Existential Reciprocity: Respect, Encounter, and the Self from Confucian Propriety (*Lǐ* 禮)

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Abstract

A pervasive misunderstanding of Confucian philosophy's concepts considers them to be directives that call for deference and subordination, principally associated with the concept *Lǐ* 禮 which is understood as rites, rituals, manners, or generally “propriety”. Imposing *Lǐ* 禮 is considered a path to social and personal harmony. However, an analysis of the conditions and implications of *Lǐ* 禮 in early Confucian thinking shows that authentic respect, not obedience, is considered the essential condition for good governance and an ordered society. Significantly, authentic respect can only originate from within the self, it cannot be commanded. Based upon self-cultivation, participation in ritual and exemplary conduct establishes a commitment to respect, and the purposeful distinctions expressed through *Lǐ* 禮 make social order intelligible. Considering the essence of respect in depth, and comparing it to the ethics conceived by Immanuel Kant, neither Confucian nor Kantian ethics are truly *deontological* in the sense of a “duty that is owed to an external instance”, rather they both rest on the autonomy of the self. A synthesis of both implies that extending authentic respect to an other in an encounter within the context of *Lǐ* 禮 gives rise to “Existential Reciprocity”: a virtuous cycle which mutually affirms both the self and the other, while rejecting a dichotomous opposition between self-esteem and morality. This is not contingent on external factors, but accessible from a self-determined, autonomous engagement with self-affirming conduct and productive encounters. Benefits are immediate and personal, and this forms the conditions in which harmonious relationships are a natural outcome.

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1 The Nature of *Lǐ* 禮

“Confucian”¹ norms have shaped all of East Asia’s societies, based on principles that were formulated by Confucius 孔夫子 (551–479 BCE)² and his disciples and successors two and a half millennia ago, and that were later modified as state philosophy and adopted in virtually all of China’s dynasties since the Hàn 漢. Confucianism was well suited for this role. Its one arm, the *Lǐ* 禮,³ comprising ritual, morals, and propriety, provided a deontological framework. Its other arm, *Rén* 仁, essentially humane virtues, contributed the values that its morals are founded on. And thirdly, its relational focus, its emphasis of societal harmony, hierarchy and order, were suitable to frame the needs of statecraft as consequentialist objectives.

However, a joint emphasis on virtue and duty creates an inherent paradox: the virtuous need no rules, and the mere display of rule-conforming behaviour does not in itself make one virtuous. Indeed, co-opting the *form* of Confucian principles as a method to achieve a specific, desirable *result* contradicts the very premise of virtuous behaviour, since actions that are performed for the sake of reward are the antithesis of a self-motivated expression of respectful responsibility (cf. Chen & Steipe, 2022a). Thus, understanding Confucianism as a canon of directives, a rulebook, would contradict it at its core. As expressed by Confucius himself, prescribed ethical values are neither effective nor sustainable: “Control them with rule, govern them with punishment, the people will be deceitful and have no shame. Lead them with virtue, unite them in *Lǐ* 禮, there will be honor and principle. [道之以政, 齊之以刑, 民免而無恥; 道之以德, 齊之以禮, 有恥且格。]” (*Analects* 2.3).^{4,5}

¹ Throughout this article, we use the term “Confucian” to denote the consistent philosophical principles that were expressed in the *Analects* (*Lúnyǔ* 《論語》) and the *Book of Rites* (*Lǐjì* 《禮記》). Whether or not those were formulated by Confucius himself and recorded by his disciples, whether they represent original thinking by his successors, or reflect the views of later editors of the received texts is of secondary importance; as long as the precepts and conclusions are consistent. Similarly, we use the name “Confucius” as a metonymy for pronouncements of this tradition, not to express a claim of authorship.

² Confucius’s family name (姓) is *Kǒng* 孔, his given name (名) is *Qǐū* 丘, his courtesy name (字) is *Zhōng Ní* 仲尼. Here we use the name *Confucius* as metonymy for early Confucian thought, and, where appropriate for the apocryphal speaker in the received text. To the best of our modern understanding, while some of the sayings likely quote Confucius’ words, the *Analects* was not authored by the historical person, but was compiled, arranged and edited for over 200 years. An attempted reconstruction of the provenance and its implications is given in the text-critical translation of Brooks and Brooks (1998) but details remain controversial.

³ Some of the terms we discuss here have no precise English translation at all. We transliterate those words, capitalized, and follow them with the character (e.g. *Lǐ* 禮, *Rén* 仁, *Tiān* 天, and *Dào* 道). For others, English words exist that are sufficiently close, yet are significantly different in meaning. In those cases, we italicize and give the Chinese word only where it is first used, e.g. *gentleman* (君子).

⁴ All Chinese sources were obtained from the online *ctext* corpus (Sturgeon, 2011). English translations are by the authors.

⁵ The antithetical parallelism of the first and fourth clause contrasts rule (政) – here to be understood as law, i.e. the type of rule that is enforced by punishment – with virtue (德). But from the perspective of ethics, law and virtue have comparable contents: they express norms of society and are not antithetical – the intent of this passage is not to claim that law and virtue are opposites. The contrast in fact concerns the way these norms are realized. The law commands, virtue is a person’s nature; therefore we translate “control” in the thesis and “lead” in the antithesis, though both are the same character 道 in the original. This point is easily missed, due to the repeated characters of the parallel structures – which are, however, not equivalent.

We show that the paradox is resolved when we analyze the self not as a static, pre-given absolute, but as dynamically constituted in and through its relationships. This view is supported by the understanding of the roles and expressions of *Lǐ* 禮, it explains the need to insist on *authentic* behaviour, rather than just pragmatic fulfilment of moral norms, and it entails the convergence of Confucianism's core virtue, *Rén* 仁, with its core method, *self-cultivation* (修身). We see significant value in this: though much of the explicit tenets of Confucianism are no longer aligned with our social and political realities, a philosophical inquiry into meanings and implications gives us new ways to address the ethical issues of today (e.g. Chen & Steipe, 2022a).

Propriety is a central theme here. Propriety means “conformity to accepted standards of behavior or morals” (OED, 2019), but what do we mean by *conforming*, what is a *standard* and what is *moral*, how does it become *accepted*? All that is clear is that we are speaking of a position which the *self* takes versus an *other*, extended to society. Moreover, when we discuss Asian philosophy, we do not precisely mean “propriety” in the first place; propriety is just one of several aspects of the Confucian concept *Lǐ* 禮,⁶ which includes a canon of rites and rituals, customs, and manners, but also detailed instructions for everyday behaviors, as well as the general attitude that underlies them, which supports values such as loyalty, moderation, filial piety, trustworthiness, fraternity etc. Thus, with its broad scope, *Lǐ* 禮 can be seen as a “cultural grammar” (Li, 2007) and this actualization of Confucian values and ethics in all aspects of life goes significantly beyond just “propriety”.

The question arises how ethics based on individual conduct could be actualized towards a harmonious society, all the more since *Lǐ* 禮 cannot have a purpose: if it had a purpose, it would be that purpose that would be the condition of personal and social harmony, and not the *Lǐ* 禮, *Lǐ* 禮 would be only a method.⁷

1.1 *Lǐ* 禮 from Precedence

The *Lǐ* 禮 are rooted in the mythical origins of China – the age of “the three sovereigns and five emperors” (三皇五帝) – and they were considered largely established even before the time of the Xià 夏, China's first historical dynasty. Confucius claimed for himself to be merely a “transmitter” of this ancient wisdom: “I recount but do not compose, I trust and cherish the ancient ... [述而不作, 信而好古.....]” (*Analects* 7.1). Yet Confucius was as far removed from these origins in time as we are from Confucius today. What then exactly is being recounted?

Chapter 9 (*Lǐ Yùn* 《禮運》)⁸ of the *Book of Rites* (*Lǐ Jì* 《禮記》) gives Confucius understanding of what made the *Lǐ* 禮 essential for social harmony:

⁶ We use the definite article “the *Lǐ* 禮” when we talk about specific instances, and simply “*Lǐ* 禮” when the focus is on the general principles.

⁷ Confucius' disciple Yǒuzǐ (有子) expresses this as: “The use of *Lǐ* is to make harmony valued. ... However, harmony is not to be pursued for its own sake. Without the meter of *Lǐ*, harmony cannot obtain. [禮之用, 和為貴。.....有所不行, 知和而和, 不以禮節之, 亦不可行也。]” (*Analects* 1.12).

⁸ The Chinese character 運 in the chapter title has two meanings: one denotes “evolving” (演變), the other implies “rotation” (運轉). Whereas evolving emphasizes changes in time, rotation indicates seasonal returning and repetition. For a detailed discussion, see Wang (2009, 390).

大道之行也，天下為公。選賢與能，講信修睦，故人不獨親其親，不獨子其子，使老有所終，壯有所用，幼有所長，矜寡孤獨廢疾者，皆有所養。男有分，女有歸……是謂大同。

今大道既隱，天下為家，各親其親，各子其子，貨力為己，大人世及以為禮。……

禹、湯、文、武、成王、周公，由此其選也。此六君子者，未有不謹於禮者也。以著其義，以考其信，著有過，刑仁講讓，示民有常。如有不由此者，在勢者去，眾以為殃，是謂小康。

When there was the Great *Dào* 道, all under the heaven was transparent. Good, and capable leaders were chosen, trust and harmony were cultivated, so that people did not only respect their own parents, care about their own children, but all elders were taken good care of until the end of their lives; all strong men were employed according to their capacities, and all children grew healthily; widowers, widows, and orphans, the childless, disabled or infirm were well treated. Men had their own suitable professions; women had their own suitable husbands. ... This is called “Grand Unity”.

Nowadays, since the Great *Dào* 道 became obscured, all under the heaven is for families, and every family is only close to their own parents, all parents cherish their own children; goods and strength are applied for self-interests, ranks inherited through generations are considered to be *Lǐ* 禮. ...

Thus, King Yǔ 禹, King Tāng 湯, King Wén 文, King Wǔ 武, King Chéng 成, and the Duke of Zhōu 周公 distinguished themselves. None of these six *gentlemen* (君子) was not cautious about *Lǐ* 禮, so that justice was encouraged, trustworthiness was demonstrated, mistakes were corrected. *Rén* 仁 was exemplified, as the humble was praised. The constant role models were presented to the people. If there was someone who did not follow, he would be removed from his position, and everyone would consider such thing to be disastrous. This was the society of Minor Prosperity (小康). (*Book of Rites* 9.1–2)

What early Confucians mean by *Dào* 道 is expressed in the influential first passage of Chapter 31 “Doctrine of the Mean” (*Zhōng Yōng* 《中庸》) of the *Book of Rites*:⁹ “That which the Mandate of Heaven brings forth is called nature; that which leads nature is called *Dào* 道 ... [天命之謂性，率性之謂道……]” (*Book of Rites* 31.1). Understanding how the *Dào* 道 is conceptualized here pivots on the word *shuài* 率,¹⁰ which is not to be read as an externally imposed command but as an inherent tendency. Thus, the essence of *Dào* 道 is self-organization of matters through their own direction. The Great *Dào* (大道) of Confucius’ account acts in a pre-historic Utopia – the Grand Unity (大同) – in which it was the natural state of affairs, and social harmony prevailed at all levels. Thus, one path

⁹ From the twelfth century Neo-Confucian tradition until the end of imperial times, the *Doctrine of the Mean* (《中庸》) was separately listed as one of the “four canonical books” (四書) of the Confucian classics, the core of the civil service examinations; another of the four books, *The Great Learning* (《大學》), is also originally a chapter of the *Book of Rites*, the other two books are the *Analects* (《論語》) and *Mencius* (《孟子》).

¹⁰ 率 (*shuài*), normally translated as “to follow”, but in this case, with reference to the *Dào* 道, “lead” is preferred.

to social harmony is achieved when all of society naturally assumes their appropriate role.

The Great *Dào* can however become obscured. Although the quoted passage is not a historical account, the social upheaval that is described would correspond to the transition of small, decentrally led, tightly knit Neolithic population units with few personal possessions, to a centrally governed society, gravitating to nascent urban centres, organizing division of labour and trade of commodities, laying claims to land and property, and enjoying the resultant prosperity. But material wealth brings with it a fear to lose what one has, and such anxiety fundamentally changes the balance of human relationship: the *other*, previously an essential ally, becomes a perceived competitor. Moreover, since all possessions are always lost in death, the only way to preserve one's prosperity beyond one's own life is to pass it on to a conceptually extended, "genetic" self – and this means to favour family relations over all others. In the era of Grand Unity, widowers, widows, orphans, and the childless were well treated, i.e. those segments of society who had no family to lean on. *Lǐ* 禮 was a spontaneous mode of social conduct and did not require explicit expression, relationships were simply a "matter of *lǐ* [禮之事]" (Ing, 2019, 91). In contrast, "nowadays ... all under the heaven is for families", i.e. "trust and harmony" were replaced with selfish acts of competition. In Confucius' understanding, the root of social conflict in a prospering society, is, paradoxically, a by-product of prosperity itself.

The remedy, according to Confucius, was to establish an alternate expression of *Lǐ* 禮 as a condition for harmony, and allow prosperity to be enjoyed by all.¹¹ The apocryphal six Sage Kings achieved this not through coercion, but through embodiment; they served as role models. Their deliberate and cautious performance made *Lǐ* 禮 explicit, it required the "name of *lǐ* [禮之名]".¹² The distinction is functional, and the ethical impulses that transformed society came from within. A return to Utopia is neither possible nor desirable – prosperity after all safeguards against famine and natural disasters; it provides infrastructures and security. Confucius cites the historical evidence that it is possible to mitigate the side-effects through the *Lǐ* 禮 – if *Lǐ* 禮 is properly applied, and emphasizes in the following passage that this is literally a matter of life or death:

夫禮，先王以承天之道，以治人之情。故失之者死，得之者生。

Lǐ 禮 is how the former Sage Kings conveyed the *Dào* of Heaven, in order to channel¹³ the emotion of humans. Therefore, those who abandon it would die, and those who achieve it would live. (*Book of Rites* 9.3)

Significantly, Confucius uses the concept *channel* (治), a character originally related to water, indicated by its radical, which he brings into correspondence with *convey* (承). Rather than imposing constraints, *Lǐ* 禮 is understood to guide human emotions

¹¹ Note that we should not assume the *harmony* (和) of Grand Unity and Minor Prosperity, and indeed our modern times, to be the same.

¹² The basic values remain the same, though the transition between Grand Unity and Minor Prosperity increases not only the need for *Lǐ* 禮, but also its complexity and elaboration (Ing, 2019, 87). For the distinction and discussion of "the matter of *lǐ* [禮之事]" and "the name of *lǐ* [禮之名]", see Ing (ibid., 91).

¹³ Rather than the more common translation "govern", we choose "channel" to match the etymological reading of 治.

according to their innate tendencies, and it manifests in heart-felt expressions in rituals and rites, customs and manners.

1.2 *Lǐ* 禮 from Principles

This all however refers to the very distant past. How did the *Lǐ* 禮 survive to Confucius' time? The surprising answer is: they did not. As he explains to his disciple Yán Yàn (言偃), the *Lǐ* 禮 of his philosophy are due to him himself.

言偃復問曰：「夫子之極言禮也，可得而聞與？」孔子曰：「我欲觀夏道，是故之杞，而不足徵也；吾得《坤乾》焉。我欲觀殷道，是故之宋，而不足徵也；吾得《坤乾》焉。坤乾之義，夏時之等，吾以是觀之。」

Yán Yàn (言偃) asked again, “Our Master esteems *Lǐ* 禮 to be utmost important, would it be possible for us to acquire the knowledge of *Lǐ* 禮?” Confucius replied, “I wanted to perceive the *Dào* 道 of the Xià 夏 dynasty, so I went to the state of Qǐ 杞, but there were not enough traces left; I obtained knowledge on the almanac of Xià. I wanted to observe the *Dào* 道 of the Yīn 殷 dynasty, so I went to the state of Sòng 宋 but there were not enough traces left; I obtained knowledge on the *Kūn Qián* 坤乾 [cosmology].¹⁴ From the meaning of *Kūn Qián*, and the almanac of Xià, I deduced [the *Lǐ* 禮].” (*Book of Rites* 9.4)

The historic *Lǐ* 禮 themselves were lost to time. In this passage, Confucius identifies the information that he required to reconstruct their essence: (i) the core of *Yīn* 陰 *Yáng* 陽 cosmology, and (ii) the almanac, i.e. a catalogue of the general occasions for which rituals ought to be performed, i.e. their categories. However, there is a third, implicit ingredient we must not overlook: Confucius' premise that moral and social guidance is to be found in the historic past in the first place, i.e. (iii) a premise of ancestral relevance. Thus, through this passage, the Confucian project not only claims exclusive authority to evaluate propriety for actual statecraft, but also establishes the contents (cosmology) and scope (almanac) of such propriety.

But it is the third component that has the deepest implications:¹⁵ deference to excellent ancestors not only provides a justification through precedence, beyond the mere opinions of the philosopher, but it establishes a cultural continuity which reinforces that the *Lǐ* 禮 need to be internally propagated, as every individual's cultural genes. This seems to us to be one of the most significant positions that differentiates Confucianism's mode of argumentation from other schools of thought: whereas Legalism discusses how rules could be made excellent, and Mohism offers philosophical opinions on the value of specific types of

¹⁴ *Kūn Qián* 坤乾, the Earth and Heaven trigrams, refers to book(s) on *Yīn* 陰 *Yáng* 陽 cosmology prior to Confucius' times. For historical information, see Wang (2009, 395).

¹⁵ Note that the justification of ideals by reference to historic examples is not a self-evidently correct position. For example, Hutton (2008) discusses in detail the central role that objections to this idea play in the criticism of Confucianism, expressed by Hǎn Fēizǐ 韓非子 (ca. 280–233 BCE), the hugely influential founder of Legalism. The argument against that – it would make it hard for Confucians to distinguish their school from others (Hutton, 2008, 452) – is one of expediency, and does not address the principled validity of the Confucian position. That might be a problem for Confucian “schools” but not for the philosophy as a whole.

relationships, Confucius derives the features of sustainable governance from innate virtue.¹⁶ This entails a need for the *self* to be involved, and the need for this involvement to be *authentic*.¹⁷

At this point, the second arm of Confucius' philosophy comes into play: *Rén* 仁 (originally “seed”, or “generative force” (cf. Wang, 2012)), is a quintessentially Confucian concept, likely coined by Confucius himself. In the *Analects*, it is never used in its literal meaning, but it metaphorically acquires a very specific sense, or rather two: either the sum-total of “all human virtues”, or “kindness and compassion” (Ni, 2017, 32–35).¹⁸ As an *achievement* of the humane, Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr. interpret *Rén* 仁 as “Human Becoming” (1999, 48–51). That such humaneness is the same word as a seed grain is revealing,¹⁹ as is the fact that the character 仁 is composed from the glyphs for “human”, 人, and “two”, 二. At the very base *Lǐ* 禮 and *Rén* 仁 are different perspectives on the same thing, and they both manifest a relational *Dào* 道.

When Confucius invokes the example of the Sage Kings this is emphatically not a proposal to imitate their acts, nor even to imitate their path to excellence. The “lessons” from antiquity must be “warmed up” for each new learning, as in the well-known, less understood Confucian saying: “Warming up the old but knowing the new, that makes one a teacher. [溫故而知新，可以為師矣。]” (*Analects* 2.11).²⁰ Considering the past provides an illuminating distance; the self appears in this reflection as an element in a continuing succession, and that is what makes a historic example both relevant and meaningful. That *Lǐ* 禮 can bring about social harmony is supported by the historic precedence, and, according to Confucius, the crucial ingredients are already inherent in us all. Such propagation of virtue, rather than imposition of morals, allows authenticity to apply itself; indeed, treating the Sage Kings as authorities, rather than as the roots of a tradition in which one oneself partakes would stand in the way of personal involvement.

Such a philosophical approach to manage relationships, not based on demanding behavior but on strengthening attitudes, is intriguing, but not straightforward to implement: *Lǐ* 禮 is neither a method, nor a policy. Propriety can be derived from *Lǐ* 禮, but proper behaviour cannot substitute. *Lǐ* 禮 is the condition of propriety and its actualization through self-improvement is fundamentally personal.

¹⁶ Cf. *Analects* 2.3 (“Control them with rule ...”), quoted above.

¹⁷ The need for authentic engagement is expressed throughout the *Analects*. *Analects* 3.12 (“If I would not participate ...”) is discussed below. The importance to consider character is expressed in *Analects* 2.10. That *Lǐ* 禮 requires respect is said explicitly: “... abiding by *Lǐ* 禮 without respect ... how were I to regard such a one? [.....為禮不敬.....吾何以觀之哉?]” (*Analects* 3.26). We read Confucius proclamation: “A gentleman is not a utensil [君子不器]” (*Analects* 2.12) to express the same idea, to name but four examples.

¹⁸ The frequency of occurrence of *Rén* 仁 in the *Analects* and the space given therein to its explanation supports that its specific meaning of an ethical core of human nature and the process of embodying it was not common, but was established by Confucius himself. For the original pre-Confucian meaning of the word *Rén* 仁 as kernel and openness, see Wang (2012), and the recent analysis of Curtis (2016). For the intricate relationship between the two most important Confucian concepts *Rén* 仁 and *Lǐ* 禮, see Li (2007).

¹⁹ *Rén* 仁 in its meaning of kernel or seed is widely used in Modern Chinese compounds such as: “杏仁” (almond), “核桃仁” (walnuts), or generically “果仁” (nuts, seeds, or pits), but also “蝦仁” (shrimp tails).

²⁰ Note the *caesura* created by the particle 而, which leads us to reject the “causal” reading in which this passage is commonly translated: “warming up the old *in order to* learn about the new...”. We read this passage as an inquiry, a gesture of asking questions to the *old* to derive insights for the *new*, without assuming any right or wrong beforehand.

1.3 *Lǐ* 禮 from Performance

Lǐ 禮 is not only a canon of virtue, it also provides access to virtue through its “other” aspect: ritual. *Lǐ* 禮 is thus a cultivation of ethical values through practice. Ritual makes the relation of *self* and *value* explicit through its experiential, participatory nature and thereby is able to initiate their actualization.²¹

The *Book of Rites* devotes a majority of its space to seasonal, sacrificial, and ancestral rites that express reverent connections with *Tiān* 天,²² and to pray for prosperity. Such prayers need not be understood as a belief in the ruler’s ability to influence the supernatural, their importance lies more generally in their state-affirming nature and to consolidate the hierarchy of the centralized political systems. For example, the *Book of Rites* describes in detail a ritual performed in the Bright Hall²³ by the Duke of Zhōu, conducted for the Son of Heaven (天子), the rank given to the highest ruler, the king, or later, the emperor. The ritual is not only performed for his own officials and state chiefs, but also includes representatives from neighbouring and remote foreign countries and tribes, thus relating the entire world to the centre of Zhōu 周 power. This relation is not only conceptual but reflects the actual geography, with the “Barbarians”, the tribes outside the empire, placed outside the hall, at the cardinal directions where they were geographically located. As a result, this choreographed arrangement represents the entire world, mapped to a single building, where hierarchy is reflected (i) in the specific position (位) for each level of the peerage system at varying distance from the centre; (ii) in the direction that each group faces, which is always towards the Son of Heaven in the centre; and (iii) in an explicit ordering within each group. Thereby higher and lower societal ranks, various and distant nations, ethnic- and geographic identities are made manifest for each participant both as a person, and as a representative. Such relationships are not abstractly proclaimed, but directly experienced, framed in a choreography of dignified etiquette and manifest a *philosophical*, not merely political network of interdependent relationships, in which every individual is grounded and oriented.²⁴ The overarching structure is hierarchical, but since it is not hierarchy for its own sake, but a tool for efficient governance, it must

²¹ For a “small-scale” illustration, consider how a smile in and of itself has a positive influence on well-being (e.g. Kraft & Pressman, 2012), or how straightening one’s posture, or walking with confidence affects the self-image.

²² The Chinese *Tiān* 天 is a broad philosophical concept. Literal translations such as “heaven” or “god” do not do justice to its scope and meaning, thus we keep the original. For a detailed explanation, see Ames and Rosemont (1999, 46–48).

²³ The “Bright Hall” (明堂) is a type of ceremonial architecture; different palaces each had their own actual structure. Reflecting the cosmo-geography of the Chinese belief system, the layout of urban space and palace architecture in the capitals had ritual significance: the Bright Hall would likely have had a square base and a round ceiling to represent the cosmography, and the four sides of the hall, plus the centre, reflect the quinary system (五行). The details however are more obscure than expected for such an important focus of political power. Apparently, the desire to base political legitimacy on historic precedents has made the sources of our knowledge unreliable (cf. Corradini, 1995).

²⁴ Chenyang Li refers to this philosophical meaning of *Lǐ* 禮 as its “thickness”: “When performing religious or filial rituals, for example, one must be reverent (敬). Confucius asks, ‘When [we] say *li*, does it merely mean the jade and silk [items used in rituals]?’ *Analects* 17.11. Obviously, *li* in this context means not just the instruments or equipment of the ritual. *Li* in the ‘thick’ sense has to do with how the ritual is performed, by what kind of people, and with what attitude. In the *Analects*, *li* is normally used in this thick sense. When used in the mere formal sense, *li* is at best instrumental.” (Li, 2014, 60).

be based on virtue. This resonates with a passage in the *Book of Rites*: “Once centred on harmony, everything has its position and all things flourish. [致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。]” (*Book of Rites*, 31.1). The metaphorical position of everything in this system – literally [all things of] heaven and earth – is both the consequence and the cause of harmony and prosperity and it is this understanding that the actual positions in the Bright Hall evoke, a mutual establishment, enabled by participatory *practice*.

Such practice to establish philosophical relationships has become inaccessible, since the relationships and conditions to which the *Lǐ* 禮 of the Chinese Classics refer have been lost in time and have lost their significance. Participatory access at this scale is closed to us. There is however another, intriguing aspect: the interaction of ritual with the individual self through rituals of self-cultivation.

1.4 *Lǐ* 禮 from Conduct

The daily routines of a *gentleman* (君子), one who embodies Confucian virtue to perfection, are described in Chapter 13 (*Yù Zǎo* 《玉藻》) of the *Book of Rites*:

君子之居恒當戶，寢恒東首。若有疾風迅雷甚雨，則必變，雖夜必興，衣服冠而坐。日五盥，沐稷而禴梁，櫛用櫛櫛，發曦用象櫛，進櫛進羞，工乃升歌。浴用二巾，上絺下綌，出枌，履蒹席，連用湯，履蒲席，衣布襪身，乃屢進飲。

The *gentleman's* dwelling always has him face the door.²⁵ He always sleeps with his head in the east. When a thunderstorm brings pouring rain, he must change, get up even at night, don robes and cap, and sit. He washes his hands five times a day, he washes his hair with millet water, his face with sorghum water, he uses a boxwood comb, for dry hair he uses an ivory comb, drinks and refreshments are served and songs rise from his musicians. He uses two kinds of towels for his bath, fine linen for the upper [body], coarse linen for the lower. Leaving the bathtub, he steps on a rush mat, rinses with warm water, steps on a cattail mat, puts on a cloth gown to dry himself; in sandals he goes to drink. (*Book of Rites*, 13.7)

This bathing “ritual” is a thoughtful, deliberate, comprehensive undertaking; it prepares the mind as much as the body and both are brought into harmony. This is not just cleaning, but purification, and displays exactly the attitude that gives rise to the famous idea that the loftiest goals must be founded in self-cultivation – as expressed in Chapter 42, the “Great Learning” (*Dà Xué* 《大學》) of the *Book of Rites*: establishing peace all under the heavens needs governing the state, which needs managing the household, which needs self-cultivation, which needs an upright mind.²⁶ Indeed, considering how prosperity, even luxury, is balanced with responsibility, such as being prepared and responsive in the event

²⁵ Translating these descriptions uniquely into practice is not possible due to the inherent ambiguities. Commentators have interpreted this passage in various ways (Wang, 2009, 528–529).

²⁶ The *Book of Rites* has: “The ancients, wishing bright shining virtue throughout all under the heavens first managed their state; wishing their state managed they first united their family; wishing their family united they first cultivated their self; wishing their self cultivated they first sought an upright mind; wishing their mind upright they first embraced sincerity of thought; wishing their thoughts sincere they first devoted to knowledge; such knowledge is grasping the essence of things. [古之欲明明德於天下者，先治其國；欲治其國者，先齊其家；欲齊其家者，先修其身；欲修其身者，先正其心；欲正其心者，先誠其意；欲誠其意者，先致其知，致知在格物。]” (*Book of Rites*, 42.2).

of a storm, hints at how this ritual is not indulgence but sophistication in every aspect of a private and public life devoted to excellence. Extending respect to others begins with self-respect and self-respect is both expressed in and constituted by habits. It is not the prosperity that makes the *gentleman*, but the care that he extends to his cultivation, in Confucius' words: "to reverentially cultivate the self [脩己以敬]" (*Analects* 14.42).

The pivotal role that the self plays here comes ever more clearly into focus. It is quite inconceivable that any of the Confucian virtues could be realized through mere imitation of its forms. Above all, self-cultivation cannot proceed unless the self is authentically involved. Authenticity is indeed indispensable: pretended virtue is not virtuous, pretended *Lǐ* 禮 has no propriety. Authenticity in Chinese is *zhēn* 真, but that word does not appear in the *Analects*. For Confucius, authenticity is not a single concept but a system that develops in a relational gesture of *loyalty* (忠) and *trust* (信), which employs *as-if* (如) towards the self, and which rests upon *reciprocity* (恕). As a system, these concepts stabilize and mutually reinforce each other, none are dispensable. *Loyalty* provides the commitment of the self, *trust* applies it to relationality, *as-if* secures the self's autonomy, and *reciprocity* ensures the cyclical application and reinforcement of all interactions. The evolving idea is woven throughout the *Analects*, and it is with reference to this system that we use the word *authenticity* here. Thus, the explicit values of *Lǐ* 禮 – such as loyalty, filial piety, moderation, integrity, which are at their basis *expressions of respect* – are inseparable from the mode of their pursuit – such as everydayness, learning, self-cultivation, which are at their basis *consequences of authenticity*. This establishes the grounds for the core of Confucian *Lǐ* 禮 – its meaning – a principle that establishes the self in a reciprocal relationship. We will call this "Existential Reciprocity".

2 The Self and *Lǐ* 禮

We turn to the core of *Lǐ* 禮: its meaning of authentic respect in an encounter, and the implied consequences for the self.

A common theme of the *Book of Rites*' detailed rituals and customs is *distinction*. Postures and positions, robes, caps and belts, ritual utensils and architectures, in short, all aspects of culture, served to encode the distinct position one would take with respect to another.²⁷ The goal of making such distinctions explicit is to take utmost care not to intrude on another's domain, and thereby to support the transparent actualization of everyone's role in a complex social hierarchy. Such distinctions are an expression of the underlying non-oppositional dualism: though differentiation is important, everyone is part of the same system and it is the function of the system that is supported, not distinction for its own sake. Acknowledging one's mutual relationship is an act of respect and Confucius notes a tight coupling between respect and propriety: "Respectful but without *Lǐ* 禮 is mere drudgery, ... [恭而無禮則勞.....]" (*Analects* 8.2)". If respectful behavior does not serve to express propriety, nothing of value can be derived, however demanding the act may be.²⁸ "Forming

²⁷ C.f. in particular Chapter 10 "Ritual Utensils" (*Lǐ Qì* 《禮器》) and Chapters 1 and 2, "Daily Rituals" (*Qǔ Lǐ* 《曲禮》).

²⁸ Confucius' disciple Yǒuzǐ (有子) expresses a similar sentiment: "... without the meter of *Lǐ*, [harmony] cannot proceed. [...不以禮節之, 亦不可行也。]" (*Analects*: 1.12), i.e. it is *Lǐ* 禮 that gives structure to efforts (cf. Section 2.1 of Chen & Steipe, 2022b).

the core of propriety”, and “being structured by propriety” is not a tautology however, but reminds us that the *Li* 禮 are not arbitrary. They express purposeful distinctions that – in just analogy to Kant’s metaphysical categories – make social order intelligible.

But respect in an encounter has a significant implication: it results in a mutual constitution, both the condition and result of a unification of the concepts “self” and “other”. Let us begin by examining the implications of the concept *respect* in this context.

2.1 Implications of “Respect”

Even today Immanuel Kant’s (1724–1804) treatment is fundamental to our understanding of ethics in philosophy. Kant’s ethics is considered to be “deontological”, i.e. “justified by duty and obligation”, and respect (*Achtung*) is a pivot of Kant’s analysis. Confucianism too is considered “deontological” (e.g. Wawrytko, 1982, 243), thus we ought to ask how one relates to the other. Let us return to the meaning of respect for ethics, and its relation to the *Li* 禮 of the *Analects*, after spelling out some implications that entail from the idea of *respect*.

Respect is a feeling²⁹ that concerns a self-other relation. To respect the *other* means to acknowledge the other’s value, and to judge this value to be at least equal, relative to the *self*. Thus, a feeling of respect has a complex cognitive interpretation: it brings the self and the other into a commensurable domain;³⁰ its inherent judgement triangulates both self and other in a network of relationships;³¹ and the resulting relationship becomes recursive.³² Through the implied gesture of judging the self, to extend respect means to engage in an *encounter*,³³ a meeting in which the self opens to comprehend

²⁹ For a recent overview of the relationship between feelings and emotions, see Scarantino and de Sousa (2018). We take *feeling* to mean the object-directed, cognitive perception of an emotional state; whereas an *emotion* is an innate, physiological response, an affective program that is in congruence with our current state of being.

³⁰ The evaluative component of respect implies a comparison, and comparisons can only be made between commensurables. Extending respect thus asserts a shared category. Confucius expresses such commensurability as *inclusiveness*, literally an encircling gesture: “The gentleman is inclusive, there is no discrimination. The petty man discriminates, there is no inclusiveness. [君子周而不比，小人比而不周。]” (*Analects* 2.14).

³¹ A judgement, comparison, or evaluation with the self, which already is located in a network of relationships, results in the implicit evaluation of one’s entire network of relationships. As a result, a subjective evaluation of the self in the world – i.e. self-esteem – is always implied by respect. In contrast, most other feelings entail binary, qualitative relations that have only the singular self for reference.

³² The *other*, being respected, becomes more worthy of respect. The *self*, being respectful, becomes more worthy of respect. That makes the respect extended to the other more valuable. This cyclical relationship is recursive, since each of its components is contained in the other. Obviously, this does not continue *ad infinitum* but converges to some point. Like with many other aspects of the mind, the recursive constitution of this process is a source of complexity.

³³ Psychology and philosophy use the term *encounter* with a similar emphasis that is distinct from its dictionary meaning of a meeting that is case by case unexpected, brief, or adversarial. For example, in Person-centred Psychotherapy, a school of the humanistic approach to therapy, in particular associated with Carl Rogers (1902–1987), a genuine, dialogical “encounter” means to acknowledge the other and comprehend their personhood, as opposed to reducing them to observed behaviour and the resulting diagnostic categorization (see Lambers & Thorne, 1998). In philosophy, the term carries the essence of Martin Buber’s distinction of the *I-It* and the *I-Thou* relationship (Buber, 1923/1995). The *I* in these two archetypes of relationship is in fact not the same: in the *I-Thou* relationship, the *I* undergoes constitution: “I come into being by Thou. [*Ich werde am Du.*]” (ibid. 13). Buber’s understanding of such reciprocal becoming culminates in his exclamation: “All real life is encounter [*Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung*]” (ibid.). In suspending any ulterior motif, purpose or pursuit of utility, Buber’s encounter of the *Thou* resonates with the Kantian definitions of both ethics and aesthetic beauty.

the other in both absolute and relative terms – i.e. not merely as an abstract concept, but with reference to one's own, personal self – and in doing so, the self emerges changed. Thus, respect has *presence* and *passage*, it manifests an active relationship with a *You*, never merely a passive conjunction with a *He/She/It*.

It is significant that the other's value is presumed to be high in absolute terms as well as relative to the self. Encountering the other in a gesture of humility and self-deprecation merely sets the self below the other; it does not of itself value the other. Only respect that is based on confident self-esteem achieves this: rather than stooping low, such respect raises the other high, a gesture that is uplifting, not cowering. Self-deprecation in fact becomes disrespect; it is one's own sense of worth that makes respect meaningful. This resonates with the Confucian emphasis on learning and self-cultivation. Such self-cultivation leads to justified self-esteem, which – through respect – is not expressed as privilege, but as an attitude of responsibility.³⁴

Moreover, respect needs to be authentic, or it is not respect. Confucius exclaims: “The challenge is the countenance! [色難!]” (*Analects* 2.8) when explaining the essence of respectful filial piety: merely behaving in a filial way is not enough, respect must come from the heart, and become expressed in sincere emotion. This follows from the nature of respect, any pretence would exclude the self from the encounter, an encounter however requires not only the presence of the self, but its willingness to change. Without participation of the actual self, there is no encounter at all. Similarly, Kant emphasizes the necessary failure of all morals that derive from anything but the self's autonomous expression of its reasonable will (GMS, AA IV, 433).³⁵ Therefore, a search for an external justification of respect, counter to one's innate perception, is fallacious. Whereas the idea that something could properly be owed respect in and of itself might have merit, that insight cannot entail it actually being respected by the self, here, and now. Even properly “owed” respect cannot be enforced. The consistent grounds for respect can only ever be intuition.

Thus, though respect is accessible to introspection and cognitive evaluation, its cognitive aspect is a consequence of intuition, respect itself is not subject to intent. One consequence that we have explored elsewhere (Chen & Steipe, 2022a, b), is that authentic respect, like other feelings, cannot be commanded or externally imposed. This places firm bounds on the role of morality in ethics, in particular, an externalized “duty” to respect would be self-contradictory: understood at this higher level, Confucius' philosophy is not “deontological” at all.

³⁴ The relationship of self-cultivation and self-esteem is expressed throughout the *Analects*, where it is personified in the *gentleman*, the role model of excellence. More explicitly, this is the topic of the following conversation: “Zi Gōng asked: ‘Poor, yet not servile, rich, yet not haughty, will that do?’ The Master said ‘Quite so. Still better is: poor, yet joy in the *Dào* 道, rich, yet love of the *Lǐ* 禮’. [子貢曰:「貧而無諂, 富而無驕, 何如?」子曰:「可也。未若貧而樂道, 富而好禮者也。」]” (*Analects* 1.15; cf. Ni, 2017, 92). Considering the opposites and parallels, both servility and haughtiness are inappropriate conduct; finding joy in the natural progression of things, and a love for propriety, are both appropriate. Whereas cultivated conduct is the basis, a composed personality is the purpose – achieved through serenity by the poor, or through refined propriety by the rich.

³⁵ Kant's works are quoted with reference to the pagination of the *Akademieausgabe* (AA, “Academy Edition”) of his collected works, cited with abbreviation, volume and page. GMS is the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1785/1900). Convenient access to Kant's works is provided by [Korpora.org](https://korpora.zim.uni-duisburg-essen.de/Kant/verzeichnisse-gesamt.html) (<https://korpora.zim.uni-duisburg-essen.de/Kant/verzeichnisse-gesamt.html>).

But if morality, i.e. a prescription of moral behavior by some authority, is not compatible with the respect expressed in the *Li* 禮, does this mean that Confucian ethics stands in opposition to Kantian philosophy? In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* [GMS]), Kant first asserts that action for the purpose of a particular result has no intrinsic moral value, since the outcome of the act, whether desirable or not, is contingent, whereas a moral value ought not to be (GMS, AA IV, 397 f.). Therefore, moral value must be based on a “higher” goal and that can only be the *Gesetzmäßigkeit* (the conformity with a principle, or law)³⁶ of the will to act, in particular the maxim which he expresses as “I ought never to proceed otherwise than so that I could also wish that my maxim ought to become a general principle. [*ich soll niemals anders verfahren als so, dass ich auch wollen könne, meine Maxime solle ein allgemeines Gesetz werden.*]” (GMS, AA IV, 402). This maxim is categorical and universally valid, since it derives from a self-evident fact about the very nature of cognition: the autonomy of the rational will. This autonomy in turn entails from the fact that the will of a rational mind is itself the source of any principle it submits to, since will as an entity of the domain of the mind operates under the freedom of thought (GMS, AA IV, 448ff.). One needs to be careful at this point, since translating Kant’s term *vernünftig* by “rational” introduces an inappropriate bias: the English “rational” implies a process of quantitative evaluation, whereas “*vernünftig*” is more generally “reason”: the capacity to think via proposition and implication, i.e. to apply insight to causality, which Kant – along with his other “categories” – sees as prior to our ability to make sense of the world in the first place.³⁷ Kant’s definition of “good” is thus based on first principles, whereas for Confucius it is derived from the ultimate goal of embodying respect, and its outcome of a harmonious society. Respect, however, is an instrument for Kant, his path to Good is to conform to the duty implied by respect for the moral law. This requires consideration.

First, Kant’s *Pflicht* is only approximated by the English word “duty”: “action and conduct due to a superior”, or “that which is owing to any one”, or “an obligation” (OED). Kant develops the term in detail (GMS, AA IV, 397 f.) due to its central importance: duty already comprises the concept of the will to Good, thus, duty is to be esteemed without intent of purpose, and duty reflects a crucial aspect of the mind in the first place, it attends the “natural, sane mind [*den natürlichen, gesunden Verstand*]” (ibid.), therefore it “does not as well require instruction, but rather only explication [*nicht sowohl gelehrt als vielmehr nur aufgeklärt zu werden bedarf*]” (ibid.). Thus, Kant’s *duty* is personal, autonomous, and based on insight, not intimidation: “Duty is the necessity of an action from respect for the principle. [*Pflicht ist die Notwendigkeit einer Handlung aus Achtung fürs Gesetz.*]” (GMS, AA IV, 400). Such duty expresses a necessity, like a law of nature, it is entailed by the realization that respect for a principle

³⁶ Much misunderstanding is due to the common translation of German *Gesetz* as “law” since this has a normative, even legal connotation in modern English usage. What Kant means is unequivocally not a legal norm, but a principle that is entailed directly by the way things are, a law of ethics in the same way that Kepler’s laws about planetary motion are laws of nature, and Aristotle’s law of non-contradiction is a law of logic. Kant designates his moral principle a law of autonomy (*Gesetz der Freiheit*) in his preface to the *Groundwork*, thus characterizing the science of ethics to operate on the domain of the mind. His moral principle is necessary, not imposed.

³⁷ This is a crucial distinction, since being rational is not a categorical precondition of cognizing the world, but employing reason is.

necessarily directs one's action; obligation – though it may exist – plays no significant part in this.³⁸ Further, this respect is ultimately respect for autonomy which is an *a priori* consequence of reason, since the autonomy of the will is the source of the (moral) principle. This cannot be emphasized enough: far from demanding subjugation under a norm – whatever that norm's utility or benevolence may be – Kant rigorously excludes any obligation that derives from anything but one's own, reasoned autonomy. And understood at this higher level, Kantian Philosophy too is not “deontological” at all, rather, just as the core of Confucian thought, it too is founded on autonomy.

Fundamentally both converge on the same: the good is inherent in the way the world is, whether recognized as its *Xing* 性 (nature, character, essence), as in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, or in the metaphysical categories that make such essence appear intelligible to reason in the first place; and to pursue the good is a matter of cultured and cultivated intuition, not intent.³⁹

2.2 The Relational Other

But there is one more aspect of authentic respect that we need to clarify before we can turn to its consequences: respect is relational, so who is being related? In a key passage of the *Analects*, Confucius defines the required attitude of personal engagement in sacrificial rituals: they are to be performed *as-if* (如) the deities are in presence:

祭如在，祭神如神在。子曰：「吾不與祭，如不祭。」

Sacrifice as if there is a presence, sacrifice to a deity as if the deity is there. The Master said: “If I would not participate in the sacrifice, it would be as if I would not sacrifice [at all].” (*Analects* 3.12)

Significantly, this *as-if* attitude does not aim to confirm the existence of deities (or ancestor spirits); it simply assumes their absent presence. Such rites do not aim to influence the supernatural, their aim is to support the self in managing its manifold societal relationships – in utmost sincerity.

Peimin Ni quotes the Sòng 宋 dynasty Neo-Confucian scholar Chéng Hào 程顥 (1032–1085) who comments that this position is inwardly reverent and outwardly appropriate (Ni, 2017, 121). This sentiment supports authenticity under all conditions, and thereby makes the self independent of external circumstances: respect can always be found; it is not contingent on the actual merit of the other. That is not to say that everyone is to be treated equally: those who are overtly incapable of conducting themselves in propriety would be excluded – i.e. the pervasive *petty man* (小人) of the *Analects*. However, apart from this qualification, the strength of basing the relationship on *Lǐ* 禮 is that the question about the actual moral accomplishments of the

³⁸ The difference in emphasis is inherent in the etymology: “duty” derives from Old French *due*, ultimately from Latin *debere* (to owe), whereas *Pflicht* derives from a West-Germanic root of uncertain provenance, visible in old English *plihtan* (to endanger), which survives in the English “pledge”, and its derived sense of German *pflügen* (to nurture, to tend, to care, and to cultivate). The Confucian *Lǐ* 禮 is closer to this latter understanding.

³⁹ The necessity of *Lǐ* 禮 and its manifestation in the nature of things converge in Confucius exclamation “Would that I need not preach! ... Does *Tiān* 天 preach? The seasons progress and all things grow – does *Tiān* 天 preach? [予欲無言。……天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？]” (*Analects* 17.19).

other becomes ill-posed: as the ceremonial *Lǐ* 禮 makes clear, the *Lǐ* 禮 are not performed for the benefit of the other, they are for the benefit of the self. All that is required is to perform them authentically, to the utmost best of our ability, *as-if*.⁴⁰ Respect the other *as-if* that respect were justified; all the benefits will ensue. This puts the self in complete control. Indeed, Confucius states: “Is *Rén* 仁 far? I wish *Rén* 仁 – Ha! It arrives. [仁遠乎哉? 我欲仁, 斯仁至矣。]” (*Analects* 7.30).

Not only does this intuition bypass the need for metaphysical abstraction,⁴¹ it also makes the philosophy accessible to direct experience.⁴² Indeed, Confucius’ disciples comment on how he *embodied* his principles in practice in minute expressive gestures, as if in theatric performance (*Analects* 10.1 to 10.5). For example: “Holding the jade tablet [of accreditation as his sovereign’s envoy], he bent as if burdened. When raising it, it was as if bowing, when lowering it, as if presenting. His expression tensed as if going into battle, shuffling his feet as if bound. [執圭, 鞠躬如也, 如不勝。上如揖, 下如授。勃如戰色, 足蹢蹢, 如有循。]” (*Analects* 10.5). One cannot escape the image of the *Nō* dancer’s *suriashi* (すり足, sliding (lit. rubbing) feet), a central aspect of the dancer’s art (cf. Berberich, 1984, 211f), refined in years if not decades of practice. These details are not whimsical embellishments, but speak to how Confucius expressed status, role, and inner attitude in an effective, non-verbal fashion that not only displayed but *constituted* the ceremony. The *Lǐ* 禮 both elicit emotions, and channel them into a feeling of meaningful respect; thereby, the dichotomy between inclination and necessity is resolved. Whereas for Kant “Respect [is] the notion of a value that diminishes my self-esteem [*Achtung [ist] die Vorstellung von einem Werthe, der meiner Selbstliebe Abbruch thut*]” (GMS, AA IV, 401), Confucian self-cultivation and respect are one.

2.3 The Relational Self

If the respect-relation can be directed towards a worthy other, *as-if*, there is every reason to allow it to originate from a worthy self, *as-if*. Indeed, such an assumption of virtue – a type of fictionalization – is a well-recognized function of ceremonial attire, masks, performative roles and the like. But in the same spirit as what was said above, *as-if* does not mean to pretend, but to experience, and therefore the impact of the ritual on the self is just as real as the devotion that is brought to it, and its consequences can persist. Thus, virtue is no longer innate, an aspect of an exalted elite, desirable, but unattainable. This virtue can be achieved and respect opens a path.

Far from being a mere matter of semantics, the unification of respect with the self provides a justification for the pursuit of the good in a synthesis that is complementary

⁴⁰ Note that through emphasizing the effectiveness of *as-if*, we are not referring to a “subjunctive world” that is proposed by recent scholarship. For example, Seligman et al. (2008, 8) assert that a moral obligation is imposed through rituals in daily life: one would hardly refuse when “please” and “thank you” are used in communication. However, such use of *as-if* is an expression of polite manners, rather than the principle of *Lǐ* 禮 that we discuss here.

⁴¹ This does not mean that active participation is democratized, specialized technical learning of *concepts* is merely replaced by learning of proper *conduct*. An emphasis on such learning as a value in and of itself is found throughout the *Analects* and elsewhere.

⁴² *Xúnzǐ* 《荀子》 has: “Not hearing is not as good as hearing, hearing is not as good as seeing, seeing is not as good as knowing, knowing is not as good as practicing. [不聞不若聞之, 聞之不若見之, 見之不若知之, 知之不若行之。]” (“Rú Xiào” in *Xúnzǐ* 《荀子·儒效》).

to both Kant's reason and Confucius' virtue, yet materially different from both: we call this Existential Reciprocity.

2.4 Existential Reciprocity

In his influential work on aesthetics and Chinese philosophy, *In Praise of Blandness* (1991/2008), François Jullien introduces the *Analects* as representative of a philosophy whose aesthetics appears simple, tastes “insipid”, yet “can give rise to the richest variations and the farthest-reaching applications” (Jullien, 1991/2008, 33). He contrasts his view with Hegel's criticism of Confucian philosophy, who dismissed Confucius as “a sort of subaltern Cicero” (29): “Cicero's *De officiis* may well be more valuable and of greater interest to us than all the books of Confucius combined, for these latter are very thin and watered-down, like books of moral sermons” (30). This is a striking misunderstanding, since Hegel criticizes an aspect of early Confucian philosophy, the “absence of [metaphysical] speculation” that is actually one of Confucius' great achievements: “The Master keeps silent on the nature of things and the way of heaven. [.....夫子之言性與天道，不可得而聞也。]” (*Analects* 5.13).

Notwithstanding the orientalist polemic, Hegel however does contribute a crucial element to our analysis of the consequences of authentic respect, and that is the *constitutive* potential of a dialectic relationship. In his “Autonomy and dependence of self-consciousness; Lordship and Servitude”,⁴³ a section of *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (*Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 1807), Hegel develops the paradox of a self (i.e. consciousness) that inquires about itself, and then posits the implied respective inward and outward movements of cognition against each other to ask about the conditions and consequences of their *Aufhebung* (sublation): “Self-consciousness exists *within* and *for itself* [authors' emphasis],⁴⁴ through and from being within- and for itself for an Other; ... [*Das Selbstbewußtsein ist an und für sich, indem und dadurch, daß es für ein Anderes an und für sich ist; ...*]” (1807, 145). In a highly abstract, yet ultimately metaphorical development, Hegel pictures this reciprocal inward and outward motion of consciousness as two independent selves, engaged in existential struggle: the inward inquiring self as lord, independent, and acting “for itself”, the other, its servant, looking outward, existing from “within itself”, yet existentially justified only in answering to the former. In Hegel's myth, a mortal struggle ensues in which each of the two risks their existence in a quest to dominate the other. Through servitude, the servant constructs the very world in which the lord exists, he who was existentially justified only in answering to the lord becomes the very condition of the lord's existence. In this sublation, self-consciousness is achieved.

⁴³ The title of this section in Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* has been translated elsewhere as “Lordship and bondage”; it is also known as “Master-Slave Dialectic”, neither of these two is a satisfactory translation of Hegel's “*Herrschaft und Knechtschaft*”.

⁴⁴ Note that the German idiom “*an und für sich*” can be translated “in and of itself” – but not in this case: Hegel literally speaks about its two separate components: “in itself” and “of itself”. However, the English “of” itself implies an outward direction, exactly opposite to the German “*für sich*”, “for itself”.

The similarity to the effect that the authentically respectful encounter has for the self is obvious. The self serves the encounter, the encounter affirms the self – neither can truly exist without the other. But rather than emphasizing conflict and struggle, as Hegel does, we see such Existential Reciprocity as a virtuous cycle in which both movements strengthen and actualize each other. Just as in the ultimate acquisition of self-consciousness, the respectful encounter cannot take place without a respecting self, the self in turn needs “self-respect” to support its respect of the other. But respect specifically means to grant the other a higher value than the self, augmented with the highest self-respect – ideally, but not necessarily, based on *Rén* 仁 and expressed as *Lǐ* 禮. The resulting mutual elevation is a virtuous cycle, possibly culminating in becoming a *gentleman* but with immediate and tangible benefits for the self. A poignant example is given in the discussion of funerary customs in Chapter 3 “*Tán Gōng*, Part One” (*Tán Gōng Shàng* 《檀弓上》) of the *Book of Rites*: “While the *gentleman* feels lasting respect, yet there is not a single day in which he is troubled [故君子有終身之憂，而無一朝之患。]” (*Book of Rites*, 3.9). In embodying *Lǐ* 禮, the self becomes unassailably constituted.

This is one view of Existential Reciprocity: the process of a mutual becoming of both self and other in a respectful encounter that is structured through propriety.

A complementary view arises from the shared experience of existence. Seen that way Existential Reciprocity becomes an awareness of existential relatedness of self and other, to which the self responds with propriety, which in turn becomes self-respect.

The former definition emphasizes the *becoming*, the latter emphasizes *being*. *Lǐ* 禮 is constituted of these two contrasting perspectives, and through *Lǐ* 禮 they mutually reinforce each other. Significantly, such mutual reinforcement could not result in a relationship in balance, if not for some counteracting tendency. However, such tendency should not be sought in *disrespect*. Kant faced a similar issue when considering the mutuality of both love and respect in friendship. Here, Kant employed a metaphor: love entails proximity, respect motivates distancing, and just as in a physical model of attraction and repulsion, a stable equilibrium ensues. Whereas we consider the metaphor to be limited – we consider love and respect as largely orthogonal,⁴⁵ in particular, our account of respect does not entail *distancing* – the problem of maintaining a proper balance is real and needs to be addressed. The obvious candidate is *distinction*, in particular the kind of distinction that underlies social roles. Whereas Existential Reciprocity provides an impulse towards parity, the endorsement of social roles balances it. Indeed, the affirmation of distinctions through the manifold overt expressions of *Lǐ* 禮 is a significant part of self-cultivation.

The benefits derived from social order are outwardly apparent, though they are contingent on the outcomes of actions. But from the perspective of Existential Reciprocity, a path to self-cultivation, enhanced self-esteem, and ultimately to fulfillment

⁴⁵ A similar conclusion is reached by Marguerite La Caze who contrasts Kant’s treatment of love and respect with Luce Irigaray and other continental authors to point out issues with Kant’s metaphor (La Caze 2005, 95), and proposes a more prominent role of love in ethics.

has its own, inherent and immediate benefits. Those benefits are non-contingent, they derive from the act of being respectful itself and they are profoundly different from the kind of external recognition or reward in which the benefits of ethical behaviour are commonly framed. In this sense, authentic respect has an aesthetic interpretation: the recognition of an essence, independent of any practical utility.⁴⁶

Whereas we might think of ethics as depending on a rational foundation – a set of concepts that are mentally manipulated, expressed through language with the goal of discourse and convincing others by argumentation – here we have a philosophy that is based on intuitive if not innate understanding, a set of values that direct specific behavior, expressed in symbolic gestures with the goal of refining the self in its relationship with others. Yet, despite the profoundly different origin, we observe a deep congruence between such intuition towards social order and personal harmony, and the foundations of the analytical approach to enlightenment. The age-old question of human nature appears ill-posed in this light. We are not by nature good or bad, we are socially conditioned, and recursively constituted. Thus, our self is not predetermined. In the framework of Existential Reciprocity, we find that we can choose to be “good”, and become good, and authentically so.

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Appendix: Structure of the argument

Confucianism is founded on the concepts of *Rén* 仁 and *Lǐ* 禮, which jointly define the virtue and duties of its practice. But joining virtue and duty creates a paradox: the virtuous need no reminder of their duties, but the iniquitous cannot be virtuous merely by imitating the *Lǐ* 禮. Our argument shows how the paradox can be reconciled if an actor authentically engages with a virtuous act; that virtue can be constituted in such a situation; and, that the benefits can obtain from such authentic engagement itself and are not contingent on its circumstances or consequences.

The role of the *Lǐ* 禮 is to provide a condition for social harmony.

⁴⁶ This echoes Kant’s definition in his *Critique of Judgement* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, KU, Kant 1790/1900): “Beauty is the form of an object’s fitness for purpose, in as far it is perceived without conceiving its utility. [*Schönheit ist Form der Zweckmäßigkeit eines Gegenstandes, sofern sie ohne Vorstellung eines Zwecks an ihm wahrgenommen wird.*]” (KU, AA V, 236).

When the natural social cohesion of the age of Grand Unity decayed, the Sage Kings of the age of Minor Prosperity deliberately and cautiously performed *Lǐ* 禮 to regulate society. This rested on their personal embodiment of the principles. Though this concerns an apocryphal Golden Age, Confucius considers this to be a matter of life or death.

The essence of *Lǐ* 禮 is fully contained in (i) a dualist, non-oppositional, non-dichotomous cosmology that defines the principle of a natural order, (ii) the categories of relationships that ought to be ordered according to those principles, and (iii) the insight that practice of *Lǐ* 禮 must align (and derive from) innate needs.

Confucius recreated the *Lǐ* 禮 from those first principles, with reference to an apocryphal Golden Age; and he found that knowledge about their cosmological roots and the categories of their occasions was sufficient for him to do so. Because they apply over several ages of the past, they represent a natural cultivation of ethical universals. Therefore, guidance from past examples is valid. Because they express ethical universals, they reflect innate aspects of what we mean by “human”. Since these aspects are innate, they can be accessed from introspection.

The *Lǐ* 禮 comprise a cultural tradition that includes explicit guidance for behaviour, as well as ritual patterns that provide access to an intuitive comprehension of the meaning of such behaviour.

Intuitive access resonates with the inherent nature of the foundations of *Lǐ* 禮; through everydayness the patterns become truly one’s own.

The role of the *Lǐ* 禮 is also to provide a condition for personal harmony, which develops in an authentic engagement of the self with its precepts.

Social harmony and personal harmony exist in mutual interdependence. An excellent society rests on excellent individuals; therefore the *Lǐ* 禮 could not be effective unless they concern themselves with the personal self. Such harmony derives from self-improvement and is based on self-cultivation; both are based on *authenticity*, which for Confucius is a system that comprises *loyalty* (忠), *trust* (信), *as-if* (如), and *reciprocity* (恕).

The *Lǐ* 禮 express purposeful distinctions that – in just analogy to Kant’s metaphysical categories – make social order intelligible. Fundamental to both everyday behaviour and ritual is an attitude of authentic respect.

Authentic respect is an encounter. Being an encounter, it involves the self, receives the other, and accepts the resulting change. Being respectful, it includes a presumptive judgement of the other, and therefore a judgement about the self. A modified self, as a result, can only arise in an authentic gesture in which the self actually participates, and this excludes pretence.

Authentic respect can involve a fictionalized other – *as-if*.

The possibility of encountering a fictionalized other places the encounter wholly under the control of the self, and guarantees autonomy.

Authentic respect can involve a fictionalized self – *as-if*.

The possibility of placing a (fictionalized) virtuous self into the encounter entails the possibility of the encounter becoming constitutive of virtue; it provides a path to virtue.

Self-cultivation and respect within the context of *Lǐ* 禮 may mutually enhance each other in a virtuous cycle. We call this Existential Reciprocity.

Respect for the *other* means to presume the other to have a value that is high, and at least equal to the *self*. As a consequence, self-cultivation enhances respect, and the ability to respect contributes to self-cultivation. An enhanced self is brought into existence as a result of such reciprocity.

This understanding characterizes ethics that are virtue based without ignoring the outcomes, fulfil duties but are not coercive, and provide inherent, beneficial consequences to the self while being considerate of others.

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