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LI IN THE ANALECTS: TRAINING IN MORAL COMPETENCE AND THE QUESTION OF FLEXIBILITY

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The concept of *li* and its role within the Confucian tradition remains a topic of debate and inquiry among contemporary scholars. This is largely due to the prominence of the concept for those attempting to understand and interpret the tradition and, more importantly, for those who seek to establish its contemporary significance.¹

The account I propose involves a novel reading of the Confucian concept of *li* in the *Analects*. In this account, I track the various meanings of *li* through three stages of moral cultivation, culminating in the acquisition of moral competence which is marked by an attitude of equanimity (*Analects* 9:29).

In the three stages of moral development that I describe, *li* have different roles and exhibit different degrees of flexibility. The first is the novice's stage during which *li* are essential in inculcating correct forms of behavior. At this stage, adherence to the dictates of *li* introduces the learner to the appropriate proprieties in different contexts. The second stage is an experimental one during which the learner extracts principles from these behavioral forms through constant practice. The emphasis at this stage is on the learner testing out his application of moral principles. This is a stage of inquiry and is perhaps the most intensive and active learning phase. The third phase is marked by the deliberations of the mature, cultivated person, who has a good grasp of the principles and ideals encoded and realized in meaningful social interaction. At this stage, *li* have a different significance as compared with the first stage. They do not function as instruments of rote learning but rather are channels for meaningful self-expression.

The three stages are presented in three separate sections only to achieve some clarity in exposition and to identify some characteristic features of each of the stages. In practice, the stages are continuous; the progression from one stage to the next is fluid and may not be clearly marked or distinguishable.

Stage 1: The Moral "Beginner" and Strict Adherence to Li

Rote practice is an important and useful instrument in many aspects of human development. Especially in the pre-social and pre-rational stages of early childhood, the repetitive aspect of rote learning is a major mode of learning. It is understood that, in these early stages, 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 at this stage. The child is taught to replicate "good" behaviors, these being reinforced in his daily behaviors and interactions.

A key function of behavioral rote learning rests in the setting of parameters of acceptable and appropriate behavior. Given that relational responsibilities and obligations is a major theme in Confucian thought, the frameworks and institutions for developing appropriate behavior in relational interactions are particularly important. A primary function of the Confucian *li* is to provide parameters of appropriate behavior that indicate and reinforce the respective positions of people engaged in interaction.² Hence, it is clearly articulated in *Analects* 20:3 that “someone who does not understand the observance of ritual propriety (*li*) has no way of knowing where to stand.”³

In his discussion of the various functions of *li*, Antonio Cua suggests that one of them is the “delimiting” function. In this connection, the translation of *li* as “rules of propriety” is most fitting. Cua rightly describes this function as a primary one of *li*:

[They] purport to set forth rules of proceeding in an orderly fashion. . . . This orderliness consists of social distinctions or divisions in various kinds of human relationships (*lun*), namely, the distinctions between ruler and minister, father and son, the eminent and the humble, the elder and the younger, the rich and the poor, and the important and unimportant members of society. . . . The *li*, in effect, stipulate the conditions of the eligibility or permissibility of actions.⁴

In Confucian thought, *li* are particularly pronounced within the family context because they reinforce practices associated with filial piety, a foundational virtue in Confucianism. The familial context is important because it is the first context for moral training: it provides a locus for cultivating affection (2:6–8, 4:21) and socializes the child for future participation in social and political life (1:2). In 2:5, Kongzi explains the concept of filial piety (*xiao*) in terms of *li*:

Meng Yizi asked about filial conduct (*xiao*). The Master replied: “Do not act contrary.” Fan Chi was driving the Master’s chariot, and the Master informed him further: “Meng Yizi asked me about filial conduct, and I replied: ‘Do not act contrary.’” Fan Chi asked, “What do you mean by that?” The Master replied: “While they are living, serve them according to the observances of ritual propriety (*li*); when they are dead, bury them and sacrifice to them according to the observances of ritual propriety.”

There seems to be an element of circularity in the account of *li* and filial piety offered thus far. In the conversation above, (adherence to) *li* appears to serve its own ends. However, is not the role of *li* primarily instrumental in inculcating filial piety? I suggest that the answer lies in a fuller understanding of the place of filial piety in the life of the moral agent. *Li* are presented to children as imperatives to obey one’s parents. On this account, the scope of filial piety is essentially, although not exclusively, worked out in the life of the younger learner. If this is correct, it is understandable that there is little opportunity for children as immature or early reasoners to challenge these normative behavioral forms encoded in *li*. But, one might say, Kongzi in 2:5 was addressing Fan Chi, one of his disciples. It pays to note, on the other hand, that although Fan Chi was not a child he was not too bright, as Kongzi himself noted (13:4).⁵ Clearly, maturity is not necessarily associated with chronological age.

There are many indications in the *Analects* of inflexibility regarding the requirements of filial piety. *Analects* 13:18 emphasizes family solidarity while 4:18 stresses the acceptance of parental authority. Needless to say, the requirements for unquestioning, dutiful submission to the father are particularly worrisome for a range of reasons (1:6, 4:20, 11:22). These include the ongoing development of the child, the role of the mother, the masking and smoothing-over of disagreements within the family, and the potential for conflict between civic duty and family loyalty.⁶

Putting these concerns aside for the purposes of this essay, *li* as they apply in other domains of interaction seem rather more amenable to change. For instance, the subservience of the child to the parent should be contrasted with the rather more casual attitude toward one's teacher: "When faced with the opportunity to practice *ren* do not give precedence even to your teacher" (15:36; trans. Lau). In the arena of public service, the tone is even more relaxed as Kongzi seems at times to make light of those who are over-zealous in their adherence to *li*: "You will be looked upon as obsequious by others if you observe every detail of *li* in serving your lord" (3:18; trans. Lau). Additionally, one is expected to stand up to one's superior (14:22).

These passages exhibit a range of views on the appropriate responses to different forms of authority. Taken together, they demonstrate that there is no expectation of an unmitigated and universal subjugation to authority. Instead, some forms of authority are seen as more fundamental than others, the authority of parents over their children being the most inflexible and intransigent.

In the context of this discussion, the uncompromising nature of submission to parents may be seen in a different light. 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. The importance of this methodology should not be underestimated. It is expressed in *Analects* 12:1, where Kongzi gives the reply to Yanhui, his favorite disciple, that *ren*, respect for others, is inculcated "through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety." This passage affirms the primacy of *li* in the early stages of *ren* cultivation.

A passage dealing with training in music holds the key to understanding the role of rote memorization. In *Analects* 3:23, various stages of performance are described, with the beginner first learning to play *in unison*:

The Master talked to the Grand Music Master of Lu about music, and said: "Much can be realized with music if one begins by playing in unison, and then goes on to improvise with purity of tone and distinctness and flow, thereby bringing all to completion."

Learning to perform music includes familiarization with the techniques of sound and tone production in the early stages. Improvisation, considerations of tone and flow of music, harmonization, and contextual appropriateness come at a later stage in the development process. By analogy, the process of self-cultivation must include a phase of acquaintance and familiarization during which one practices the behavioral norms appropriate in a range of situations. There is little room for improvisation because one does not have the requisite resources to do this. To insist on the oppor-

tunity for critical assessment in the case of a person not capable of reflective and critical thought is a misplaced move.

For all learners, the proper understanding of the meaning and context of ritual behavior comes only after much practice. There is a sense of constancy and even endurance required at this stage of one's moral development:

Like bone cut, like horn polished,
Like jade carved, like stone ground. (*Analects* 1 : 15; trans. Lau)

The skills required for these creative activities are acquired only through continuous and rigorous practice. As with performance in music, one can *only* master the skill *through constant practice*. The technicalities of *li* are important and constitute the first phase of learning. Familiarity with *li* and continuing practice in *li* acts are prerequisites for the cultivation of the self. In practical terms, this means that in order for one to engage fully with others within a particular social and cultural environment, one needs first to understand the existing social, cultural, and moral norms operative within that framework. In this connection, it could be said that one of Kongzi's insights lies in the acknowledgment of the influential forces of tradition and culture in shaping behavioral and moral norms (see 15 : 10). The Confucian awareness of the historical, ethical, and cultural environment is expressed in the notion of *li* as being partly rooted in tradition. Herbert Fingarette, studying the distinctiveness of Confucian moral philosophy, points out that *li* "rest primarily on the inheritance by each age of a vast body of conventional language and practices from the preceding age."⁷ Nevertheless, there is caution about blindly following inherited tradition. The balance between preserving tradition and effecting change is one of the major themes in the *Analects*. Kongzi notes in 7 : 28 that he *selects* from his learning those things that work well and then puts them into practice. This indicates that the developing person must move beyond mere absorption of existing norms. In other words, training in *li* is necessary although insufficient for moral cultivation.

Stage 2: The Developing Learner and Experimentation

While the *Analects* seems at points to be adhering rigidly to *li* (3 : 17 and book 10), it does, on the other hand, present the view that Kongzi was prepared to modify the *li* during his time:

The Master said, "The use of a hemp cap is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety (*li*). Nowadays, that a silk cap is used instead is a matter of frugality. I would follow accepted practice on this. A subject kowtowing on entering the hall is prescribed in the observance of ritual propriety (*li*). Nowadays that one kowtows only after ascending the hall is a matter of hubris. Although it goes contrary to accepted practice, I still kowtow on entering the hall." (9 : 3)

The material of the cap is inconsequential to its function. Hence, Kongzi is prepared to follow popular practice. However, this passage is also quick to point out that modification of *li* is not to be taken lightly. Kongzi refuses to subscribe to the com-

mon practice of bowing after ascending the steps of the hall because it contravenes the respect underlying the ritual. This passage is significant not because of its specific detail regarding these two practices, but because it demonstrates that there are criteria for modifying ritual behavior and challenging the status quo.⁸

Analects 17 : 21 establishes the need sometimes to rethink adherence to behavioral requirements. Zaiwo, known for his laziness (5 : 10), inquires after Kongzi regarding the three-year mourning period for one's parents during which one is meant to withdraw from engagement in social affairs and enjoyment of luxury and comfort. Zaiwo presents the issue to Kongzi with some attempt to justify his desire to shorten his period of mourning:

Zaiwo inquired, "The three-year mourning period on the death of one's parents is already too long. If for three years exemplary persons (*junzi*) were to give up observing ritual propriety (*li*), the rites would certainly go to ruin. And if for three years they were to give up the performance of music (*yue*), music would certainly collapse. The old grain has been used up, the new crop is ready for harvest, and the different woods used ceremonially as drills for making fire have gone through their full cycle—surely a year is good enough."

The Master replied, "Would you then be comfortable eating fine rice and wearing colorful brocade?"

"I would indeed," responded Zaiwo.

"If you are comfortable, then do it," said the Master. "When exemplary persons (*junzi*) are in the mourning shed, it is because they can find no relish in fine-tasting food, no pleasure in the sound of music, and no comfort in their usual lodgings, that they do not abbreviate the mourning period to one year. Now if you are comfortable with these things, then by all means, enjoy them."

When Zaiwo had left, the Master remarked, "Zaiwo is really perverse (*bu ren*)! It is only after being tended by his parents for three years that an infant can finally leave their bosom. The ritual of a three-year mourning period for one's parents is practiced throughout the empire. Certainly Zaiwo received this three years of loving care from his parents!"

Kongzi's response should be viewed with great interest. It is only one of a number of possible responses. It would not have been out of place for him to insist that Zaiwo persist with the next two years as required in traditional mourning practice. Instead, he remarks that if Zaiwo feels comfortable not complying with the common practice, he should simply do as he wishes. This passage is significant in representing a flexible approach to behavioral norms and in reflecting a commitment to the priority of the appropriate emotions underlying ritual behavior. Kongzi sums up these issues in his key question: would Zaiwo be *comfortable* in the following two years not practicing mourning behavior? Clearly, one who is still grieving would not be at ease.

Reflecting on one's actions and behaviors, the rationale for them, and their possible motivational sources, is a rigorous and challenging activity. Kongzi himself was a keen observer of human behavior, often reflecting on his own and others' actions and their motives (2 : 10). The purpose of this exercise was to learn:

The Master said, "When you meet persons of exceptional character think to stand shoulder to shoulder with them; meeting persons of little character, look inward and examine yourself." (4 : 17)

This statement helps to distinguish this phase of the moral cultivation process from the previous one where the primary activity is to absorb or replicate with little inquiry or reflection. This second stage is perhaps best characterized by the following statement by Kongzi:

Learning without due reflection leads to perplexity; reflection without learning leads to perilous circumstances. (2 : 15)

Learning (*xue*) without due reflection (*si*) is inadequate for personal advancement. It is futile (*wang*), and the final result is perplexity. It is necessary for the learner to reflect on her experiences and to work through the factors and priorities that come together in each situation. Such reflection is the defining characteristic of this second stage. *Analects* 7 : 8 expresses the necessity of independent inquiry and exploration after the first phase of learning:

The Master said, "... When I have pointed out one corner of a square to anyone and he does not come back with the other three, I will not point it out to him a second time." (trans. D. C. Lau)

The student is to come back with *three of four* corners. Reflection is a *subsequent* stage in the process of self-cultivation. It requires some independence from the received or taught view. Kongzi expected his disciples, especially his most capable disciple, Yanhui, not merely to accept his views without challenging them:

I can speak with Yan Hui for an entire day without his raising an objection, as though he were slow. But when he has withdrawn and I examine what he says and does on his own, it illustrates perfectly what I have been saying. Indeed, there is nothing slow about Yan Hui! (2 : 9)

Kongzi expects reflective comments from his students rather than vacuous affirmation and acquiescence. It is interesting that he would consider a student without independent views "slow" (*yu*). However, Kongzi alters his earlier conclusions about Yanhui when he observes that Yanhui's agreement with him is not based on self-effacing lip service. Yanhui has considered and thoughtfully put into practice the content of their discussions.

It is critical that the interdependent roles of learning and reflection be placed in perspective. Learning without due reflection is futile, while reflective theorizing without concrete content may lead to the formulation of inaccurate and unrealistic theories: hence, it is "perilous." This phase of moral cultivation involves intensive experimentation because one needs to reflect on and extract the reasons or principles for specific decisions and responses. There are many examples in the *Analects* of the spontaneity, imaginativeness, and mastery required in the practice of *li* (6 : 13, 13 : 5, 2 : 4, 7 : 36–37, 8 : 1, 8 : 2, 13 : 26, 15 : 21). Diligence is required in putting one's ideas into practice. The tone of 1 : 1 provides some insight into the passion and commitment of Kongzi:

Is it not a pleasure, having learned something, to try it out at due intervals? (trans. D. C. Lau)

In addition, his frequent engagement with his disciples and other interlocutors reflects the encouragement of a style of open-ended inquiry (see, e.g., 9:3, 15:16, 11:22, 11:26, 14:32, 17:21):

Zixia said, “Learn broadly yet be focused in your purposes; inquire with urgency yet reflect closely on the question at hand—authoritative conduct (*ren*) lies simply in this.” (19:6)

As suggested previously, to be able to reflect well requires some detachment from popular opinion and practice. In 7:33 Kongzi emphasizes critical differences between acculturation (*wen*)—a primarily uncritical process—and cultivation. Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont provide an animated translation of this passage:

The Master said, “In the niceties of culture (*wen*), I am perhaps like other people. But as far as personally succeeding in living the life of the *junzi*, I have accomplished little.”

Cultivation of the self requires more than mere acceptance of the norms that operate within one’s ethical and social setting and the ability to operate therein. Hence, the good villager, “who, though he acted as if he were following the Confucian norms, was actually only following convention without consciously engaging in moral practice at all,”⁹ is despised as being a “thief of virtue” (17:13). Mengzi’s comments on the “village worthy” are particularly perspicacious:

“If you want to condemn the village worthy,” said Mencius, “you have nothing on him; if you want to criticize him, there is nothing to criticize. He chimes in with the practices of the day and blends in with the common world. Where he lives he seems to be conscientious and to live up to his word, and in what he does, he seems to have integrity. His community all like him, and he even sees himself as being right. Yet one cannot walk the way of Yao or Shun with such a person. This is why the Master says that he claims excellence under false pretenses.”¹⁰

The Master’s comments in *Analects* 13:24 also distinguish between the popularity of a person on the one hand and his character and commitments on the other:

Tzu-kung asked, “‘All in the village like him.’ What do you think of that?”

The Master said, “That is not enough.”

“‘All in the village dislike him.’ What do you think of that?”

The Master said, “That is not enough either. ‘Those in his village who are good like him and those who are bad dislike him.’ That would be better.” (trans. Lau)

The *junzi*, the paradigmatic man, is a figure that stands in contrast to the village worthy. The *junzi* is independent of the expectations and norms dictated by popular culture. While he relies on his own judgment, the small man by contrast seeks to be affirmed by others; in this way the latter lacks confidence and is reliant on external support (15:21; see also 15:22). The *junzi* is an independent assessor of required and right action in particular situations. Only a mature, paradigmatic person is able to exercise these skills.

Stage 3: The Paradigmatic Person

The paradigmatic person is conscious of and sensitive to the morally salient features of different situations. While these skills and predispositions are not easily defined, it may be said that they include the ability to unravel and analyze the complex and interwoven features of particular situations and to identify those with greater moral weight (9 : 30).

In exercising these skills, the focus of the paradigmatic person shifts from considerations of normativity. He does not view the behavioral requirements embodied in *li* as constraints on his behavior. *Li* are no longer cumbersome and restrictive. But they are indispensable because they create the conditions for appropriate expressions of the self (2 : 8, 3 : 3, 3 : 12, 3 : 26, 17 : 17, 17 : 21, 19 : 14). They facilitate the expression of attitudes, intention, and emotion within the boundaries of meaningful action. The lines of analogy between the expression of the self in and through *li* on the one hand and musical performance on the other are skillfully captured by Herbert Fingarette:

Acts that are *li* are subtle and intelligent acts exhibiting more or less sensitivity to context, more or less integrity in performance. We distinguish sensitive and intelligent musical performances from dull and unperceptive ones; and we detect in the performance confidence and integrity, or perhaps hesitation, conflict, “faking,” “sentimentalizing.” We detect all this *in* the performance; we do not have to look into the psyche or personality of the performer. It is all “there,” public.¹¹

Fingarette’s articulation of the logistics of a performance transcends a dichotomy between the “personal” and the “public” in a musical performance. This understanding of a performance is important in thinking about *li* performances as *expressions of the cultivated self*. Here, I suggest that we take the analogy between *li* performance and musical performance further:

A performance is an event through which the musician expresses and reveals herself. She demonstrates not only her technical capabilities with regard to the musical instrument, but also, and more importantly, she expresses the depth of her feelings and knowledge about the musical work. It is not through technical excellence alone, but through her expression of self *in her technical excellence*, that she engages with her audience. Indeed, it could not be further from the truth to suggest that there are two distinct parts to a musical performance, the outward show and some other inscrutable, mystical “inner” feelings of the performer. The performance *is* the expression of the performing self, and conversely, the accomplished musician can only express herself through performance.¹²

A person’s commitments cannot be realized or manifest except in action. However, it is not correct to say that there is a person or character *beneath* or *underlying* her actions. In Confucian thought, actions are expressions of one’s personhood (*Analects* 2 : 10). In a deep way, the actions *are* the person, and perhaps even more central to the self than one’s verbal commitments (see 4 : 22, 4 : 24, 5 : 10). It is not a coincidence that the idea of sincerity or trustworthiness (*xin*)—the coherence of one’s words and actions—is a key concept in Confucian thought.¹³

While the paradigmatic person is no longer restricted by the dictates of existing *li*, he nevertheless abides by them where appropriate. The fluidity and overlap in the different functions of *li* in moral cultivation is brilliantly captured by an analogy Philip Ivanhoe sets up between *li* and juggling:

The *li* are both the best means for developing virtue and the best way in which to display the perfected virtue. In this regard, they are not unlike juggling which is both an excellent way to develop dexterity and an excellent way to display it.¹⁴

The received *li* engender and support an environment of shared expectations within which the expressions of individuals are properly understood. Within this ethical and social context the paradigmatic individual expresses herself in creative and novel ways. In some cases, the paradigmatic individual will insist on the revision of certain normative requirements if these are unnecessarily restrictive or if there are more weighty concerns.

The difficult question here is how such decisions are made and by whom and what the relevant criteria are. The concept of *yi* (ethical appropriateness) provides some relevant insight regarding the deliberative process in particular situations. *Yi* is a concept that embodies significant flexibility:

The Master said, "Exemplary persons (*junzi*) in making their way in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate (*yi*)."
(*Analects* 4:10)

Regarding the concept of *yi*, the commitment is not to abstract universals but rather to the open nature of ethical deliberation. Much of Confucian moral deliberation focuses on the concrete practical details of particular situations. The evaluation of appropriate action and behavior involves sensitivity in assessing different situations. Kongzi is not a normative ethicist. In the many instances of his deliberations in the *Analects*, he draws together the significant strands of each situation and attempts to work toward an ideal balancing and coherence of significant factors.¹⁵

A noteworthy understanding of *yi* as part of a discourse suggesting the *process orientation* of Confucian thought is expressed by Hall and Ames:

The primary reference of *yi* is to the organic process comprised by the harmony of action and circumstance. . . . The sort of world required by our analysis of *yi*, however, cannot be characterized primarily by the sort of harmony achieved by the imposition of antecedently existing patterns on events, for *yi* acts involve the deriving or bestowing of meaning in such a way as to realize novel patterns uniquely suited to each concrete circumstance.¹⁶

Hall and Ames reject interpretations of *yi* as ethical standard or principle.¹⁷ Their rationale rests on a strong conviction that *yi*, construed as either norm or principle, would be external to and hence imposed on individual persons. Their understanding of *yi* is contrasted with one of *yi* as a predetermined transcendent standard, superimposed on ethical deliberations or situations.

A deeper understanding of the scope of *yi* in ethical deliberation must be situated within other relevant passages in the *Analects* that provide a broader philosoph-

ical context for the concept. That *yi* does not allow one simply to make the most of each situation is clear: it does not allow selfish profit (*Analects* 4:16, 14:12, 19:1); wealth and position gained through inappropriate means is considered not-*yi* (*buyi*). It is also significant that *yi* is often closely aligned with the norms of propriety (*li*), sincerity (*xin*), and conscientiousness (*zhong*) (1:13, 12:10, 13:4). The commitment of the paradigmatic person to *yi* is realized in the adept and sensitive consideration of significant factors.¹⁸

Does the *Analects* recommend any value commitments or ultimate concern? Passages such as 16:10 provide some idea of the sorts of commitments Confucians might have:

Confucius said, "Exemplary persons (*junzi*) always keep nine things in mind: in looking they think about clarity, in hearing they think about acuity, in countenance they think about cordiality, in bearing and attitude they think about deference, in speaking they think about doing their utmost (*zhong*), in conducting affairs they think about due respect, in entertaining doubts they think about the proper questions to ask, in anger they think about regret, in sight of gain they think about appropriate conduct (*yi*)."

One who is committed to a set of values is of course appropriately mindful of them. Most revealingly, mindfulness is expressed in *how* a person approaches situations. The term denoting mindfulness, *si*, is the same as the term for reflection. It is a concept associated with the mind-heart (*xin*),¹⁹ and it stands to reason that a capacity for reflection is closely linked with one's mindfulness of particular commitments.

The exercise and realization of *yi* involve weighing one's commitments to work forward an optimum outcome. The paradigmatic person is committed to *yi* in that she judges each situation according to its circumstantial and significant factors. Hence, in conducting affairs, she is mindful of due respect, in her bearing and attitude she is mindful of deference, and so on. Such moral sensitivity is, of course, ultimately reliant on the attitudes and commitment of individuals (19:6).

But in Confucian philosophy we can also say that a commitment to *ren*—humanity in general and specific relationships in particular—should underlie and inform all deliberations.²⁰ In other words, *ren* is the ultimate commitment that provides the ethical content for the paradigmatic person's deliberations.

It might be pointed out that the *Analects* does not provide an exhaustive list of *ren* manifestations in its sketchy passages. We may choose to regret this situation or we may instead view this lack more optimistically: that there is no list of clearly specified and prescriptive ultimate commitments allows for a more accommodating and dynamic picture of human achievement. This flexibility is also important in establishing the contemporary significance of Confucian philosophy.

Instead of a list of prescriptive norms or principles, we are provided with details of the paradigmatic person's attitude and demeanor. The profundity of the Confucian picture of ethical deliberation lies in a particular cultivated ease due in part to the confidence of the paradigmatic person. The confidence in turn comes about as a result of his tested ability to deliberate and act successfully in a range of contexts. The small person, by contrast, is ill at ease:

The Master said, “The gentleman [*junzi*] is easy of mind, while the small man is always full of anxiety.” (7 : 37; trans. Lau)

In a terse and vivid manner, this passage captures an enviable equanimity in the *junzi*’s approach to affairs. This is contrasted with an attitude of dis-ease and anxiety in the small man. One who is unfamiliar with existing norms or unsure of the legitimacy of his own commitments will have cause to be anxious. The paradigmatic person has had extensive experience in a wide variety of situations and in responding to different people. Through his vast experience, he is confident of his cultivated skills in deliberation and hence is not anxious about new situations. He is sure of his own judgments and does not seek mere approval from others (13 : 23–25).

The paradigmatic man is an exemplar, both in his *li* performances and in the transmission of his attitude and deliberative skills. Antonio Cua describes the self-cultivation of the *junzi* as embodying these two aspects:

[The *junzi* has] an indispensable, educational role, not only in providing models for competence in *li* or rule-following, but also in inculcating *jen*-attitude or ethical concern and reasonableness in rule-application.²¹

At this phase, the mature moral person has moved beyond the period of experimentation. For him, *li* provide a channel for the expression of human emotion that is both aesthetically pleasing (*Analects* 8 : 2) and ethically influential (8 : 9). Bearing sensitivity and commitment to certain ideals and principles, his actions and behaviors serve as exemplars of appropriate action.

He functions effectively and in doing so does not simply benefit himself. The hallmark of the mature person is in the benefit he brings to others and society. The highest accolades—reaching beyond the achievements of the revered sage kings Yao and Shun—go to one who is “broadly generous with the people and is able to help the multitude” (6 : 30). In Kongzi’s case, his individual followers are enriched by interacting and deliberating with him. The constant study and assessment of existing norms and values by paradigmatic persons will benefit society. As a result, the continuing tradition continues to evolve, and is improved, in and through the changes brought about by these discerning individuals. Their work contributes to the realization of *ren* in human society.

Conclusion

Early Confucian thought espoused in the *Analects* of Kongzi is not averse to change and development. On the contrary, it *promotes* a continual and conscientious engagement with existing norms, by paradigmatic persons.

Some readers of the *Analects* who object to its staid, archaic norms may have asked the wrong questions of it. If one expects from the *Analects* a set of prescriptive norms—and reads its passages with those expectations—the general picture will be unsatisfactory because the *prescriptions* contained therein will appear patchy and unfocused and often inconsistent (see for instance 5 : 8, 11 : 22).

One of the aims of this essay is to demonstrate that the Confucian *Analects* is much more mature in its thoughts on ethical deliberation than is commonly believed. According to the account described here, the *Analects* deals with meta-ethical issues relating to the processes and skills required in ethical deliberation. It is mature because it transcends a deontological or rule-based morality. It does not provide answers to readers regarding exactly how one is to act but rather engages them in thinking about the lessons that may be drawn from the conversations. The open-ended nature of cultivation and inquiry within the Confucian tradition prompts a reading of the *Analects* as a manual of moral development.

Its concepts, such as *ren* (concern for humanity), *li* (norms of appropriate behavior), *zhong* (conscientiousness), *shu* (mutuality), *dao* (path or ultimate commitment), and *zhi* (wisdom) may be characterized as cluster concepts, each embodying a wide variety of manifestations in concrete situations. To define a cluster concept would result in a false and inappropriate circumscription of its meaning. Readers acquire an understanding of the concepts from extracting ideals, principles, or a commitment from the deliberations in the passages. In coming to understand the concepts in the *Analects*, one becomes familiar with their scope and contexts of application, of when certain actions are appropriate, or even when existing *li* must be challenged. Reflection on these issues, as they are experienced in the lived context, contributes to the cultivation of ethical sensitivity. For instance, many readers react adversely to the suggestion of Kongzi in *Analects* 13:18 that the son and father should cover up each other's misdeeds: "Confucius is teaching us to tell a lie!" they say. However, further reflection requires the reader to be ethically sensitive in placing him or herself in that same situation and to ask what the most fitting decision might be. Kongzi's remark should not be endorsed without further careful thought. But some might be honest enough to admit that in their experience they may on occasion have had good reasons to cover up for a family member, a friend, or a colleague.

The view developed here recognizes the different kinds of ethical competence and their correlative applications within each phase of moral cultivation. Yet, the underlying continuity through these stages is a developing, morally sensitive self. The process of moral development is dynamic, continuing, and cumulative, with the learner at each stage developing and building on skills and resources acquired in the previous stage. Gradually, along the developmental path, *li* cease to act as constraints to behavior and instead facilitate expressions of an aesthetically and ethically refined self. Ivanhoe, a Confucian scholar, captures the deeper spirit of Confucian moral cultivation. He argues that Kongzi "did not just want people to act in a certain way, he wanted them to *act out of* certain dispositions. He wanted people to care for, not just take care of, their parents, to develop the virtue of filial piety, not just to *act* filially."²²

The suggestions in this essay have important implications for contemporary moral philosophy. There are philosophical resources within early Confucian thought that actively encourage critical thinking as part of moral development. This essay sees the *Analects* as part of a living and ongoing tradition. Within this philosophical

environment, morality is understood as a living phenomenon, with moral progress being initiated by critically self-aware and ethically sensitive persons.

Notes

- 1 – Many contemporary scholars of Confucian thought who seek to defend Confucian teachings interpret *li* in the light of *ren* (human-heartedness) in order to move away from a focus on the rigidity of external compliance to a more flexible, morally sensitive approach. In many accounts of this type, the concept of *li* has been explained as interdependent with, yet in contradistinction to, *ren*. The connection between *ren* and *li* has been represented according to a variety of schema, including internal/external (Antonio Cua, *Dimensions of Moral Creativity: Paradigms, Principles and Ideals* [University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978], p. 55), personal morality / social relations (Tu Wei-ming, “The Creative Tension between *Jen* and *Li*,” in *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985], pp. 6–7), universalistic/particularistic (ibid., p. 11), and spirit/rules (“letter”) (Antonio Cua, “The Conceptual Framework of Confucian Ethical Thought,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 23 [1996]: 165). (See also Kwong-loi Shun, “*Ren* and *Li* in the *Analects*,” *Philosophy East and West* 43 (3) [1993]: 457–479.)
- 2 – The *Xunzi*, which emphasizes the importance of *li* in constraining behavior, discusses in detail the functions of *li* in chapter 19, “A Discussion of Rites”; see *Hsün Tzu: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), pp. 89–111.
- 3 – Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998). This translation is used throughout this essay, unless otherwise noted.
- 4 – Cua, “The Conceptual Framework of Confucian Ethical Thought,” p. 165.
- 5 – Refer to D. C. Lau’s comments on Fan Chi in Lau’s translation, *Confucius: The Analects* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 200.
- 6 – These concerns are not insignificant although they do ultimately rest on what is taken to be the scope of filial piety. If filial piety is understood to apply only to a particular time period when the children are young, there is little to worry about. However, the problem is acute if filial piety is taken to extend over the course of a person’s life. There are indications in the *Analects* (4 : 20) that adult children are expected to comply with the dictates of filial piety.
- 7 – Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 69. See also Benjamin Schwartz’s discussion of the significance of tradition in Confucian thought, in his *The World of Thought in Ancient China*

(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), chap. 3, "Confucius: The Vision of the Analects."

- 8 – There are a number of principles for action, including those for ethical action, scattered through the *Analects*. In this passage, it seems that economy is the criterion for the choice between hemp and silk in the first case, while in the second, respect and its expression appear to be central considerations. *Analects* 16 : 10 lists a broad range of principles for action; these will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.
- 9 – Tu Wei-ming, "The Creative Tension between *Jen* and *Li*," p. 37.
- 10 – From *Mencius* 7B : 37, as translated by Ames and Rosemont (*Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, p. 238 n. 8). Ames and Rosemont also present a relevant analysis of the passage:

Such a village worthy is overdetermined in the sense of form and regularity so that he is plausible to those who would look to him as a model, yet the creative element necessary for his personalization and renewal of the exemplary role is absent. He has no blood. He is a hypocrite because he has nothing of quality to contribute on his own. Confucius is given the last word in this passage, summing up his concerns about the corrosive influence such a "model" can have on the quality of the culture. (p. 266 n. 297)
- 11 – Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, p. 53.
- 12 – Karyn Lai, "Confucian Moral Cultivation: Some Parallels with Musical Training," in Kim-chong Chong, Sor-hoon Tan, and C. L. Ten, eds., *The Moral Circle and the Self* (Chicago: Open Court, 2003), p. 122.
- 13 – Among other passages, book 1 of the *Analects* (1 : 4 to 1 : 8) discusses *xin* as an essential quality of cultivated personhood. Ames and Rosemont propose a most fitting translation of *xin*: "[to] make good on [one's] word"; see their *Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation*, pp. 72–73.
- 14 – Philip Ivanhoe, "Thinking and Learning in Early Confucianism," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17 (1990): 490 n. 21.
- 15 – This methodology associated with *yi* may be Kongzi's "one-thread" (*yiguan*), an elusive and enigmatic reference to the core of his philosophy. In *Analects* 15 : 3 Kongzi remarks, "I have a single thread binding it all together" (Lau, *Confucius: The Analects*, p. 132). I discuss the concept of *yi* in greater detail in Lai, "Confucian Moral Cultivation."
- 16 – David Hall and Roger Ames, "Getting It Right: On Saving Confucius from the Confucians," *Philosophy East and West* 34 (1) (1984): 16–18.
- 17 – Here, they give specific mention to Chung-ying Cheng's definition of *yi* in Cheng's article "On *Yi* as a Universal Principle of Specific Application in Confucian Morality," *Philosophy East and West* 22 (3) (1972): 269–280. It is not clear, though, that Cheng in this article subscribes to the notion of principle

“in any of the classical Western senses of that term,” as Hall and Ames argue; see Hall and Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), pp. 101–102. Note that, right through his argument, Cheng is emphatic that *yi* applies to the *particular*, not the universal.

- 18 – Antonio Cua provides an insightful analysis of the paradigmatic man, in Cua, “The Concept of Paradigmatic Individuals in the Ethics of Confucius,” *Inquiry* 14 (1971).
- 19 – Together with its cognate *lǚ* (see *Analects* 12 : 20, 15 : 12, 18 : 8), *si* is “from the heart” (*cong xin*); see *Shuowen jiezi zhu* (Duan Yucai [1735–1815], *Xu Shen zhuan: Duan Yucai zhu* [Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1981], p. 502; this is a reprint of the original *Jing yun lou* [1815]).
- 20 – This is a view commonly held by scholars, wherein they draw together the key concepts *ren* and *li*. See, in particular, Tu Wei-ming, “The Creative Tension between *Jen* and *Li*,” where Tu discusses at length the revision of *li* in the light of *ren*.
- 21 – Cua, “The Conceptual Framework of Confucian Ethical Thought,” p. 157.
- 22 – Philip Ivanhoe, “Character Consequentialism: An Early Confucian Contribution to Contemporary Ethical Theory,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 19 (1) (1991): 57–58.