

Editorial

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Robert Neville in his *Ritual and Deference* refers to ritual as a mark of high civilisation;¹ moreover, ritual acts as a frame for the cultured, aesthetic, and religious life. One might add that rituals are the concretion of patterns of social interactions that are intimately related to meaningful communications and to the proper expressions of attitudes, feelings, and values—but whether they are the condition for, or the consequence of such activities remains a matter of dispute. Wittgenstein says, '[T]o imagine a language is to imagine a form of life.'² The same could be said of ritual: to imagine a ritual is to imagine a form of community, and along with it, its institutions of ethics, politics, and religion.

Apart from its communal dimension, ritual also allows for the possibility of realising one's personhood, what Confucians call '*ren* 仁' (variously translated as authoritative conduct, benevolence, humaneness, or humanity). Contrary to the common understanding of the person as an independent, autonomous entity, the cultivated, noble self as understood by Confucians is accessible only through ritual conduct. Thus, this noble self is never a given, but is an ongoing, lifelong enactment; the way both to achieving and to actualising it is through the practice of ritual.

While Daoist criticisms of Confucianism are often directed at its preoccupation with matters ritualistic, nevertheless it shares with Confucianism a central concern: practice. That they disagree is precisely due to differing philosophical positions regarding it. Rather than emphasising appropriate conduct and maintaining differentiated human relations, Daoists are more concerned with the significance of indeterminacy (which maintains flexibility) and the parity of all things (in which the human,

¹Neville sees rituals for high civilisations to be what we call social institutions. He cites David Hall's analysis of Whitehead's theory in referring to the 'epitomes' of a high civilisation: art, science, religion, morality, education, and so forth. (See Robert Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany: SUNY, 2009), pp.20-21, and note 7 in p.165.)

²Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1958), §19.

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among others, is but an aspect of the natural world, with no elevated privileges). For the Daoists, practice is facilitated by maximising one's opportunities and one's range of possible responses to the ever-changing circumstances.

This special issue of *Sophia* features explorations of Confucian thinking on ritual and its critique from a Daoist perspective. Eight papers are on offer, two of which are Daoist.

Tan Sor-hoon's paper addresses the question: Does (the Confucian conception of) ritual require a metaphysics? Adopting a pragmatic approach, she suggests that if there were a need for it, a metaphysics—while not contemplated by Confucians of the past—could be found. Yet, there is no reason to think that there is a unique, definitive metaphysics that undergirds Confucian ethics. Rather, it further suggests that ethics ought to be primary: any metaphysics articulated needs to be subjected to the requirements of the ethics.

Explored in Mary Bockover's paper is the question regarding the meaning of *li* (ritual propriety) and its relationship with *ren* (sometimes rendered as 'humanity'). The paper's thesis involves interpreting *li* as a ritualised body language and *ren* as the human spirit. While ritual is specific to culture, the human spirit expressed is more general. At the same time, Bockover maintains that there is no human spirit without such body languages. The paper further argues that ritual is not reducible to a cultural form, since it also requires an allegiance to authenticity and to being part of the Great Way.

Sungmoon Kim questions the viability of understanding the notion of *li* (ritual propriety) in terms of civic virtue, an understanding to which he suggests role ethicists are committed. Kim discusses how Mencius and Xunzi understand ritual propriety in very different ways. As he sees it, an interpretation of *li* as civic virtue would not find support in the teachings of Mencius. And while the interpretation resonates better with Xunzi's philosophy, there are still problems, as Xunzi's main concern lies elsewhere.

Winnie Sung contributes a study addressing the question: What does it mean to be transformed by ritual? For her, it is not only a reconfiguration of one's desires, but something that involves a more fundamental change in the heart-mind. The aim of ritual is to reform the self-seeking tendencies of the heart-mind such that it comes to conform with the ethical standards assumed by ritual. Moreover, because such ethical standards are not arbitrary—i.e. they are based on certain aspects of human feelings—the practice of ritual ultimately leads to satisfaction.

Geir Sigurðsson expounds on how the Confucian views of ritual illuminate our understanding of the pedagogical significance of ritual in building community. He highlights the need for ritual practice to go beyond mere imitation and stresses that the discipline of ritual practice paves the way to freedom. Through ritual practice one learns to dance between invariance and change, such that one becomes meaningfully creative in one's social interactions.

Peter Wong seeks to articulate an aspect of ritual that he suggests is comparable to musical performance. Music, then, becomes a marker for lively and authentic practice of ritual, in which case, it may be possible to establish a language and critique of ritual that is more generalised and more likely to be applicable across traditions.

No discussions on ritual in Chinese philosophy are complete without contributions from a Daoist point of view. Chris Fraser puts it well in the 'Introduction' to his piece when he says that a study of ritual propriety in the Confucian tradition may well profit from examining the views of its traditional critics, especially those of the Daoists.

Fraser discusses ritual in the context of the Confucian *Xunzi*, and offers a corrective from the perspective of the Daoist classic, the *Zhuangzi*. His paper argues against a Confucian tendency to over-determination, as exemplified by their excessively rigid views on ritual propriety. For Fraser, without dismissing the usefulness of rituals in promoting social interactions, the Daoist would maintain that rituals are much more fluid in practice, such that flexibility of ritual requirement is needed for different contexts. Moreover, it would be a mistake for the Confucians to assume that ritual is fundamental to establishing social order.

Unlike Fraser, the critique by Hans-Georg Moeller is directed at a Confucian position more aligned with the thinking of Mencius. Moeller suggests that the Confucians justify their emphasis on the importance of sacrificing to the ancestors by appealing to the need to be true to one's filial feelings. For him, there are a number of other considerations that trump the Confucian justification, considerations that are derived from the perspective of Daoists as outsiders to the tradition. He concludes by claiming that the Daoist critique exposes the arbitrariness and relativity, even irrelevance, of the Confucian practice of sacrificing to the ancestors.

Finally, we have also the timely inclusion of a series of review discussions, which are responses to a recent publication by Wesley Wildman concerning the viability and scope of the philosophy of religion in present day academia. Wildman's reply to those discussions is also included. At issue is the view that philosophy of religion cannot be confined to a perspective that is purely theistic. The plurality of religious traditions in the world demands a more diverse approach. Although not part of the discussion, Neville makes an important point when he suggests that every religion (which, in the eyes of its adherents, is *the Religion*) needs to develop a theology of other religions.³ Following Neville, a similar task awaits philosophy of religion: it needs to develop both a philosophy of Religion and a philosophy of religions, including a nuanced understanding of how each relates to the other. Furthermore, ritual in the Chinese tradition raises a particular challenge for the philosophy of religion—while religion in the West is usually conceived in terms of faith and belief, in what sense are the more practice-oriented traditions religious?

³ See Neville, *op. cit.*, p.22.