand *ren* as valuable in itself are able to become *ren*.

The ideal state for Kongzi is when one acts at all times out of *ren*, and out of an internalization of the virtue. Such behavior would qualify as doing the right thing for the right reasons, as opposed to doing the right thing with the inappropriate or improper intention (merely acting in accordance). An example from *Mengzi* 2A6 might help to further illustrate this distinction:

Suppose someone suddenly saw a child about to fall into a well: anyone in such a situation would have a feeling of alarm and compassion—not because one sought to get in good with the child’s parents, not because one wanted fame among one’s neighbors and friends, and not because one would dislike the sound of the child’s cries. (Van Norden, 2008, p. 46)

²³ The petty person is the counterpart to the gentleman. It is a term used to describe those who are uncultivated, particularly those who attempt to use virtue for instrumental means. Xunzi, a later follower of Kongzi, writes: “One who makes a display of wisdom and lords his ability around is a petty man.” (Hutton, 2014, p. 328)

²⁴ Not only does petty person lack the internalization of *ren*, but they are also entirely uncultivated, using the guise of virtue for personal gain.

While this example says something of Mengzi's theory of human nature, it is also useful in illustrating that one can have many reasons for action, some better than others. The man in this example might have various reasons for acting to help the child; however, removing the child is an identical action, regardless of the motivation. Acting merely in accordance with *ren*, as opposed to acting out of an understanding of *ren*, will look identical in most cases. Both Mengzi and Kongzi are concerned with the reasons and motivations for action; in this case, compassion is the right reason, unlike helping the child out of annoyance at her crying.

Let us look more closely at right and wrong reasons for acting in a *ren* fashion.²⁵ An extensive theme in the *Analects* concerns the proper motivations for pursuing *ren*; in the ideal state, one does not have instrumental reasons for undergoing cultivation.²⁶ Instrumental motivations are described in the text as external reasons, e.g., validation from others, a salary or official position, or material comforts. The following are only a few of the many passages which address this topic:

The Master said, "Do not be concerned that you lack an official position, but rather concern yourself with the means by which you might become established. Do not be concerned that no one has heard of you, but rather strive to become a person worthy of being known." (4.14)

The Master said, "It is not easy to find someone who is able to learn for even the space of three years without a thought given to official salary." (8.12)

The Master said, "The gentleman is distressed by his own inability, rather than the failure of others to recognize him." (15.19)

The Master said, "In serving your lord, show respect for the tasks you have been assigned. Do not make the salary you will receive a priority." (15.38)²⁷

²⁵ Chapter 3 will articulate more clearly how one's motivations change and develop throughout the course of cultivation.

²⁶ There are some details within this discussion that must be further clarified and addressed; for example, when one starts on the path of cultivation, one's motivational set is such that it requires virtue to be pursued for instrumental reasons. These clarifications will be made in Chapter 3.

²⁷ See also 1.14, 1.16, 6.22, 7.16, 14.24, and 15.32.

The *ren* individual is thus not motivated by garnering fame, by earning a positive perception by others, by a salary, or by any other external ends. Rather, the *ren* individual studies and trains for its own sake.²⁸ In other words, the *ren* individual acts out of an understanding of the reasons and moral motivations behind *ren*, as a full understanding of what makes a *ren* action *ren* provides the right kind of reason for action.

Despite our discussion of the avoidance of rewards, there is textual support to show that there is some reward for the *ren* individual. Without such, it might be difficult to imagine why one would stay on the path of cultivation for long. Kongzi explains that there is happiness, ease, and comfort to be found in following the Way; qualities which outweigh any reward to be found outside of the Way.

The Master said, “Without *ren*, one cannot remain constant in adversity and cannot enjoy enduring happiness. Those who are *ren* feel at home in *ren*, whereas those who are clever follow *ren* because they feel that they will profit (*li*) from it.” (4.2)

The Duke of She asked Zilu about Confucius. Zilu had no reply. [Upon Zilu’s return], the Master said, “Why did you not just say: ‘He is the type of person who is so passionate that he forgets to eat, whose joy renders him free of worries, and who grows old without noticing the passage of the years.’” (7.19)

The first passage addresses how the *ren* individual can feel at home in *ren*; a sensible extrapolation would be to say that this individual feels that acting out of *ren* is an act of ease, and that such cannot be said for the average person.²⁹ The second passage describes Kongzi’s pleasure found in the Way; since we can assume Kongzi to be a *ren* individual, we can take these pleasures to apply to *ren* individuals broadly. We see that Kongzi, who is indifferent to external rewards, derived joy from the internal goods provided by his pursuit of *ren*. These internal goods

²⁸ Chapter 3 will look more closely into the possible contradiction of *ren* being something that cannot be directly pursued and will discuss different plausible motivations for striving to become virtuous.

²⁹ We can also remember *Analects* 2.4 in which Kongzi was able to act with ease and comfort while always acting out of *ren*: “at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds.”

can be contrasted with external, material goods; they are social goods, or pleasures, which can only be accessed by interacting with others. According to Slingerland (2003), these “internal goods” of the Confucian Way are goods which have moral value and include an agent’s “own moral qualities, their level of self-cultivation, and their love for the Way” (p. xxiii). In 6A16, Mengzi describes the distinction between these material and immaterial rewards: “There are Heavenly honors, and there are human honors. Benevolence, righteousness, devotion, faithfulness, delighting in goodness without tiring—these are Heavenly honors. Being a duke, High Minister, or Chief Counselor—these are human honors” (Van Norden, 2008, pp. 156-7). Human honors are the material, external goods we have discussed, which have no moral value, while the heavenly honors are the internal goods of cultivation, which do have moral value. These internal goods are only available to those who have reached a certain stage of moral development, and they are the kinds of goods which will allow us to flourish. While the uncultivated individual might see external goods such as being a Chief Counselor as the key to flourishing, it is actually the internal goods of benevolence and righteousness that will bring about the most flourishing (for both the individual and her society). Through the cultivation of *ren*, one develops communal relationships, which opens up opportunities for internal well-being, along with the awareness and appreciation for these sorts of goods. These pleasures far outweigh any material pleasures, but only the cultivation of *ren* allows one to be aware of and enjoy such goods.

As a quick side note, the influential neo-Confucian scholar and general Wang Yangming (1472-1529) offers some further insight into *Analects* 7.19. He remarks that “The passions of ordinary people do not extend beyond being passionate about rewards, fame, wealth, and honor...The nature of their passion is not different [from the Master’s], it is merely the object of

their passion that is different” (Slingerland, 2003, pp. 70-71). This object of passion is crucially important and has serious bearing on evaluating virtuousness.

While there is much more that could be said about the usage and importance of *ren* within the *Analects*, we have now established a foundation on which we can build our interpretation of Kongzi’s conception of the self. The virtue of *ren* provides insight into goal of cultivation and illustrates some of the changes which an individual will undergo during cultivation. We will see this play out when we look to the ways that an agent’s motivations change, as well as when we look at what it means to internalize *ren*. Finally, the virtue of *ren* provides us with some clues about Kongzi’s understanding of the self insofar as *ren* is a deeply social concept; it is the ultimate goal of cultivation, and it inherently concerns interpersonal relationships and societal flourishing.

CHAPTER 3: THE CONFUCIAN SELF

Our exploration of *ren* and *li* has demonstrated that, within the *Analects*, there exists an important relationship between the individual and the community, and that this relation is essential to the process of self-cultivation. What we now wish to explore is what this relationship reveals about Kongzi's underlying conception of the self. How is it that the individual interacts with, and is shaped by, the community? How do *ren* and *li* play into this process? What insight does this process offer into Kongzi's understanding of the self? The following is an attempt to construct a plausible and consistent conception of the self as seen within the *Analects*, framed by our established interpretations of *ren* and *li*.

To identify Kongzi's conception of a "self" or "selfhood" is a difficult task, particularly when approaching the matter from a Western background. Certain challenges are immediately apparent; which aspects of self are we looking for? If we pull from established, contemporary theories of self, and their understanding of selfhood, are we potentially importing anachronistic or inappropriate concepts into Kongzi's work? Furthermore, scholars have offered myriad interpretation of the self in the *Analects* throughout the past few decades, some more plausible than others. It seems that the most advantageous and worthwhile path is to start with the text itself, and to build on our established interpretation of Kongzi's project.

In establishing the conception of self in the *Analects*, our first question ought to be whether Kongzi conceived a self at all.³⁰ With only a cursory glance, it becomes immediately apparent that Kongzi has some conception of self:

³⁰ There is a further conversation to be had regarding the plausibility of ascribing certain concepts to a thinker which they did not linguistically express, and whether or not such an ascription presents a problematic instance of an anachronism. For a defense of doing so, see Prudovsky, G. (1997). Can we ascribe to past thinkers concepts they had no linguistic means to express? *History and Theory*. 36:1, pp. 15-31.

The Master said, “At fifteen, I set my mind upon learning; at thirty, I took my place in society; at forty, I became free of doubts; at fifty, I understood Heaven’s Mandate; at sixty, my ear was attuned; and at seventy, I could follow my heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds.” (2.4)³¹

Kongzi’s autobiographical narrative lends itself to a few noteworthy observations. First, we are shown that Kongzi undergoes growth, cultivation, and transformation. Second, this evolution is to some extent internal and establishes that Kongzi implicitly endorses some kind of inner, or mental, life.

Before moving forward with our analysis, some clarification is needed regarding my use of “internal.” Throughout this project, we will identify and discuss various “internal” changes that a moral agent may undergo. The use of “internal” is somewhat colloquial, insofar as we mean to say that these are changes happening to the agent and her dispositions. We do not mean to create a strict dichotomy between internal and external dimensions here. While such changes are happening to an individual agent, we do not want to say that these inner, mental states are wholly separated from the outside world or from other agents. The use of “internal” by no means implies anything metaphysical about the status of mental states. Rather, when discussing internal states, we are talking about the mental states, emotions, motivations, and general disposition of an agent, which also have important external aspects. They all involve communication with and expression to others. However, it is necessary to identify and discuss this internal dimension in order to highlight the changes that an individual experiences in regard to their personal dispositions, which includes desires, motivations, and emotions.

Let us look at each step within the autobiography to identify both the internal dimension, as well as his transformation. Kongzi begins by setting his mind upon learning. As Slingerland

³¹ All passages of the *Analects* included in this chapter are based on Slingerland’s (2003) translation, though some modifications have been made.

(2003, p. 9) comments, this step simply shows Kongzi committing himself to the path of cultivation. He sets his intentions and submits to the study and practice of ritual. Already, this focusing of his mind and attention upon his studies implies an internal dimension to his mental life. At thirty, Kongzi describes taking his place in society; his studies have shown him how to properly interact with his community, and he has begun the process of appropriate socialization. Kongzi has come to understand his social role and how he fits into the order of his community. While this understanding is likely still short of full internalization, Kongzi nevertheless understands and accepts what is proper for him to do, particularly in relation to his broader community. We thus see that his step has a profoundly relational component; a vital step in cultivation is to find one's proper place in society, and to recognize the values which govern proper behavior and the social order. As Kongzi writes in 16.13, "If you do not learn ritual, you will lack the means to take your place." The importance of "taking one's place" will be discussed later; for now, it is sufficient to recognize that Kongzi's education involves his recognition of the importance of ritual in affording one the ability to properly interact with one's community.

The third step of his autobiography involves Kongzi becoming "free of doubts." We are shown that his cultivation involves the transformation of his mental states. He finds a sense of ease, and his mind settles such that he is comfortable with the teachings of the Way and with his new way of being (Slingerland, 2003, p. 9). To become more comfortable and confident in his understanding of the teachings implies an emotional shift, and in turn a sort of internal transformation. In the beginning stages of cultivation, there might still exist some discord between the student and the teachings, insofar as the student might not understand, at all times, the proper action to take. Kongzi, on the other hand, is at the stage in which he has become free of doubts, implying that he fully understands what he should do in order to act out of *ren* and

follow what underlies ritual. While this step doesn't show whether Kongzi's emotions, attitudes, and dispositions are fully aligned with the teaching of the Way, it does imply an internal shift regarding his understanding of proper behavior.

The fourth and fifth stage of his cultivation describe his coming to understand the Mandate of Heaven,³² and his ear becoming attuned. These steps once again point to the internal dimension of cultivation, insofar as he internalized his understanding of ritual propriety. His 'ear being attuned' has been interpreted in a few different ways but can be most easily read as there being no conflict between Kongzi's inner dispositions and the teachings of the sage kings which he hears, or studies (Slingerland, 2003, p. 9). Another possible reading is that Kongzi's ears are attuned such that he is able to recognize and hear Heaven's teachings and messages more easily or clearly than others. A third interpretation is also possible; that virtue is non-codifiable, and the virtuous individual must develop the ability to perceive the morally relevant aspects of any situation, and that this is the sense in which Kongzi's ear is attuned. With all three interpretations, we see that Kongzi internalizes, or at least deeply recognizes, the meaning of ritual propriety and the teachings of the sages.

In the final stage of Kongzi's autobiography, he is able to follow his heart's desires without overstepping the bounds.³³ This illustrates the ultimate stage of cultivation, in which Kongzi's disposition has cultivated in such a way that the proper thoughts, actions, and emotions

³² The Mandate of Heaven, or *tianming*, is a doctrine of the ancient Chinese philosophical and political tradition, which embodies the belief that Heaven (*tian*) legitimizes rulers. While there is discussion regarding the status of *tian* as either a moral deity or an impersonal force (Back, 2016), *tianming* establishes that a ruler's worthiness and actions will be judged and consequently rewarded or punished. To understand Heaven's Mandate is to understand which actions are morally correct and in line with *tian*.

³³ Slingerland (2003) translates the final stage of Kongzi's autobiography as follows: "at seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without overstepping the bounds of ritual propriety." Given our interpretation of *li*, however, it seems more consistent to read this passage as Kongzi not overstepping the bound of what *underlies* ritual propriety, because at times, alteration of the formal elements of a ritual is acceptable or even necessary. Because of this and because the Chinese character for *li* does not actually occur in this line, I have modified all uses of *Analects* 2.4 to read more literally "without overstepping the bounds."

arise spontaneously. As Slingerland (2003) comments, this is the point at which “one’s dispositions have been so thoroughly harmonized with the dictates of normative culture that one accords with them spontaneously” (p.9). This ultimate step is naturally interpreted as exemplifying some final sort of internal shift; his locus of action has undergone a transformation such that the proper behavior comes to him without active thought, and his actions are always in accordance with *li*. His motivations for thought and action are naturally in line with the underlying meaning of ritual, such that his spontaneous activities are always in accordance with *li*. Insofar as Kongzi’s cultivation is one which develops his dispositions, thoughts, and actions, it is clear that Kongzi’s cultivation is a cultivation of the self, and that this transformation has a considerable internal dimension.

It is important to note that *Analects* 2.4 points us to an inner, or mental dimension of human beings, because not all are in agreement that Kongzi has any account of a mental life. Herbert Fingarette (1972), for example, holds the following position:

I must emphasize that my point here is not that [Kongzi’s] words are intended to exclude reference to the inner psyche. He could have done this if he had had such a basic metaphor in mind, had seen its plausibility, but on reflection had decided to reject it. But this is not what I am arguing here. My thesis is that the entire notion never entered his head. The metaphor of an inner psychic life, in all its ramifications so familiar to us, simply is not present in the *Analects*, not even as a rejected possibility. (p. 45)

Fingarette holds that Kongzi has no understanding of a person’s “inner psyche.” This argument stands in strong contradiction to our interpretation and does not hold up against textual evidence.

Throughout the *Analects*, we see direct reference to one’s inner life, as we saw in our dissection of *Analects* 2.4. A further example is presented in *Analects* 7.37:

The Master said, “The gentleman is self-possessed and relaxed, while the petty man is perpetually full of worry.”

In this passage, Kongzi draws a distinction between the gentleman and the petty man based on differences in their mental life. If all we have on Kongzi's account is actions and outward behavior, then we have no room for mental states. However, to be self-possessed is to be in control of one's *feelings*. Watson's (2007) translation of this passage describes the gentleman as being "composed" (p. 52), while Lau's (1979) describes him as "easy of mind" (p. 91). While slightly different, each of these translations point to a mental state of some sort; a state of being calm. It is difficult to imagine a description of someone as being "self-possessed" or "easy of mind" through a purely behavioral lens (at the same time, however, we should be careful to avoid the claim that these emotional states are purely internal). The same can be said of the petty man being anxious; there is a sense in which this feeling is experienced internally by the agent. This passage, along with many others, is quite difficult to interpret while claiming that Kongzi lacked a notion of an inner psychic life, as Fingarette argues.³⁴

Furthermore, to say that Kongzi's account of human psychology, and selfhood, lacks any possibility of a mental life contradicts our interpretations of *ren* and *li*. This contradiction manifests on a few different counts. We discussed, to a great extent, the distinction made between acting in 'accordance with' and 'acting out of an internalization' of *ren* and *li*. Kongzi follows not the formal prescriptions of ritual propriety, but instead acts out of a deep understanding of what underlies these rituals. Such a division inherently implies an internal, or mental realm in which different motivations may materialize. True cultivation requires not only the right actions (those which accord with *li*), but also the appropriate reasons for acting. To

³⁴ To be clear, my claim is not that such mental states are strictly inner; I do not wish to draw a dualistic view of behavioral and internal states. Rather, these mental states are internally available to the agent, but at the same time are not necessarily unavailable to others. In another sense, such internal states are necessarily relational, insofar as they exist, in most cases, in relation to some external stimulus. This discussion of internal states is necessary to establish some of Kongzi's basic assumptions on which we can ground an interpretation of the self.

properly perform a ritual is to act out of an understanding of its meaning and significance; as such, *li* requires not merely behavior and action, but proper internal cultivation. Furthermore, it is important to note that rituals have expressive power; they function as communicative devices.

Rituals are behaviors which convey internal states to others; ideally, they are outward expressions of internal states. For example, Kongzi states the following in *Analects* 2.7:

Ziyou asked about filial piety. The Master said, “Nowadays ‘filial’ means simply being able to provide one’s parents with nourishment. But even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If you are not respectful, wherein lies the difference?”

Kongzi indicates that filial piety is not merely a behavior; if it were, then being filial toward one’s parents would look no different from caring for animals. Filial piety and caring for one’s parents require the proper emotional attitude of respect, whereas the care of animals can be merely behavioral. What Kongzi wants to indicate is that the care of one’s parents cannot be characterized as filial piety unless the appropriate internal state accompanies the behavior. As such, there is an important difference between the ways we engage with our parents, and the ways we care for livestock. Filial piety is the kind of ritualized behavior which requires the agent to carry out the prescribed action with the appropriate motivation, an action for which there is both an external, expressive element, along with an internal, motivational element. Once again, we see that there is an inner “psyche” in which such emotions and motivations manifest.

We can also draw from our discussion on *ren* for further support; *Analects* 5.8 exemplifies Kongzi’s apprehension in attributing to any of his disciples a full attainment of *ren*. While their actions were in accordance with *ren*, Kongzi could not confidently evaluate the state of their internal cultivation without seeing their behavior over a lifetime. Actions in and of themselves are insufficient to be *ren*. What is important is what underlies those actions. If our

interpretation is correct on this front, then we can establish with certainty that Kongzi has an account of a person's inner life.

With this minimal condition in place, we may now move forward with informing a more robust sense of self in the *Analects*. This discussion will not be concerned with metaphysical or phenomenological claims regarding the self, the kind which make up much of contemporary discussion; Kongzi was not concerned with answering these kinds of questions, and for our purposes they do not need to be addressed. The claims about the self in the *Analects* we are concerned with are those which illuminate the relationship between the individual and the broader community, and those which offer insight into Kongzi's sociopolitical theory. We will first discuss what it means to develop the proper disposition, which I find to be the most useful method for framing the development of the self throughout the process of cultivation. We will then examine the details of such a disposition, which include the agent's level of internalization, as well as the ways that emotion, motivation, and spontaneous action give insight into what a proper set of dispositions looks like.

Development of an Agent's Disposition

We have thus far established that Kongzi has an account of an inner, mental life. To talk of the internalization of *ren*, however, requires something further than to say that one is aware, in one's mind or thoughts, of the proper way to act. Perhaps the best way to describe Kongzi's process of self-cultivation is to say that it requires the development of a certain set of dispositions. In the *Analects*, *ren* is the set of virtues and dispositions which are foundational for self-cultivation. The process of becoming *ren*, and of cultivating the proper set of dispositions, requires an important internal component, one which offers some insight into the relationship

between the self and the community. Let us spend a bit more time with the previously explored *Analects 2.7*:

Ziyou asked about filial piety. The Master said, “Nowadays ‘filial’ means simply being able to provide one’s parents with nourishment. But even dogs and horses are provided with nourishment. If you are not respectful, wherein lies the difference?”

As discussed, filial piety is the “root” of *ren*; or rather, the root of *ren* lies in the relationships we have with those closest to us. It is thus a fundamental virtue to be practiced. We have also suggested that filial piety, as seen in this passage, is not mere behavior. To provide for one’s parents only through a particular set of behaviors and actions is not enough to be filially pious. There is some internal component which differentiates the actions directed toward one’s parents from those directed toward animals. While one may behaviorally act in all the appropriate ways toward one’s parents, there is some internal state which differentiates a pious act from a non-pious one. We can easily understand Kongzi’s concern here: imagine a child who provides their elderly parents with material care, perhaps by sending checks or paying for their nursing home, yet they never visit or spend time with them. Or we might imagine a child who does take the time to be with their parents and takes care of them, yet does so in a demeaning, callous, or insensitive manner. The material care may be provided, and yet we can see Kongzi’s worry that something vital is missing; such children bear an improper or inappropriate attitude toward their parents. We could say that these children take care “of” their parents, yet they do not care “about” or “for” them.

According to Kongzi, one must act not only for the right reasons, but also out of the appropriate attitudes and dispositions. To cultivate oneself, then, is to cultivate such dispositions that one acts appropriately, with the proper attitudes, and for the right reasons. Regarding filial piety, as seen in *Analects 2.7*, these dispositions would manifest in the showing, as well as

feeling of respect, appreciation, love, and concern. To take care of one's parents without these feelings would be tantamount to not truly feeling care and concern for them and would certainly not qualify as filial piety or virtuous action.

It is thus clear that developing the appropriate dispositions is an integral feature of self-cultivation. In order to cultivate these virtuous psychological dispositions, Kongzi argues that it is necessary to begin with the appropriate internal material:

Zixia asked, “[An Ode says,] ‘Her artful smile, with its alluring dimples, Her beautiful eyes, so clear, The unadorned upon which to paint.’ What does this mean?”
The Master said, “The application of colors comes only after a suitable unadorned background is present.” (3.8)

The metaphor within this passage likens the process of painting the face to the process of cultivation, and importantly, highlights that there is something like a canvas that can be painted; there is something that can be cultivated. We see here that Kongzi conceives of humans as having a certain internal feature, a sort of material, which will be altered in some way during cultivation. In this metaphor, the face can best be painted if it is unadorned. A blank canvas is much easier to paint than one that has been marked up or warped. Likewise, we can interpret Kongzi to believe that a person's natural material, that which is to be cultivated, must be unadorned, undeveloped, or unpolluted such that cultivation is possible.

Zai Wo was sleeping during the daytime. The Master said, “Rotten wood cannot be carved, and a wall of dung cannot be plastered. As for Zai Wo, what would be the use of reprimanding him?” (5.10)

In this passage, Kongzi stresses that a wooden block must be in the proper condition in order to be carved, and a wall must be clean in order to be plastered, just like a face or canvas should be unadorned in order to be properly painted. While one could attempt to carve a rotten log, the process would have much lower chances of producing the desired end product. This second

passage further clues us in to the fact that cultivation is the process which molds or shapes a sort of natural material, and that this material cannot be “rotten” if it is to be properly cultivated. If one has been negatively influenced for long enough, that is to say, has remained unvirtuous, then the path toward cultivation is almost certainly closed off to them. Proper cultivation requires that one is “unadorned” when they begin their practice and journey toward virtue.

Analects 5.10 likens Zai Wo’s internal material to rotten wood, with the implication that he can no longer be cultivated. Importantly, we must ask whether Zai Wo’s native substance has “rotted” over time, or if he was born with an internal material unfit for cultivation. If Zai Wo were born already rotten, the implication would be that he never had the opportunity to undergo moral cultivation. To say that some people happen to be born with a “rotten” native substance, so to speak, would have potentially problematic implications. The consequence of such an interpretation would be that Kongzi would have to be committed to the idea that some people are simply unlucky, born without the ability of moral cultivation.

Such an interpretation, however, runs counter to the interpretations of both of Kongzi’s successors, Mengzi and Xunzi. As Mengzi wrote:

People having these four sprouts is like their having four limbs. (*Mengzi* 2A6)³⁵

Mengzi held that all people are born with sprouts of virtue, which can be nourished and cultivated to grow and flourish. Just like having four limbs, these sprouts of virtue are a natural feature of what it is to be a human being; we are all born with the potential for cultivation.

Meanwhile, Xunzi wrote that any person has the potential to become a sage king:

Anyone on the streets can become a [sage king like] Yu. How do I mean this? I say: that by which Yu was Yu was because he was *ren*, *yi*, lawful, and correct. Thus, *ren*, *yi*, lawfulness, and correctness have patterns that can be known and can be practiced. However, people on the streets all have the material for knowing *ren*, *yi*, lawfulness, and correctness, and they all have the equipment for practicing *ren*, *yi*,

³⁵ Van Norden, 2008, p. 47.

lawfulness, and correctness. Thus, it is clear that they can become a Yu. (*Xunzi* Chapter 23)³⁶

Xunzi writes that all people, regardless of social status, are born with the material required for cultivation; anyone can learn to know and practice *ren*, and thus, anyone can become a sage king. While their methods of cultivation differ, both Mengzi and Xunzi (who saw themselves as adherents to Kongzi's philosophical thought) hold that all people are born with the potential for cultivation. This alone presents a good reason to hold that Kongzi believed all people to be born with the capacity for cultivation, and *Analects* 17.2 lends further weight to the plausibility of this reading:

The Master said, "By nature people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice."

From this passage, we can gather that Kongzi believed all people to be born with a similar nature, and thus the same native substance. Insofar as people's natures are all similar, and Kongzi believes that some people can become virtuous, it becomes clear that everyone must have a native substance that has the potential to be molded and developed.

In order to understand how divergence can take place as the result of practice, we can recall the analogy from *Analects* 5.10, which compared people's native substance to wood. It is not in the original nature of wood to begin as rotten. By nature, wood can be carved and manipulated. However, if the wood is not cared for, if it is discarded or ignored, then changes will take place: the wood will begin to rot and decay. Unless one cares for the wood by oiling and carving it early on, then the wood will spoil, such that it can no longer be properly manipulated or carved, no matter how much effort is applied.

³⁶ Hutton, 2014, p. 254.

Let us connect this analogy to Kongzi's conception of individuals. All humans are born with a certain substance which has the potential for cultivation, and as long as this substance remains untainted (or "unadorned," as suggested in *Analects* 3.8), then cultivation remains possible. However, insofar as we are all exposed to different influences from our society, our native substance will undoubtedly change over time. It cannot remain static and will change one way or another. If we are cared for, provided for, and educated, then our native substance can be directed to develop in the "right" direction. On the other hand, if nothing is done to properly habituate a person, or through exposure to the negative influence of others, their native substance may change to such a degree that cultivation is no longer possible. We saw this shift take place in Zai Wo, whose substance was not cared for, such that he lost the capacity for cultivation. This reading is consistent with our overall interpretation, insofar as we have established that there is *something* which is to be cultivated, and if this substance is, say, destroyed, it cannot be recovered. One implication of such a reading may be that moral self-cultivation must start at an early age in order to allow for the best outcome.³⁷

We can thus conclude that Kongzi's account of cultivation is grounded in his understanding of this necessary feature of how all human beings are constructed; that we are all born with a raw material which allows us to cultivate and develop ourselves. Now that we understand *what* is being developed through the process of self-cultivation, we can further investigate in what way one's natural substance should be cultivated. To develop a *ren* disposition, on our reading of the *Analects*, becomes discernible in a couple of different ways. While they are all related in some sense, emotion, motivation, and spontaneity are the

³⁷ We will later discuss those born with a natural talent for cultivation; those who are able to develop virtue more easily than others.

fundamental considerations of such a disposition. Importantly, these are aspects of an internal shift, yet they require the relationship to one's family and community to be properly developed.

Emotions

We see in the *Analects* that the emotions we naturally feel are not always the appropriate ones or felt to the appropriate degree. An integral piece of the cultivation process is developing a disposition such that one feels the proper emotions in the appropriate situations. We can turn to the following passages, which concern the apprehension of appropriate emotional attitudes:

The Master said, "Someone who lacks magnanimity when occupying high office, who is not respectful when performing ritual, and who remains unmoved by sorrow when overseeing mourning rites—how could I bear to look upon such a person?" (3.26)

Fan Chi asked about *ren*.

The Master replied, "When occupying your place, remain reverent; when performing public duties, be respectful; and when dealing with others, be dutiful. These are virtues that cannot be abandoned, even if you go to dwell among the Yi or Di barbarians." (13.19)

We see respect, sorrow, and reverence as examples of emotional attitudes which concern Kongzi. These emotions must be present in the cultivated person, and they must be the appropriate emotion for the respective situation or ritual, as well as the proper magnitude of emotion. As we have thus far established, the cultivated individual cannot simply act in a respectful fashion; they must also possess the relevant internal emotion (as seen in our discussion of filial piety). Both 3.26 and 13.19 describe a variety of situations we might find ourselves in, along with the appropriate attitudes for such a situation. Public duties should be accompanied by an emotional attitude of respect, while mourning rites should be conducted with sorrow. To carry out these rituals or acts without the appropriate emotional attitude is the mark of an uncultivated

individual. *Analects* 2.8 further illustrates the necessity of the correct internal state accompanying ritual:

Zixia asked about filial piety. The Master said, “It is the demeanor that is difficult. If there is work to be done, disciples shoulder the burden, and when wine and food are served, elders are given precedence, but surely filial piety consists of more than this.”

Kongzi demonstrates that the behavior of filial piety (serving food and *acting out* respect) do not suffice to embody the ritual. He writes that filial piety “consists of more than this;” one must also feel the appropriate emotion.

Furthermore, Kongzi writes that these emotions are more fundamental to ritual than the particular actions of the ritual itself.

Master You said, “When it comes to the practice of ritual, it is harmonious ease that is to be valued. It is precisely such harmony that makes the Way of the Former Kings so beautiful. If you merely stick rigidly to ritual in all matters, great and small, there will remain that which you cannot accomplish. Yet if you know enough to value harmonious ease but try to attain it without being regulated by the rites, this will not work either.” (1.12)

Lin Fang asked about the roots of ritual. The Master exclaimed, “What a noble question! When it comes to ritual, it is better to be spare than extravagant. When it comes to mourning, it is better to be excessively sorrowful than fastidious.” (3.4)

Both passages illustrate that proper emotions are fundamental and necessary aspects of ritual.

Analects 1.12 warns that strict and rigid practice of ritual does not allow for the full expression of the underlying, appropriate motivations, as the proper emotional attitudes might be missing. In *Analects* 3.4, Kongzi states that one should rather be cautious than excessive with ritual practice, implying that it is preferable for one to spare the ritual accoutrements while maintaining one’s respectful attitude. We thus see a further point in this passage; that excessive sorrow is preferable to feeling no emotion at all during mourning rites. It is thus better to feel too much of the appropriate emotion than to perform a ritual with an absence of said emotion. From these two

observations, we can recognize the importance of internal dispositions regarding cultivation, insofar as they are fundamental for any proper social interaction or ritual practice.³⁸ According to Kongzi, what must be learned is to feel the appropriate emotions at the appropriate times, and to develop the proper dispositions is to feel these emotions effortlessly. The act of cultivation attunes one to spontaneously feel the virtuous emotion appropriate to any circumstance.

Importantly, this alignment of emotion with ritual is not an arbitrary requirement by Kongzi; he is not asking us to force an emotional response to some ritual. Cultivation allows one to understand the meaning of a ritual, and to understand why a certain emotion is the proper one to accompany the ritual. On the internal side, then, cultivation develops the proper affective attitude within the agent. We can also recall that the function of *li* is as a tool for communication between members of the community; rituals act as a tool to convey emotion. As such, feeling the proper emotion (along with allowing an avenue for its expression), is itself the underlying reason for the rituals. Rituals are a way to encode and express emotions to others, and the process of attuning one's emotions to these rituals is thus not an arbitrary one. Through practice and habituation, the moral agent comes to a better and deeper understanding of why the specific rituals are in place and can develop these appropriate emotions to accompany the ritual act. Importantly, then, these emotions are able to be developed precisely because the ritual code is not arbitrary.

One's natural substance must be cultivated to properly develop one's affective attitudes.

Both the uncultivated layperson, as well as the sage, might feel anger at times. The sage,

³⁸ A point worthy of noting here is that ritual can be said to channel our natural emotions. For example, it is natural for us to feel sorrow at the death of a loved one; this is how we are psychologically constructed. If this is the case, then the reason that Kongzi prefers one to feel excess sorrow rather than feeling a lack of sorrow is that the latter seems to indicate that one is missing a fundamental element of what it means to be human. For more on how these issues are developed in the later writing of Xunzi, see Berkson 2016.

however, feels anger only when it is appropriate, and to the degree to which it is appropriate. What is interesting about habituating emotions, however, is that the act of pausing and reflecting on one's emotional response, or the act of pondering which emotional response is best suited for the situation, seems to prevent one from actually feeling the emotion itself.³⁹ Kongzi thus stresses the importance of spontaneity; the cultivated individual possesses a disposition out of which the proper emotion arises spontaneously. Both the layperson and the sage feel emotions spontaneously, but only the sage displays the proper reaction. In *Analects* 2.4, Kongzi explains that "at seventy, [he] could follow [his] heart's desires without overstepping the bounds." He has thus reached the final stage of cultivation, such that his immediate desires and emotional reactions are always in accordance with proper emotions/attitudes and conduct. Let us look a bit more closely at the text concerning Kongzi's account of spontaneity.

Spontaneity

One of the marks of cultivation, particularly in its final stages, is the ability to act from virtue in a spontaneous fashion. While everyone can and does act spontaneously, the sage acts from a special sort of cultivated spontaneity. She is able to act from virtue at all times in a spontaneous fashion; something which the uncultivated individual is unable to do. As it will turn out, understanding cultivated spontaneity will illuminate various other aspects of the *Analects* in important ways. In this section, we will see that cultivated spontaneity allows for full ritual expression, and that it reveals the agent's degree of internalization and cultivation. We will also show that Kongzi's account of cultivated spontaneity has implications for his understanding of

³⁹ For example, imagine you are faced with an upsetting situation of some kind; the emotions you might feel immediately are anger or frustration. However, if you first stop to critically examine the situation and ask yourself which emotion is most appropriate for the circumstance, you will no longer actually experience that emotion once you have made up your mind about how you *should* feel. At least, you will no longer experience it as strongly.

the self, particularly in the way that the self changes throughout the process of cultivation. If it turns out that Confucian cultivation can mold or alter our spontaneous reactions to a significant extent, then this process will have important implications for our understanding of the self within the *Analects*.

Spontaneity & Ritual

To develop our understanding of spontaneity and spontaneous action, we must build off our previous interpretation of *li*. Recall that each ritual carries with it an underlying meaning or purpose, which is made up of two parts: the internal emotional state of the agent, and the information it communicates to others. On Kongzi's account, full ritual expression is only achieved if 1) this underlying meaning is upheld and 2) the ritual is performed spontaneously.

Ivanhoe (2010) describes such spontaneous action as follows:

In order for a ritual performance to exhibit the ideal of spontaneity, it must not only be well rehearsed and competently performed, it must also be an expression of personal commitment and concern and display appropriate sensibility and judgment. Only someone who has the right attitudes, concerns, and good sense, as well as the right training, is going to be able to perform with the ease, elegance, and creativity of ritual at its best. (p. 190)

Only the thoroughly cultivated individual can practice rituals fully, insofar as such an individual is able to express the ritual both properly and spontaneously. Spontaneous performance of ritual requires that the behavior be deeply habituated, be carried out properly, express the appropriate meaning, and be accompanied by the appropriate internal state; all the while, the ritual action arises naturally, easily, and freely.

Let us take *Analects* 7.9 as an example:

When the Master dined in the company of one who was in mourning, he never ate his fill.

Externally, Kongzi's behavior communicates respect and compassion for those who are grieving. In another sense, however, Kongzi's behavior may be seen as a reflection of his mental state; he is truly sharing in the grief of those around him. It is not that he is forcing himself not to finish his meal, but that he feels such grief that he is unable to. While this passage itself gives no insight into Kongzi's mental state, Slingerland (2013) notes that the vast majority of Chinese intellectuals who have commented on the *Analects* over the past two thousand years understand the point of this passage to be about sincerity and depth of feeling: "while others might observe the superficial niceties of the mourning rituals and then get on with their day, Confucius felt the rituals (even if they were being enacted by someone else), and remained profoundly affected by the emotions they evoked (p. 67)."⁴⁰

Whereas a young student might force himself to follow the formal elements of a mourning ritual (all the while secretly wishing he could finish the food on his plate), Kongzi's cultivation and internalization of virtue is developed to such an extent that we can safely assume he is sincere in his behavior. This interpretation is further supported if we recall *Analects* 2.4; "at seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without overstepping the bounds." Insofar as Kongzi was truly able to do what he wanted, all the while according with ritual, there is good reason to think that his not eating his full is an indication of his internal state.

We see further support for such an interpretation in *Analects* 17.21, where Zai Wo complains about the requirements of the three-year mourning period. Kongzi responds:

The Master asked, "Would you feel comfortable then eating your sweet rice and wearing your brocade gowns?"

"I would."

The Master replied, "Well, if you would feel comfortable doing so, then by all means you should do it. When the gentleman is in mourning, he gets no pleasure from eating sweet foods, finds no joy in listening to music, and feels no comfort in

⁴⁰ While it is possible that these commentators are wrong, their understanding provides good reason to interpret the passage in a similar manner absent strong evidence to the contrary.

his place of dwelling. This is why he gives up these things. But if you would feel comfortable doing them, then by all means you should!”

Kongzi explains that the ritual mourning period is a way to properly process and express one’s emotions and mourning; the reason that those in mourning abstain from certain foods and music is that they cannot enjoy them while mourning. In this sense, such a ritual is intended to be a vehicle for the agent to process her grief, while also communicating this mental state to those around her.⁴¹

To return to our question at hand, what role does spontaneity play in this ritualized expression of emotion? Kongzi’s behavior is of the cultivated sort insofar as his ritual behavior is an expression of his internal state and communicates respect to those around him. He is able to convey this internal state fully only because he does not have to deliberate on whether or not to finish his meal. Deliberation of any sort while performing ritualized behavior suggests that the agent has yet to reach the final stage of internalization, that they have other motivations for acting. If Kongzi had to deliberate about which behavior was fitting to this situation, it would indicate that he has yet to fully internalize this ritual, because his feeling of grief is not fully connected to the external expression of the emotion, and thus cannot be externally apprehended. There is thus a sense in which deliberation is indicative of the agent having yet to fully internalize the reasons for action encoded in the ritual, and thus having yet to reach the final stages of cultivation. Kongzi’s action of not eating his fill was pre-reflective and spontaneous and fully conveys his internal state to those around him, while also signifying his full internalization of ritual and virtue.⁴²

⁴¹ Meanwhile, Zai Wo seems to be lacking these proper emotions, insofar as he is able to indulge in sweet foods. The implications about Zai Wo is that he is lacking something fundamental, and we can recall Kongzi comparing his internal substance to rotten wood.

⁴² When I say that his actions are pre-reflective, I am referring to a specific sort of spontaneity: cultivated spontaneity. This will be addressed in the discussion on *wu-wei*. Here, we should clarify, however, that Kongzi *did* spend years reflecting on and developing the proper behavior and emotions, such that the proper reaction now

Our modern practice of addressing others (teachers, elders) with certain proper greetings offers a parallel example, insofar as they express a certain meaning and emotion, and are ideally carried out spontaneously. There is an external aspect to the greeting, insofar as there is a greeting exchanged between two individuals, which formally communicates respect. Additionally, however, this external formality serves to express the agent's internal state, which ideally is one of respect or deference toward the teacher or elder in question. Insofar as this greeting is carried out spontaneously, the action fully conveys the respect that it is meant to convey, whereas having to deliberate how best to greet a professor signifies a missing emotional attitude.⁴³ If one must spend time deliberating how to best greet someone, and during the greeting itself is unsure whether they have chosen the proper way, then the ritual cannot fully convey what it is meant to. For a handshake to fully convey the respect that it is meant to, it must be carried out spontaneously, without deliberation on its appropriateness. Such ease and naturalness suggest that the agent is comfortable and confident in her behavior, which further suggests full internalization of the meaning underlying the ritual.

While it wouldn't be quite right to call spontaneous ritual action thoughtless or mindless, there is a sense in which the sage acts without conscious thought or evaluation:⁴⁴

Whenever the Master saw someone who was wearing mourning clothes, was garbed in full official dress, or was blind, he would always rise to his feet, even if the person was his junior. When passing such a person, he would always hasten his step. (9.10)

presents itself pre-reflectively in all situations. The right action now presents itself to him without reflection or thinking.

⁴³ Unless the student is unfamiliar with the appropriate ritual. For example, an international student or a freshman who is new to the university might be unfamiliar with the relevant ritualized behavior, all the while carrying the proper emotional state.

⁴⁴ Such action can be identified as *wu-wei*, or "effortless action," which will be discussed shortly.

Rising to one's feet and hastening one's step are both ritual signs of respect. Kongzi's respect is sincere to such a degree that he hastens his step perhaps without conscious thought. This kind of respectful action arises out of a deep understanding of what it means to grieve for those in mourning, to feel respect toward officials, and to feel sympathy for those living with disabilities, and to actually internalize those feelings (Slingerland, 2003, p. 89). These virtuous emotions manifest themselves spontaneously within the fully cultivated Kongzi, and thanks to his years of training, the accompanying ritual actions of rising to his feet or hastening his step manifest spontaneously as well. When we interact with an older family member, a professor, or a government official, a respectful greeting might come to us in a similar, spontaneous manner. We do not have to contemplate how to feel or how to engage with them; we simply feel respect toward them, and the appropriate greeting arises naturally to express this emotion.

While spontaneity is an integral aspect of full ritual expression, it is important to note that the goal is not merely spontaneously performative acts that convey things to others. Kongzi's spontaneous ritual action is maintained even when no one else can see him: "He would not sit unless his mat was straight" (10.12).⁴⁵ We can assume that this kind of ritual behavior is often carried out when no one else is around; as such, we can interpret Kongzi's behavior as a natural expression of his own feelings. We can also recall *Analects* 9.10, in which Kongzi's behavior expresses respect and sympathy toward people who are blind: the person being honored will not be aware of Kongzi's behavior, yet he spontaneously carries out the ritual regardless.⁴⁶ This points us to the way in which spontaneous ritual behavior is a natural expression of the agent's

⁴⁵ This passage can be interpreted as having one of two meanings; either, Kongzi would be sure that his mat was straightened out before sitting, or that he was using the correct type of sitting mat based on the situational context. In either case, however, ritual is involved (Slingerland, 2003, pg. 105).

⁴⁶ There is another interesting aspect to this passage: given that the blind person wouldn't have access to Kongzi's behavioral communication, we can infer that Kongzi's action has a broader communal meaning. The passage indicates that rituals are not just for the individual partaking in the ritual and the individual being honored. Ritual must, in part, be aimed at other members of the community seeing Kongzi's communication of respect.

emotions. Furthermore, Kongzi's actions when no one is watching can clue us in to the level of internalization he has undergone; his behavior is at all times in line with ritual and arises out of him spontaneously.

Cultivated Spontaneity

When discussing spontaneity in the context of the *Analects*, it is important to note that Kongzi advocates for a specific sort of spontaneity that is developed through a long process of cultivation and which can be contrasted with uncultivated spontaneity. To spell out this distinction, we can look to two examples of uncultivated spontaneity. First, there is a sense in which purely habituated actions are spontaneous, yet uncultivated. If I make myself coffee first thing in the morning each day, then my behavior tomorrow morning (brewing a cup of coffee) will be spontaneous insofar as I do not spend time deliberating what to do upon waking up. This sort of habituation is uncultivated insofar as it does not require the proper internalization of a value. We can similarly imagine a student who has spent some time on the path of cultivation and is so thoroughly habituated in ritual that they are able to spontaneously act at all times in accordance with ritual. Their virtue-according behavior is spontaneous, yet there seems to be something important missing if they are acting only out of brute habituation. To spontaneously act in accordance with ritual out of pure habituation seems to involve a sort of carelessness which isn't reflective of the final stages of cultivation. The young student who acts out of pure habituation, who simply goes through the motions of ritual, is merely acting *in accordance* with virtue while doing so spontaneously. The sage, however, acts *out of* virtue, and does so spontaneously. This sort of cultivated spontaneity is facilitated by years of learning and reflection, as well as years of deliberate effort to act out of virtue, until acting for the right reasons becomes a spontaneous behavior.

Spontaneity out of mere habituation lacks the sort of understanding and internalization which accompanies the sage's spontaneity. The student in our previous example can only spontaneously do exactly what the ritual prescribes; they will react to a scenario in the same way each time. The sage, on the other hand, knows what underlies ritual and can spontaneously evaluate if a ritual would express virtue in each specific context and situation. While the student strictly adheres to ritual in all circumstances, the sage's training allows for a nuanced understanding of ritual; thus, there will be times when the sage spontaneously recognizes that following a ritual would miss the meaning that underlies the ritual.⁴⁷ Spontaneous action purely from habituation is uncultivated spontaneity and is not the sort which Confucian cultivation aims at, though it may be an intermediate step. Purely uncultivated spontaneity, as well as spontaneity arising from brute habituation, are uncultivated spontaneity on Kongzi's account.⁴⁸

There is a second sense in which we can differentiate between cultivated and uncultivated spontaneity by looking to emotions and emotional expression. Most of our emotions, particularly those in response to a sudden situation or stimulus, arise spontaneously. Both the sage and the young student might feel spontaneous grief upon the loss of a loved one; both naturally and spontaneously feel the appropriate emotion. The agent embodies cultivated spontaneity when this emotion is appropriately expressed through ritualized behavior. Improper spontaneity in this case would be to express one's grief through the improper sort of behavior, i.e., non-ritually prescribed behavior such as self-harm or violence toward others. Furthermore, there might be

⁴⁷ Mengzi's example, discussed earlier, presents the worry in which a man's sister-in-law is drowning, yet it is ritually improper to have physical contact between unmarried men and women (4A17). Strictly following ritual would mean letting her drown, whereas the sage would immediately recognize that the meaning underlying the ritual prohibition on such physical contact would not be broken by saving her, and that saving her is the right thing to do.

⁴⁸ We can make a further distinction here between natural, uncultivated spontaneity and habituated spontaneity. Natural spontaneity is completely uncultivated and unhabituated, and is the sort of behavior exemplified by someone who has undergone no training or practice in virtue or ritual propriety. Habituated spontaneity (in regard to ritual), while not virtuous, is more cultivated than natural spontaneity, insofar as it is not natural behavior. This natural spontaneity is endorsed by Laozi and will be discussed in the next subsection on *wu-wei*.

cases in which the virtuous thing to do is not to express one's emotions at all. While the sage is able to spontaneously judge whether emotional expression is appropriate in each specific scenario, the uncultivated individual lacks this sort of judgement. We can imagine a toddler who rightfully feels angry at her sister for taking her favorite toy. However, she may spontaneously express this anger through unvirtuous avenues by screaming, crying, or physically lashing out at her sister. This exemplifies uncultivated spontaneity, insofar as her emotional expression was not of the virtuous sort. The sage embodies cultivated spontaneity when judging those moments in which the virtuous thing to do is not to express one's emotions at all. Finally, one last example of uncultivated spontaneity is an agent spontaneously experiencing emotions that are improper for the circumstances, i.e. rage when a child accidentally drops her ice cream cone on one's shoes.

To summarize, an agent's emotional spontaneity can be of the *uncultivated* sort insofar as 1) the agent feels the appropriate emotion but fails to express his feelings through the proper ritualized behavior, 2) the agent expresses an emotion which should not have been expressed at all, or 3) the agent feels the improper emotion based on the situation. On the other hand, cultivated emotional spontaneity requires that one feels the proper emotion to the appropriate degree, and that one expresses this emotion for the right reasons and in the right way through the appropriate ritualized behavior. Kongzi wants to foster the kind of disposition in people which will give rise to the proper spontaneous emotion and the ability to spontaneously act out of virtue when expressing this emotion.

Wu-wei

A look to one of Kongzi's contemporaries, Laozi, will help to further elucidate this distinction between cultivated and uncultivated spontaneity.⁴⁹ The concept of *wu-wei* appears

⁴⁹ We will use the name Laozi as shorthand for "whoever compiled the *Daodejing*." The authorship of the text, as well as the status of Laozi as a historical person, is unclear.

both in the *Daodejing* of Laozi and in the *Analects* as a form of spontaneity. Most simply put, *wu-wei* describes effortless action, and is both an internal state as well as a manner of interacting with the people and the world around us. Laozi writes of *wu-wei* as a way to bring harmony back to a world in discord. His fundamental assumptions include that human nature is, at its core, non-competitive, but that society, culture, and technology have led us into unproductive competition.⁵⁰ Any sort of education, training, or cultivation are thus forces which move us further away from our fundamental nature. For example, he writes:

Cut off sageliness, abandon wisdom, and the people will benefit one-hundred-fold.
Cut off benevolence, abandon righteousness, and the people will return to being filial and kind.
Cut off cleverness, abandon profit, and robbers and thieves will be no more.
This might leave the people lacking in culture; so give them something which to identify: manifest plainness. Embrace simplicity.⁵¹

Laozi's writing deserves much more detailed attention and investigation than I will afford him here. On a basic level, however, we can understand Laozi as advocating that a sort of social regression toward a simple life is the key to a harmonious community. He argues that a focus on attaining sageliness, benevolence, and righteousness is a pursuit of artificial desires that prevents us from flourishing; a rather direct attack on the ideas of Kongzi.

Despite this clear rift between Laozi and Kongzi, there is an important similarity between the two. Both thinkers see some version of spontaneity as the key to flourishing, with Laozi advocating for uncultivated spontaneity and Kongzi for cultivated spontaneity. Laozi argues that actively striving for certain socially constructed goals and attempting to satiate artificial desires will distract us and pull us away from our true selves and our natural virtue.⁵² Laozi embraces a

⁵⁰ For Laozi, culture includes things like ritual, benevolence, and filial piety.

⁵¹ *Laozi*, Chapter 19 (Ivanhoe, 2005, p. 171).

⁵² The *Daodejing* can be read as advocating for rather amoral values. As such, "natural virtue" here refers our naturally non-competitive disposition, which is what best allows for a flourishing community.

primitive naturalness; we must stop actively “doing” and adopt a *wu-wei* manner of living by removing artificial desires and learning. As described by Slingerland (2014); “the fully natural person has stripped away the gaudy paint of socialization and returned to something like his true nature, simple and pure” (pg. 100). In such a state, one acts in a *wu-wei* fashion, which allows our limited, natural desires to arise; the expression of which is the key to a harmonious and flourishing life.⁵³ Laozi clearly advocates for untrained spontaneity, insofar as any sort of teaching or learning inevitably corrupts our natural and ideal dispositions, drawing us into conflict.

The *Laozi* shows us that we have spontaneous desires and behaviors without cultivation and demonstrates what these sort of dispositions might look like. Laozi’s view involves the agent acting out of her innate, pure, and “unaltered” spontaneity. While Kongzi would agree that our untrained dispositions give rise to spontaneous desires and behaviors, he would disagree that these are the sorts of behaviors which, unaltered, allow for human flourishing and harmony. For Kongzi, only cultivated, or tutored, spontaneity is conducive to a good life. We are simply not constructed such that fulfilling our innate desires leads to either individual or societal flourishing. Kongzi argues that our natural desires will always lead us into conflict, because we naturally value things that put us into competition with others. Instead, we must cultivate ourselves such that we can find new sources of value, and Kongzi wishes these new desires to become so deeply internalized that we act on them spontaneously.

Emotions, thoughts, and behaviors often arise naturally and spontaneously for all people, but to express these emotions through ritual, and only in certain situations, is a learned behavior. Our modern practice of proper greetings is an example of such a learned behavior, as described

⁵³ Chapter 80 of the *Laozi* further explains that small communities, as well as the fulfillment of basic needs by the ruler are the only material requirements for a harmonious society.

by Ivanhoe (2017): “Bowling to those you meet, shaking their hands, or waving to greet or send off one’s guests— these all are learned behaviors, not reflexes or natural tendencies.

Nevertheless, once one is properly acculturated into a given society, these behaviors usually happen immediately, unreflectively, and with various levels of comfort and ease” (p. 111). Every human being is capable of natural, spontaneous action, yet these spontaneous actions are unlikely to naturally be in line with ritual propriety. Through years of training, the hope is that our innate dispositions are habituated in such a way that they spontaneously give rise to those actions and feelings which are in accordance with ritual propriety. This is how we see Kongzi in the last stage of his cultivation; his desires, emotions, and instinctive behaviors track consistently with the requirements of virtue and ritual (Harris, 2010, p. 169). Confucian cultivation requires a specific sort of learned spontaneity, and thus aims to re-train the dispositions we are born with, the ones which guide our spontaneous action. It is only through this shaping of our spontaneous inclinations that we are afforded access to those values which grant access to our richest possible lives.

We can also see why Kongzi advocates for cultivated spontaneity when thinking about communication between individuals of a society. For Kongzi, moral cultivation makes it possible for us to properly communicate with the other members of our community. Two strangers can both spontaneously feel respect for the other, but without the shared ritualized behavior of shaking hands, they have no avenue for accurately expressing this emotion to one another. The handshake is a learned behavior which facilitates proper social interactions, such that members of a community can live in harmony. Kongzi would argue that the members of a Laozian society lack such shared ritualized behaviors, making clear communication and harmonious coexistence impossible, or at the very least very difficult.

We can thus see the different views held by Kongzi and Laozi regarding spontaneity. For Kongzi, society will come into conflict unless we properly develop ourselves in certain ways. For Laozi, this development is precisely what will lead to conflict. Thus, each thinker holds an idiosyncratic view of what sort of spontaneity is conducive to a harmonious society. This divergence hopefully clarifies the kind of spontaneity which concerns our discussion. Intuitively, spontaneity might be understood in a more Laozian manner; however, by comparing the two thinkers, we have illustrated that Kongzi conceives of people developing themselves in such a way that new, learned thoughts and behaviors become spontaneous.

Spontaneity and Internalization

Importantly, spontaneity is an essential aspect of ritual not only because it allows for a more natural, easy performance of the ritual. It is also that the spontaneity of an action seems to reveal, or make apparent, the internal state of the agent, more so than a deliberative action ever could. We will show that in this sense, spontaneous inclinations reveal the level of internalization reached by the agent, an internalization of something which is not natural or innate (as it is in the *Daodejing*). As Ivanhoe (2017) describes them, spontaneous actions are those “thought to be motivated by deep, standing, innate dispositions to perceive, evaluate, and respond to events and situations in certain ways” (p. 106). He explains that spontaneous actions are often regarded as authentic and honest reactions and behaviors; they arise out of our true nature, desires, or dispositions, and reveal how we truly feel (Ivanhoe, 2017, p. 105). Morewedge and Kupor’s (2018) literature review shows that:

In many contexts, people perceive the content of spontaneous thoughts to provide more meaningful information about the self, other people, and their world, than the content of similar deliberative and effortful thinking. In other words, people attribute greater meaning and importance to the content of their intuitions, reflexive and implicit attitudes, spontaneous thoughts, and even their dreams, than to similar content arising from more deliberate forms of cognition. (pg. 39)

Deliberative actions are those which have passed through reflective processes, such that an agent's immediate inclination is not the one which is ultimately expressed. Spontaneous actions can thus be seen as more authentic, insofar as the agent is expressing her immediate reaction to a certain situation. When we say that such an action is authentic, we are saying that it reveals the true intentions and desires of the agent, and thus tells us something meaningful about her internal states.⁵⁴

Let us clarify with an example. Individuals in the early stages of cultivation will often have to self-correct their immediate desires, so that their actions are in line with virtue. At this point, virtue and the teachings thereof will not be the cause of spontaneous actions, insofar as it is not an immediate motivating force for the student. Only upon reflection is the student reminded of the teachings and may consequently act in accordance with ritual propriety. In this sense, the virtuous action is not the most authentic one, insofar as it had to undergo deliberation first. The sage, however, is immediately motivated by their deep understanding and internalization of the teachings. There is no need to remind oneself of the teachings or try to remember proper ritual behavior. The teachings are so deeply internalized that virtue has become the immediate reason for action, and the spontaneity of the action reveals the authenticity of the agent's cultivation.

As a more concrete example, imagine that I have recently decided to follow a vegan diet for environmental reasons, and it is my first time eating at a restaurant since making this decision. My immediate desire, upon reviewing the menu, is likely to order a cheeseburger (my favorite meal). I reflect upon this inclination, however, and remind myself of my newly adopted

⁵⁴ The exception here might be a scenario in which we encounter a circumstance so new or foreign to us that we do not immediately know how to react. These scenarios would require deliberation, and thus aren't the paradigm cases which reveal our true internal states.

veganism and the environmental harms of animal agriculture, and instead opt for the beet salad. In this example, the cheeseburger is what I truly desire, yet I supersede my spontaneous inclination while going through a deliberate, reflective process. My ultimate choice of ordering a salad is not entirely authentic, does not fully express my desires, insofar as my immediate desire is for the burger. While the moral reasons for eating vegan are ultimately motivating for me, I have yet to internalize these reasons to the point that they immediately override or extinguish my other, unvirtuous desires. If, in this example, I take veganism as a virtue to strive for, then Confucian cultivation would ask me to continue overriding my carnivorous desires until my spontaneous inclination is always in accordance with veganism and arises out of my commitment to veganism. I cannot be said to have fully internalized the reasons behind veganism until they become an immediate motivating force for me. Once I reach this level of internalization, I will have the spontaneous desire and motivation to act virtuously and will no longer have to reflect on what I *should* order off the menu. This is the sort of shift which marks the truly cultivated individual; the point at which our immediate desires, thoughts, and behaviors always arise out of virtue. Once my unfiltered, spontaneous reaction is the always virtuous one, then my actions will reveal to others my internal state. We will return to this point in the next section, as we dive into our discussion of Kongzi's conception of self within the *Analects*.

Spontaneity and the Self

In our previous discussion, we established that Kongzi does in fact have some account of an inner world and that there must be *something* that is being cultivated when he discusses self-cultivation. Our understanding of spontaneity in the *Analects* has further bearing on Kongzi's account of the self, particularly when asking what is being cultivated and how this cultivation bears on the flourishing of the community.

Confucian cultivation requires, or brings about, that one's spontaneous reactions, thoughts, and behaviors are altered. One way in which we see this illustrated in the *Analects* is that following ritual and acting properly in all ways is a difficult task at first, one which becomes easier only after substantial training and cultivation.

The Master said, a young person should be filial when at home and respectful of his elders when in public. Conscientious and trustworthy, he should display a general care for the masses but feel a particular affection for those who are *ren*. If he has any strength left over after manifesting these virtues in practice, let him devote it to learning the cultural arts. (1.6)⁵⁵

Kongzi admits that habituating oneself by following the requirements of ritual and virtue can be an exhausting practice for those who are in the early stages of cultivation; this passage highlights that it is likely to drain our strength for the day, particularly for a younger person who is in the early stages of cultivation. It is not an easy, carefree, or even natural practice. It takes mental strength to implement the teachings in all aspects of one's life. While such a student might well act in accordance with virtue, they cannot be said to be doing so spontaneously, as their actions require deliberate effort and reflection. We can note here two important steps of moral cultivation: first, one must move from 'acting in accordance with virtue' to 'acting from virtue', and second one must learn to 'act from virtue' in a spontaneous manner. If at any point a student is having to utilize reflection and deliberation in their actions, they cannot be said to have made this final jump to spontaneity yet.

There is a point here which needs further clarification. While we can say that a young student must exert serious effort, particularly in these early stages of training, we must also note that most people are not starting completely from scratch. A person is born with a range of inclinations, and it is possible that some of these inclinations are in accordance with virtue and

⁵⁵ See also 6.12, 8.7, and 9.19.

that simply by chance, an untrained person's behaviors can be in line with ritual. The text implies that while the uncultivated individual may possess some virtuous inclinations, most of their desires and spontaneous tendencies are unvirtuous ones. Most of our natural and authentic inclinations are not reliably in line with virtue from the start⁵⁶, and the agent must undergo serious development and change throughout the process of cultivation. This topic will be further discussed in the next section on motivations.

The rare occurrence of individuals born with a natural inclination toward virtue is illustrated by the example of Yan Hui, Kongzi's most exceptional student. Yan Hui seems to grasp the teachings much more easily than most, and importantly, is naturally motivated to act on what he has learned. Kongzi's admiration of Yan Hui illustrates how exceptional the occurrence of such a student is.⁵⁷ The way Yan Hui is described seems to imply that he has a natural ability or disposition to understand the teachings, and to follow the path of cultivation more easily than most:

The Master said to Zigong, "Who is better, you or Yan Hui?"
Zigong answered, "How dare I even think of comparing myself to Hui? Hui learns one thing and thereby understands ten. I learn one thing and thereby understand two."
The Master said, "No, you are not as good as Hui. Neither of us is as good as Hui."
(5.9)

The Master said, "Ah, Yan Hui! For three months at a time his heart did not stray from *ren*. The rest could only sporadically maintain such a state." (6.7)

These descriptions of Yan Hui imply that he was able to travel along the path of cultivation more quickly than others and saw the implications of the teachings more readily. Based on our

⁵⁶ This is a point of divergence seen in Mengzi and Xunzi's writing, with Mengzi writing that people are born with virtuous inclinations which must be fostered, and Xunzi writing that humans are born without such innate tendencies. Kongzi's position on this matter is somewhat unclear, and the text can be seen as supporting either side of the debate.

⁵⁷ *Analects* 11.9 and 11.10 further demonstrate Yan Hui's significance for Kongzi, illustrating the excessive sorrow the Master felt at his death.

interpretation, it must be the case that Yan Hui was born with some naturally virtuous inclinations like most others.⁵⁸ What makes Yan Hui special, however, is that he can build on these inclinations more easily than others, has a stronger ability to grasp the teachings and understand their purpose, and is thus more readily motivated by these teachings. For Kongzi, Yan Hui represents the best possible scenario, insofar as he is an incredibly quick learner and possesses the best possible conditions for cultivation. In one sense, Yan Hui is similar to the average person; he was born with a few virtuous inclinations, and with many unvirtuous ones. What sets him apart, however, is his exceptional ability to understand the teachings and the underlying meaning of ritual, and that these teachings immediately act as a motivational force for him.

Interestingly, Yan Hui describes the difficulties he faces in his training:

With a great sigh Yan Hui lamented, “The more I look up at it the higher it seems; the more I delve into it, the harder it becomes. Catching a glimpse of it before me, I then find it suddenly at my back.

“The Master is skilled at gradually leading me on, step by step. He broadens me with culture and restrains me with the rites, so that even if I wanted to give up I could not. Having exhausted all of my strength, it seems as if there is still something left, looming up ahead of me. Though I desire to follow it, there seems to be no way through.” (9.11)

Even Yan Hui, who grasps the teachings more quickly and is motivated more easily than others, must exert serious effort in his training. We can thus assume that the majority of people, who are born without the natural talent of Yan Hui, face even more difficult challenges. Whether or not a student possesses natural talent for cultivation, those in the early stages of cultivation are not yet capable of spontaneously acting from virtue.

⁵⁸ We must keep in mind *Analects* 17.2; “By nature people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice.”

Throughout years of learning and training, however, something shifts internally. One is trained so thoroughly that one's inclinations and desires develop in such a way that acting out of ritual becomes an act of ease, requiring neither active thought nor deliberation.

...at seventy, I could follow my heart's desires without overstepping the bounds.
(2.4)

Those who are *ren* feel at home in *ren*. (4.2)

Kongzi describes the ultimate state of cultivation as an effortless state of ease and grace, wherein one feels at home in *ren*. One factor in this comfort is that virtuous ritual action arises naturally and authentically, without force or effort. As a reminder, to say that an action is authentic is to say that it arises without the agent's deliberate reflection on the behavior prior to carrying it out; the action is unfiltered, and thus presents her true nature, motivations, or intentions. The agent is always able to express what she immediately and instinctively feels or thinks. This final state of cultivation is a stark contrast to the strength and effort which must be exerted as a young student, and something clearly changed along the way. Since the rituals and demands of virtue remain unchanged, some internal aspect of the individual has changed and developed throughout the years of training and habituation. Throughout a lifetime of training and cultivation, one's spontaneous behaviors, thoughts, and actions shift to be always in line with what underlies ritual and virtue.

Since spontaneous actions are the kinds of actions which appear prior to deliberation and active consideration, we can say that they arise out of our pre-reflective cognition; they are not passed through our critical or reflective faculties before being presented or externalized. Spontaneous reactions therefore reflect our most authentic beliefs, desires, and dispositions; we can thus label them as our most natural responses to whatever situation or stimulus we encounter, and it is this natural response which shifts over the course of a lifetime of cultivation. As such,

we can say that there is something about our dispositions, desires, beliefs, or even our nature which changes over the fifty-year period in which we train and cultivate ourselves. What we wish to conclude here is that Kongzi's account of spontaneity gives some insight into his account of self, particularly the internal aspects of self. While it would be satisfying to offer a metaphysically detailed account of selfhood, this would require reading too much into the text. Instead, we can conclude that our most fundamental desires, beliefs, and dispositions are altered throughout the course of moral cultivation, which offers us insight into the fact that our internal selfhood undergoes a significant change during this training.

To frame our discussion of selfhood, we must remember why Kongzi argues that this internal shift must take place at all. As was explored in our discussion of *wu-wei*, Kongzi believes many of the desires and inclinations we are born with lead us into conflict with those around us. Without any sort of moral education, we are naturally focused on material goals, such as wealth, renown, and official positions.⁵⁹ It is likely that a society full of people with such desires will outstrip the available resources for fulfilling these desires. As such, conflict is inevitable and existing as a harmonious, flourishing society is out of reach. Much of what we innately value is detrimental for peaceful coexistence, and cannot guarantee that we live the richest, fullest lives possible.⁶⁰

The internal shift of our desires, values, and inclinations that comes out of moral cultivation is Kongzi's solution to this problem. The path of cultivation opens us up to new sources of value; we no longer strive for external, material goods, but rather for certain internal goods. The sage learns that there is more joy and ease to be found in a virtuous life than could ever be found in a life of pursuing wealth or renown:

⁵⁹ See *Analects* 4.5, 4.14, 4.19, 7.12.

⁶⁰ See *Analects* 7.37 and 13.26.

The Master said, “Without *ren*, one cannot remain constant in adversity and cannot enjoy enduring happiness.

“Those who are *ren* feel at home in *ren*, whereas those who are clever follow Goodness because they feel that they will profit from it.” (4.2)

The Master said, “The gentleman is self-possessed and relaxed, while the petty man is perpetually full of worry.” (7.37)

Once one shifts to truly valuing ritual and virtue, one has access to joy and fulfillment which are only available through cultivation.

Importantly, this shift, as well as the rewards that it grants, are only available within a social sphere. Kongzi believes that we are the kinds of people who can flourish only through the proper connection to individual members of our community. A person cannot undergo cultivation in complete isolation; a community is required for the process to take place, as well as for access to its rewards. The internal shift that takes place during cultivation is a shift of the self, insofar as our innate beliefs, desires, and inclinations are altered. Insofar as this shift is also inextricably tied to the community, we can see a deep connection between the individual and their community.

When we are in our innate state, our desires are largely self-focused. Through training and cultivation, an agent’s natural responses come to regard others as much as, if not more than, oneself. Respecting and caring for others becomes a natural and spontaneous reaction (a disposition which one does not possess to a substantial degree at birth). As we showed, our spontaneous reactions are our most authentic ones, insofar as they represent what we truly value or desire, and cultivation shifts these desires from being focused primarily on oneself, to also encompassing the members of our community. The locus of our desires and emotions develops to consider the circumstances of those around us. As such, we can say that through the process of moral cultivation, one undergoes a sort of expansion of one’s self such that the members of one’s community come to be seen as a component of one’s broader self.

The cultivated individual comes to understand that his connection to others is exactly what gives him access to joys, happiness and flourishing in a way that the uncultivated individual could never hope to be granted. In this sense, the affordance of a rich and full life is fully dependent on one's connection to his community. We are connected to the members of our community precisely because the community is what allows us to thrive. Our flourishing is tied up in our connection to others; as such, the process of cultivation broadens the self to include more than just the individual. Developing the proper spontaneous reactions to others, training our deepest desires and tendencies to be always connected to others, is a process which expands the self in such a way that we gain access to happiness and flourishing, and consequently the flourishing of the broader society.

Motivation & Reasons for Action

We have thus far established that Confucian self-cultivation involves the development of a certain set of dispositions. A key aspect of this shift in one's dispositions is developing and cultivating one's motivations or motivational set. Throughout this investigation, we have touched on the importance of reasons for action, yet it will prove fruitful to take a more detailed look to understand how this shift illuminates Kongzi's conception of the self.

When we speak of motivational sets, we are considering the kinds of things that motivate us into action; which includes our values, desires, and reasons for action. Kongzi implies that these motivational sets are not necessarily harmonious or free of conflict. We see in the *Analects* that a person likely holds a conflicting set of motivations, but that one kind of motivation will tend to be stronger and win out over other motivations in a majority of cases (that is, it will be what motivates the agent into action). In their uncultivated state, Kongzi understands people to be motivated largely by a self-interested desire for external goods. While one's natural

motivational set likely contains other-regarding motivations that may be in accordance with virtue, uncultivated agents usually have a stronger pull toward self-regarding, external goods. When we are untrained, we tend to value and desire profit, material goods, salaries, and official positions more than any internal goods⁶¹. Book 4 of the *Analects* offers a variety of examples of these types of motivations:

The Master said, “A scholar-official who has set his heart upon the Way, but who is still ashamed of having shabby clothing or meager rations, is not worth engaging in discussion.” (4.9)

The Master said, “The gentleman cherishes virtue, whereas the petty person cherishes physical possessions [...]” (4.11)

The Master said, “The gentleman understands rightness, whereas the petty person understands profit.” (4.16)

The Master said, “In ancient times scholars learned for their own sake; these days they learn for the sake of others.” (14.24)

If we are uncultivated, according to Kongzi, we tend to be the type of beings who seek wealth and external validation and are motivated into action by such desires. While we may sometimes act virtuously, we are not reliably motivated to do so.

Importantly, Kongzi is unclear on whether these virtuous, other-regarding tendencies are a natural feature of human beings. Mengzi and Xunzi diverged on the answer to this question, which only makes it more difficult to identify Kongzi’s view. Mengzi writes that while we naturally have self-interested desires, our natural motivation set also includes inclinations toward virtue. We are born with certain “sprouts” of virtue, which, if developed, will lead us to virtue.⁶² Xunzi, on the other hand, writes that we are “bad” by nature and that the cultivation of virtue goes against our inborn tendencies; for Xunzi, virtuous inclinations are not a part of our initial

⁶¹ “Internal goods” will be further defined shortly. For now, we can understand them as non-material, virtuous goods.

⁶² See Mengzi Book 2A6.

motivational set.⁶³ If we try to categorize Kongzi's view of human nature, we can be sure that he doesn't see people as possessing naturally strong and meaningful tendencies toward virtue; if this were so, then we wouldn't be facing the problem of moral cultivation in the first place. But is Kongzi's view of human nature as bleak as that of Xunzi? We have found Kongzi to admit that people do sometimes act in accordance with virtue prior to cultivation and that they might possess some prosocial tendencies. At the same time, however, we also have natural tendencies toward greediness and selfishness, and it is difficult to discern the extent to which we have both good and bad inclinations by nature. While Kongzi's view might be an unsettled matter, we can say that our interpretation thus far has left us with the following: without any teaching or training, people may sometimes act in accordance with virtue, but these actions are unreliable. We largely see that people value, and are motivated by, self-interested reasons like external goods, material wealth, and social status. The process of moral cultivation nurtures and develops an agent's tendencies to do good until their virtuous motivations and reasons for action always override the non-virtuous ones. That is to say, there is a development in our motivational sets such that our virtuous reasons for actions are strengthened to the extent that they always trump the non-virtuous motivations we possess.

When we take a closer look at this change in an agent's motivational set, we notice that there is room for two different possibilities regarding their development. When we are born, we have some virtuous motivations, but for the most part, we are motivated by selfish desires. As we undergo cultivation, our virtuous motivations are strengthened such that they override our selfish desires. The question that remains is, what happens to our self-interested desires? Do they retain the same strength (or motivational force) throughout our entire lives, even when they are

⁶³ See Xunzi Chapter 23 "Human Nature Is Bad."

overridden by our virtuous motivations? Or do our selfish desires diminish throughout one's lifetime of cultivation, to the point that they are eliminated, or at least vastly reduced? Kongzi describes the internal state of the fully cultivated individual as follows:

The Master said, "The gentleman is self-possessed and relaxed, while the petty man is perpetually full of worry." (7.37)

The Master said, "The wise are not confused, the Good do not worry, and the courageous do not fear." (9.29)

Kongzi's descriptions of the cultivated individual paint a picture of someone whose internal state is free of doubts and conflict. It seems implausible that these agents are being constantly pulled away from virtue by their lingering self-interested motivations. Instead, the cultivated individual becomes free of tension as their self-interested desires fade over time, leaving them free of worry and doubts. *Analects* 2.4 reminds us that at age forty, Kongzi became "free of doubts," yet importantly, it wasn't until age seventy that he "could follow [his] heart's desires without overstepping the bounds." While Kongzi's self-regarding motivations have greatly diminished by the age of forty, it isn't until thirty years later that his motivational set is such that acting on his desires will always produce the appropriate virtuous action. It is plausible that simply "being free of doubts" is compatible with mere habituation, insofar as the agent has knowledge of the proper action and chooses to ignore any self-regarding motivations. If we looked only at an agent's outward actions, then internal tension about his motivations would matter little, as long as his actions were in line with ritual propriety. However, insofar as Kongzi is concerned with the internal state of moral agents, it seems clear that self-interested desires are reduced and eventually eliminated such that an agent's ultimate mental state is free of tension, and her motivational set is ordered such that she is able to follow her desires freely.

Another important aspect of Kongzi's writing on motivation is that social influence has a serious impact on the development of our values. *Analects* 17.2 reminds us that "By nature people are similar; they diverge as the result of practice." When Kongzi writes that we diverge as a result of practice, he means that we diverge in the way we act as a result of our socialization and the circumstances we are born into. The social traditions of one's time include ritual practice, music, and language, and Slingerland (2003) writes that, according to Kongzi, this tradition "plays a primary role in shaping human character" (p. xxiii) With the proper social order in place, however, a person's nature can be cultivated such that both the individuals and the community as a whole can flourish (Slingerland, 2003). What Kongzi thus tells us about human nature is that we are all born with the potential for cultivation and that the influence of those around us, as well as the traditions of our time, will shape our growth and the content of our motivational sets. We further see this argument in the following passages:

The Master said, "To live in the neighborhood of the Good is fine. If one does not choose to dwell among those who are Good, how will one obtain wisdom?" (4.1)

Master Zeng said, "The gentleman acquires friends by means of cultural refinement, and then relies upon his friends for support in becoming Good." (12.24)

Both passages illustrate the impact of an agent's social environment on their moral development. Being exposed to unvirtuous behavior and influence makes proper cultivation difficult, whereas surrounding oneself with others who are on the same path will buttress one's own efforts.

Returning to the topic at hand, let us discuss why cultivation requires practitioners to strengthen their virtuous motivations to such an extent that they override any unvirtuous desires. Most basically, our motivation for external, self-regarding goods will prevent us from living rich, full lives. Kongzi writes in *Analects* 4.12:

The Master said, "If in your affairs you abandon yourself to the pursuit of profit, you will arouse much resentment."

Our natural, self-oriented desires and motivations bring us into conflict with one another. Given that external goods such as salary and official positions are limited, people naturally come into competition and conflict with those around them as they pursue these material goods. These motivations are thus inimical to our flourishing as individuals and as a community. As Ivanhoe (2000) explains:

The notion that one must recognize that one's own desires are not preeminent, that an agreed upon and common set of rules takes precedence, is a prerequisite to participation in any kind of cooperative enterprise or game. Such deference to the larger enterprise is clearly needed for participation in society. (p.5)

Ivanhoe's description of setting aside one's own desires to ensure the flourishing of the community is the first step in cultivation; a society of people who act out of mere habituation (rather than acting out of true virtue) would meet this condition. What this observation illustrates is that the first step of cultivation, i.e. mere habituation, is already a step in the direction of societal flourishing and harmony. Even if agents haven't internalized the reasons for overriding their self-regarding desires, their acting in accordance with ritual will improve the state of their society. This, however, is not enough for Kongzi. He cares not only about the flourishing of the community but also about individuals living good lives. Kongzi is concerned with the internal states of agents, along with creating a harmonious society. As such, simple ritualistic habituation is not sufficient for the ideal society.

An aspect of developing the proper mental states is to develop the proper motivational sets, and acting out of brute habituation does not constitute the proper ordering of one's motivational set. *Analects* 9.3 reminds us of the limits of pure habituation:

The Master said, "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. To bow before ascending the stairs is what is prescribed by the rites, but these days people bow

after ascending. This is arrogant, and—though it goes against the majority— I continue to bow before ascending.”

In both cases, the majority of people simply follow what they perceive to be ritually proper, developing habits to accord with how the majority act, or to act in accordance with the letter of the rituals; Kongzi, however, understands the meaning behind each respective ritual, and actively judges which behavior actually expresses this underlying meaning. He is motivated by this understanding of ritual and his desire to act out of virtue, whereas the individual who follows the masses lacks this motivation, as they have yet to understand the underlying meaning of each ritual or develop the appropriate motivations. Even when an agent’s actions adhere to ritual, his motivations reveal whether he acted out of virtue. An agent who is still in the stages of habituation is at best motivated by a desire to learn and cultivate himself and at worst is motivated by using ritual for personal profit.⁶⁴ Either way, his motivational set has yet to be properly ordered.

With deeper cultivation, however, virtuous motivations become the strongest and most meaningful reasons for action. This means that the practitioner acts virtuously out of an understanding of the underlying meaning of ritual and the value of virtue. This understanding will provide a motivational force for the agent that always overrides all other motivations:

The Master said, “The gentleman devotes his thoughts to attaining the Way, not to obtaining food. In the pursuit of agriculture, there is the possibility of starvation; in the pursuit of learning, there is the possibility of salary. The gentleman is concerned about the Way and not about poverty.” (15.32)

The Master said, “The gentleman is not motivated by the desire for a full belly or a comfortable abode. He is simply scrupulous in behavior and careful in speech, drawing near to those who possess the Way in order to be set straight by them. Surely this and nothing else is what it means to love learning.” (1.14)

⁶⁴ To be clear, when one acts out of habit, they are acting without much conscious thought. What I mean to say here is that the student who is still in the earlier stages of cultivation, who is still merely habituated into ritual action, likely has some motivation or desire to undergo cultivation.

The sage no longer acts out of a motivation for profit, material goods, or an official position, and we can say that in these final stages of cultivation, such desires have been reduced significantly, if not entirely. Without any sort of learning or cultivation, we cannot understand how these values hinder us; it is only after pursuing *ren* that we come to see other sources of values and come to understand how the desire for material goods stunts our ability to flourish. The practitioner begins to find other, immaterial sources of value, which act as both rewards and reasons for action. For the cultivated agent, motivational force stems from the understanding that ritual propriety and benevolence are values that will allow both the agent and the community to flourish.

On an individual level, this flourishing manifests as the peace, ease, joy, and sense of fulfillment which are only available to those who have undergone cultivation and minimized their desires for material goods. What becomes tricky when looking closely at the shift in motivation is the following: we know that any material rewards cannot motivate an agent to undergo cultivation. But the immaterial goods of virtue also do not, and cannot, act as an initial motivator for starting on the path of cultivation, as these are only available to agents who have spent some time cultivating. The joy and ease that ultimately comes from being *ren* cannot be known to or understood by those who have yet to feel it, thus it cannot act as a motivating force to begin cultivation. An important question thus remains; if we are initially motivated mostly by external, material goods, how is it that anyone would be motivated to start on the path of cultivation when there are no material (or even immaterial) rewards in sight?

We know that Kongzi certainly had students, so there is some way to motivate people to start on the path. As we previously established, humans have a varied set of motivations to start, which likely includes some inclination to wonder about personal and community-wide

flourishing. This must be sufficient to start one on the path for most practitioners, and soon after starting on the path, new motivations to continue on the path begin to present themselves. Harris (2013) describes this process as follows:

[...] there are values associated with the practice of virtue that are inherent to a life lived virtuously, and which cannot be explained fully to those who are not virtuous. Just as someone who has never played chess seriously cannot understand in anything but a theoretical way the joys and sources of value to be found in playing chess well, so too one who has not embarked on moral cultivation cannot understand the values inherent to the practice of virtue. The move from prudence to an actual ethical commitment comes not because of mere habituation, but because someone who becomes virtuous comes to see a greater value in virtue. (p. 108)

It is conceivable that an agent begins their cultivation for material rewards, but this motivation can only go so far as encouraging habituation. The idea is that the agent will soon see how much more valuable benevolence and righteousness are than material wealth, such that their motivations to cultivate themselves will change. For example, we may encourage prosocial behavior in a child through material rewards or threat of punishment, but we want her to be kind and generous not out of a desire for treats or out of fear of punishment, but out of an understanding of why it is good to treat others well. The desire to continue on the path is motivated by the value of virtue itself, which manifests itself to the practitioner only after taking the initial step to actually begin their practice in moral cultivation. Along the way, the internal goods of cultivation (ease, joy, sense of fulfillment) will push the practitioner to continue their development. While these rewards are not the ultimate goal of cultivation, they can act as motivators along the way to the final stages of one's cultivation. Furthermore, the values and rewards of benevolence, righteousness, and devotion become enjoyable for the practitioner because the practitioner comes to see how they contribute to their own flourishing and to the flourishing of the community, and how the latter contributes to the former.

Kongzi's account of motivation and the way that our motivational sets can be cultivated gives us some insight into his account of the self. As we described, moral agents move from acting out of self-interested reasons to acting out of an understanding of virtue and ritual. Moral cultivation develops our dispositions to such an extent that the strongest motivation (of our total motivational set) shifts from being focused on profit and personal gain to being focused purely on virtue. Our motivations reveal the things we value and prioritize and illuminate which of our reasons are strong enough to warrant actions and behaviors. These new reasons for action are nurtured and cultivated until they are internalized; ritual propriety and benevolence are truly what we value and want to act out of. In his final stage of cultivation, Kongzi "could follow [his] heart's desires without overstepping the bounds" (2.4); his strongest desires and reasons for action are always those which come out ritual propriety and benevolence. Kongzi's account regarding the way in which our motivational sets change over the course of cultivation reveals a deep shift within each individual practitioner; the things we value most, the things which push us to take action and interact with others in certain ways, the things we prioritize and try to bring about in the world, these will all change over the course of an agent's moral cultivation. Most basically, we move away from our self-interested desires, which inhibit flourishing, and come to value the internal goods of the way, which are the kinds of things that afford both individual and societal flourishing. These internal goods, such as benevolence and righteousness are inherently relational; as such, the moral agent undergoes a sort of expansion of the self such that she understands the role that the community plays in her own well-being.

Along with a change in motivation naturally comes a change in desires, insofar as our desires motivate our actions. As we established, the cultivated individual develops new desires for virtue as he comes to see both the individual as well as the communitywide flourishing that

virtue brings about. This individual minimizes, and eventually loses his self-interested desires, such that his desires come to consider the flourishing of the community, as well as how his own flourishing is connected to and dependent on those around him.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, we have looked at the ways in which Kongzi argues that individuals change and develop while undergoing cultivation. These changes turned out to be drastic and extensive in such a way that they appeared to signal something about Kongzi's underlying conception of the self. While Kongzi does not spell out his conception or offer a theory of the self, we can look to these developments within an individual as a valuable lens into his understanding of the self. We must also note that examining the overarching purpose of cultivation can offer further insight into the question of Kongzi's conception of the self.

According to our interpretation of the *Analects*, the process of moral cultivation develops an agent's disposition such that the way they view and interact with the world shifts significantly. This process transforms the way in which an agent understands their relationship with the people around them and with their community. The development is detailed and complex, and the project thus far has thoroughly explored how it takes place.

Further clarification is warranted, however, regarding the connection between this development of an agent's disposition and Kongzi's conception of the self. When we looked at the details of this process, we saw that certain fundamental features of the agent are transformed; the agent sees a change in their values, motivations, and emotions, as well as a new way of interacting with the world and with their community. To some extent this transformation is intellectual, insofar as the agent comes to understand the proper reasons for action, the underlying meaning of ritual, and the value that comes from *ren*. However, cultivation is more extensive, and perhaps deeper, than simply instilling the agent with knowledge. According to Kongzi, moral cultivation radically transforms the agent's general disposition. As we have

discussed, this manifests in a few different discernible ways; for example, an agent's self-interested desires are regulated such that her virtuous motivations will override the non-virtuous ones in all instances.⁶⁵ We have also outlined the way in which virtuous action becomes spontaneous for the practitioner; the depth of cultivation within the agent is such that virtuous action becomes the immediate, pre-reflective response in all cases. There is an ease with which the cultivated individual acts, a feature which highlights the depth and extent of the internalization of virtue. This internalization, once again, goes beyond an intellectual understanding of the underlying meaning of *ren*; the shift in the agent's desires, emotions, values, and reasons for action results in a deep internalization of *ren*.

By understanding this transformation of a person's disposition and character, we can access one piece of what Kongzi believes it is to be a person: people are malleable, and given the right circumstances and conditions, their disposition can be cultivated to properly understand the way in which they ought to relate to the other members of their community.⁶⁶ The other important insight we gain from this interpretation is that Kongzi believes there is something about what it is to fully be a person that requires that we live in harmony with our community in order to flourish; that is, a society can only flourish at the hands of its individual members, and an individual can only flourish if she relates to her community in the proper manner. Throughout this project, we have always come back to the reminder that the reason individuals must undergo the arduous process of cultivation is to unlock and access new sources of value, and that cultivation makes available both to the individual and to the community a sort of flourishing and

⁶⁵ In the final stages of cultivation, the agent's motivational set is developed such that she will always be motivated to carry out the virtuous action. To be clear, however, this applies only in relevant instances, i.e., those instances in which the action has moral value. While Kongzi likely has a broader understanding than we do today about which actions carry moral value, there are still many actions which lack a moral content.

⁶⁶ Recall from Chapter 2 the discussion that people can be influenced, or molded, to be *unvirtuous* as well. According to our interpretation, this is the path of least resistance, whereas being cultivated toward virtue requires much effort.

harmony which would be otherwise entirely unavailable. To become *ren*, then, is to become the kind of person who can properly relate to those around us, and our flourishing is thus tied up in our relationship with others. If we are correct in this interpretation, then Kongzi's conception of the self is one in which we can only actualize our potential as individuals through our relationship with those around us.

There are a few select passages in which Kongzi discusses individuals who live a more isolated lifestyle. Some of these passages discuss certain scholarly recluses, who live in family units but avoid their broader community-wide responsibilities. After meeting a well-spoken recluse, Kongzi's disciple remarks:

'To avoid public service is to be without a sense of what is right. Proper relations between elders and juniors cannot be discarded—how, then, can one discard the rightness that obtains between ruler and minister? To do so is to wish to keep one's hands from getting dirty at the expense of throwing the great social order into chaos. [...]' (18.7)

Zilu is pointing to a hypocrisy in the recluse's behavior: the recluse welcomed Zilu into his home, showed him proper hospitality, and has a proper relationship with his own son, all the while ignoring his broader social responsibilities. Zilu is pointing to an inconsistency in the recluse's lifestyle; that he understands proper conduct toward others, yet refuses to extend this conduct outside of his home. This passage sheds light on an individual who is somewhat isolated, and we might think it could illuminate what Kongzi imagines would happen were one to grow up without any relationships or social influence. However, even this recluse is presented as having grown up in a smaller family unit; thus, we aren't clued into the importance of others in the development of one's subjectivity in a concrete or detailed sense. However, we see once again the broader importance of a harmonious community for the flourishing of individuals; Zilu expresses that the kind of relationship the recluse has with his family should extend to the way he

relates to others outside of his home. To forego this kind of proper relationship is to cause disharmony within one's society, which simultaneously inhibits proper flourishing for the individuals within the community.

Additionally, the recluses and hermits mentioned in the *Analects* are often described as having fled from society, making the choice to remove themselves from the community which socialized and raised them. In *Analects* 18.6, Kongzi states that "A person cannot flock together with the birds and the beasts," but that the recluse has done exactly that. They have, in a sense, abandoned their humanity as soon as they remove themselves from their society. It is antithetical to what it is to be a person to live away from one's community.

There is thus a sense in which Kongzi's conception of the self is a socially embedded one, insofar as he holds that the presence of a particular type of community is a necessary condition for a person to fully flourish. In the current field of feminist metaphysics and sociopolitical philosophy, there is a lot of work being done around the self as social or relational. However, it will turn out that Kongzi's definition of the self as social is dissimilar to and distinct from the sense in which feminists use the term; we must thus be careful to distinguish Kongzi's view of the self as social from such characterizations. Regardless, it will prove useful to situate Kongzi among these theories in order to further understand his conception.

Within contemporary feminist theories of selfhood, we see authors endorsing a variety of conceptions of relational selfhood, with an array of different flavors.⁶⁷ These thinkers can be broadly painted as understanding the self as relational and constituted by others, and that we require interpersonal, social connection in order to grow into functioning agents and to develop

⁶⁷ These theories and perspectives deserve more time and dedication than I am able to afford them here. For our purposes, I will present a brief overview of the theories to situate Kongzi against them.

subjectivity. In many cases, these theories are direct reactions to the trend in Western philosophy of characterizing the self as atomistic and individuated. Barclay (2000) writes:

Both feminists and communitarians have claimed that numerous moral and political theories promote a vision of the autonomous self as essentially independent and self-sufficient, a vision that denies the inescapable connectedness of selves and the fact that their immersion in networks of relationships forms their desires, aspirations, indeed their very identities. In other words, what is denied is that the self is essentially social. (p.52)

This sort of individuated perspective on selfhood has been the dominant view in recent social and political philosophy, and it is what the feminist theorists are pushing against. Consider Di Stefano's (1983) reaction to Hobbes' characterization of individuals and their development:

The issue concerns [...] the ways in which early maternal and parental care provide a social, intersubjective context for the development of particular capacities in children—emotive, social and cognitive capacities—which are presupposed to some extent in Hobbes's state of nature being... (p. 638)

Di Stefano titles Hobbes' story of human development "The Case of the Missing Mother," arguing that Hobbes' account is built on atomistic egoism and entirely omits the influence and necessity of maternity.

Our interpretation of the *Analects* is consistent with such a critique, insofar as Kongzi's account acknowledges the importance of one's family unit and larger community. For Kongzi, a person can only develop in the proper way when embedded in a flourishing community, and in order to flourish, one must develop the proper sort of relationship with those around them. In this sense, it is quite plausible to say that Kongzi would disagree with a more atomistic, individuated conception of the self. In *Analects* 14.12, Kongzi states the following:

The Master said, "Take a person as wise as Zang Wuzhong, as free of desire as Gongchuo, as courageous as Zhuangzi of Bian, and as accomplished in the arts as Ran Qiu, and then acculturate them by means of ritual and music—such a man might be called a complete person."

This passage explains that one who is fully cultivated can be called a “complete person,” and on the other hand implies that one who remains uncultivated is an incomplete person. Undergoing cultivation allows a person to fully actualize their potential and their flourishing – this is what Kongzi calls being a complete person. Given that cultivation requires the presence of others, we can say that becoming a complete person is an inherently social process.

Out of the feminist’s critique of individuated selfhood sprout many alternative theories of a relational self. These theories can vary in their definitions of self; for example, some characterize the self as narrative, embodied, socially constructed, or a combination thereof.

Donchin (2000) offers some insight into a general understanding of the self as relational:

I share [the] conviction that the self exists fundamentally in relation to others. Interconnections continue to shape and define us throughout our lifetime, so that patterns through which we construct (and reconstruct) our self-identity and infuse it with meanings are bound up with meanings given in the social world external to us. (pp. 239-240)

Such a relational understanding of the self recognizes the necessity of others in one’s development as a functioning agent who possesses subjectivity. We can identify a similarity to Kongzi’s account in this passage; when a person undergoes cultivation, she develops her dispositions in part through the practice of ritual. As we have discussed extensively, rituals convey certain meaning between members of a community and their purpose is to communicate some sort of emotional attitude. Rituals are thus a piece of the external, social world which carry meaning and are necessary in the development of the individual. In this sense, we can see a similarity between Donchin’s description and Kongzi’s discussion of ritual.

The specifics of how the feminists’ accounts are filled in varies between thinkers. For example, some authors stress the primacy of emotion and embodiment to the construction of selfhood:

Emotion is as fundamental to personhood as thought. So too, is bodily experience, and in particular experience entwined with the bodies of others (in sex, reproduction, and nurture); care is a basic human relation, and is essential not only to becoming a person, but to responding to the vulnerability characteristic of the human condition. (Wallace, 2019, p. 196)

On this view, we cannot understand or define the self without understanding human beings as embodied, emotional creatures. Others focus on childhood development in discussing the social embeddedness of the self, such as Benhabib (1992):

As opposed to the dismissal of the body in the one case, and the reduction of self-identity to the continuity of a substance in the other, I assume that the subject of reason is a human infant whose body can only be kept alive, whose needs can only be satisfied, and whose self can only develop within the human community into which it is born. The human infant becomes a “self,” a being capable of speech and action, only by learning to interact in a human community. The self becomes an individual in that it becomes a “social” being capable of language, interaction and cognition. (p. 5)

There is, of course, a spectrum along which these theories fall, from weaker claims that social aspects are fundamental to the development of selfhood, to stronger claims that the self might be entirely socially constituted or constructed.

Characterization of the self as a narrative is another, related, account, a perspective which holds that the self is necessarily narrative. An agent develops subjectivity through an understanding of oneself as situated in time, and through the ability to sequence past event, project into the future, and to differentiate one’s own narrative from those of others. For example, Nelson (2003) describes the following account of a narrative self (which has an additional focus on childhood development):

In brief, the account here is that narrative emerges from and belongs to the community, but in the individual lives of children it is a vehicle through which consciousness of both self and the wider social and temporal world becomes manifest and gradually emerges as a new subjective level of conscious awareness, with a sense of a specific past and awareness of a possible future, as well as with new insight into the consciousness of other people. (p.33)

Even the narrative conception of self is a relational account, insofar as our narratives come out of and are situated against the narratives of others. Again, there is a similarity which can be drawn between such a narrative account of self and Kongzi's account. For Kongzi, ritual is a vehicle that enables the individual to understand his connection to his community, and it aids in his cultivation. To be clear, there is no description in the *Analects* of this development occurring specifically through a person's narrative. Rather, we can see a similar fundamental understanding of how the social world grants meaning to the practitioner's development and actualization of his potential.

Among the different feminist accounts of selfhood, regardless of the specifics, the thinkers agree that an essential part of the self is that it is socially or relationally constituted. We saw that we might be able to draw some comparisons between these accounts and Kongzi's conception of the self. While we can see some possible connections, our interpretation of the *Analects* renders a direct equivalence as implausible, or at the very least an overstep. In the *Analects*, Kongzi certainly discusses the ways in which one can develop properly or improperly. However, we are not granted a direct discussion of people as relationally or socially constituted. Kongzi's treatment of a person's development *always* happens within a community, and he does not explicitly discuss whether a community is necessary for the development of one's subjectivity. We cannot say whether Kongzi holds that social factors are necessary for one to be a person at all; that one's self, subjectivity, or personhood are necessarily relational. Kongzi writes that the people around us can pull us away from virtue or push us toward it, which is why he stresses that we must be cognizant of who we surround ourselves with.⁶⁸ The uncultivated person might not have access to their full potential of flourishing, but we don't see Kongzi argue

⁶⁸ For example, in *Analects* 9.14, he writes that a gentleman living amongst the barbarians could transform the barbarians to be virtuous.

that they lack a self or subjectivity. Rather, he writes that they do not have the right kind of relationship with their community, such that they cannot access the values and flourishing that cultivation grants. There is not enough evidence within the *Analects* to develop a concrete argument that Kongzi's conception of self is a relational one in the sense that contemporary feminist literature understands the self as being relational. Rather, the self in the *Analects* is relational insofar as the agent's community possibilizes her full access to flourishing.

In fact, when looking at the *Analects* alongside these theories, we notice that Kongzi is concerned with a somewhat different topic from the contemporary theorists. In his writing, Kongzi is not interested in how people develop subjectivity, whether we have a self, or what these might look like. Rather, he wants to understand how it is that people can properly develop and flourish. With our robust interpretation of the text, we can draw some plausible and confident conclusions about his conception of the self, all the while being aware of the fact that Kongzi did not focus on the question of selfhood.

We can, however, be more confident in ruling out that Kongzi holds an entirely atomistic view of the self. On the Confucian model, the earliest virtue that a child is exposed to is filial piety, which teaches them not only about respect for their parents and elders, but also about the proper sort of relationship and interactions they should have with those around them.⁶⁹ The groundwork of a person's cultivation thus consists of a relational foundation, insofar as it is built upon the proper understanding of how one should interact with those closest to them. Ritual is a way for practitioners to understand and express the ways in which they are connected to others. Kongzi recognizes the importance of one's parents and community in the development of a

⁶⁹ As discussed in Chapter 1, children at this stage have not internalized the virtue in a meaningful way. These early stages are meant for the child to mimic the behavior of others to foster their habituation into ritual action. For examples of filial piety as taught to children, see 1.2, 1.6, and 2.5.

child, such that his project never considers what development might look like without the presence of others.⁷⁰

We can conclude by saying that Kongzi's conception of the self is certainly not atomistic or individuated, yet we also cannot attribute to him the sort of relational selfhood that some feminist thinkers endorse. Rather, we might place him somewhere on the spectrum between the two extremes, given that he simply does not provide enough detail for us to confidently categorize him within these contemporary accounts. I leave much room for further analysis regarding the connection and comparison between Kongzi's conception of the self and that of the feminist thinkers. However, the hope is that my analysis had laid a proper foundation upon which to continue such work.

⁷⁰ Note the aforementioned discussion on recluses in the *Analects*.

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