

CONFUCIUS AND THE EFFORTLESS LIFE OF VIRTUE

Hagop Sarkissian

Life is complex. Human beings typically require years of guidance, rearing, and correction by others in order to navigate the social world with any degree of proficiency, and even with considerable experience it remains likely that one will encounter awkward situations, face conflicting social or moral demands, or be unsure of what how to act or what to feel. Hence, while it may seem attractive to live a life full of spontaneity and natural ease, the facts of social life seem to preclude this possibility.

The wonderfully terse biography of Confucius in *Analects* 2:4 suggests otherwise.¹ After a prolonged period of learning and cultivation, Confucius achieved a state of advanced virtuosity, allowing him to assent to his emotional prompts without hesitation and without encountering friction or resistance by others:

The Master said:

At fifteen I set my heart on learning;

At thirty I took my position [in society]

At forty I had no doubts

At fifty I understood the commands of Heaven

At sixty my ears were attuned

At seventy I could follow my heart's desires without transgressing norms.²

Confucius, by all accounts, was not a recluse. Hence, the passage implies that (a) Confucius set his mind on a course of study or cultivation at the age of fifteen, (b) pursued such studies for a span of fifty-five years, and (c) was thereby able to cultivate a state of being such that he could follow his immediate inclinations in all of life's predicaments without transgressing social norms.

Trusting, for now, that this is not a vacuous boast, and assuming the ideal of living naturally worth emulating, we shall examine the *Analects*

to see if it contains any plausible program of learning that would allow one eventually to act according to inclination without transgressing norms. When viewed in the context of recent developments in moral psychology, Confucius's emphasis on *emotional* education seems the most promising source for attaining such an ideal (though ultimately it remains just that—an ideal).

I. THE LIMITS OF PROPRIETY

The best place to start is with *li* (禮) or ritual propriety, Confucius's greatest preoccupation and the foundation of his virtue curriculum. Of course, Confucius was not solely occupied with *li*. His curriculum also included the study of music, poetry, archery, and history, all considered important to cultivating virtue; but owing to restrictions in space, we shall concentrate on propriety. Not only does it feature prominently in the *Analects*, but observing ritual propriety is distinguished from the other disciplines insofar as it emphasized (among other things) *social intercourse*. Social exchanges were considered imperative to the cultivation of virtue, for Confucius believed virtuous conduct requires not only proper emotions and character but also something akin to “mind-reading” (discussed in section IV, below).

The *li* comprised religious rites (ancestor worship) and formal ceremonies (weddings, funerals), as well as the manners and customs, the strictures and prerogatives, the protocols and functions of each social, political and familial station. The *li* would indicate, for example, appropriate dress for ceremonial occasions, as well as appropriate conduct for a father or a son. Strict compliance with such conventional rules of propriety was, however, inadequate for a virtuous life. In fact, stringent attention to rules of propriety could be offensive (3:18). Confucius recognized a wide gap between observing propriety and acting virtuously, the latter requiring, in addition to *formal* compliance, the following qualifiers:

- (a) The individual must observe propriety with appropriate dispositional attitudes; there must be an emotional “presence” (3:12, 3:26). Emotional authenticity trumps procedural formality (3:4, 17:11).
- (b) Propriety must be observed effortlessly, naturally, and spontaneously; the virtuous exemplar will not appear “troubled” (9:28, 14:30).³
- (c) Finally, there is the matter of matching propriety to occasion, for which there is no algorithm. Knowing when to observe propriety—and when *not* to—was requisite to the exercise of virtue.

Familiarity with the rules of propriety was an important start, but only that; for the social world is neither straightforward nor routine, and much human intercourse falls outside the immediate scope of propriety. Worse still, the demands of propriety may conflict in certain situations, and figuring out whether some ritual is more appropriate or whether it requires modification or when no ritual fits at all requires skill. In sum, the infinitely complex configurations of the social world require highly particularized responses, leaving mastery of ritual propriety inadequate to constitute (by itself) the whole of virtue.

Rituals and Emotions

For Confucius, observing ritual propriety was clearly something more than mimicking gestures and following rules. The point of observing ritual propriety was rather to discipline oneself (for example, 6:27, 12:15) and thereby cultivate or shape virtuous *emotions* such as love, reverence, humility, gratitude, faith, and loyalty. In the absence of ritualized human interaction, Confucius believed basic emotions might compromise social harmony (for example, 8:2). Then again, assiduous practice risked overrunning the nascent propensities of the heart-and-mind. “When substance (*zhi* 質) surpasses refinement, you have a boor. When refinement surpasses substance, you have a pedant. When substance and refinement are proportional, you have an exemplary person (6:18).” The aim, then, was to strike a balance.

This causal relationship between observing propriety and shaping emotion is patent and widely acknowledged.⁴ Thus, Confucius’s preoccupation with observing ritual propriety points to a parallel preoccupation with *emotions*. Why such emphasis on emotions?

The Proper and the Appropriate

Virtuous exemplars are characterized by Confucius as those who “in making their way in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate (*yi* 義)” (4:10). *Yi*, then, denotes appropriate behavior “in the vast sea of unique life situations where more often than not there is no simple ‘covering’ rule of *li*.”⁵ In this context, *yi* means something like (a) embodying the spirit of propriety, (b) conforming to one’s unique position in society, and (c) conducive to social harmony.⁶ For example, the *li* of filial piety normally requires a son to maintain a reverential and deferential attitude toward his father; however, he may also dissent if his father deviates from proper conduct. When is it appropriate to dissent? In what manner? Should the son inform other family members or keep the matter to himself? These crucial questions admit of no easy answers, and yet the absence of prescribed rules of propriety does not excuse the agent from virtuous

conduct; rather, the agent must somehow act in the “spirit” of propriety, even if this entails acting contrary to propriety.⁷ The agent must have some means to determine appropriate action.

One possibility is the use of some form of practical reasoning. Indeed, there are places in the *Analects* where Confucius advocates the use of analogical reasoning, as exemplified in the “negative golden rule” (for example, 12:2) and the virtue of reciprocity (*shu* 恕).⁸ Nevertheless, this paper is limited to explicating and evaluating the spontaneity of “Confucius at seventy,” which includes a temporal aspect anathema to prolonged reasoning or contemplation. Tu Wei-Ming, for example, describes *yi* as “a practical judgment based upon the holistic evaluation of objective conditions.”⁹ How long would it take to produce such a judgment? Is it even possible to “holistically evaluate objective conditions”? Time is a luxury often unavailable to the virtuous agent; in some situations, *any* thought would be one-thought-too-many.¹⁰ Moreover, Confucius explicitly refers to the *desires* of the heart-and-mind, which seems opposed to the notion of practical reasoning. Finally, the very progression of the biographical sketch suggests that, at the end of his lengthy period of self-cultivation, he had achieved such skill as to preclude the need for deliberation of this sort.

In the absence of reasoning—and under pressures of time—how does the virtuous agent act appropriately? Various answers have been proposed to this question, all of them indicative of an intuitive faculty. For example, Joel Kupperman believes Confucius requires the virtuous agent to “gravitate” to the appropriate action; “what he ‘feels like’ doing is what is right.”¹¹ Philip Ivanhoe calls it an “intuitive sense of the Way” (Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*, 1). It is precisely this intuitive ability that enables the virtuous spontaneity of the mature Confucius, yet how can we account for it?

There are no explicit answers in the *Analects*, but Confucius’s emphasis on emotional education suggests a possible answer. Indeed, recent developments in the philosophy of emotions and neuroscience suggest that something like “intuition” is at the very core of human reasoning and that our actions are based on and motivated by rational emotions—for Confucius, the very emotions cultivated through observing ritual propriety.

II. EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Given the paucity of textual evidence, it is difficult to reconstruct Confucius’s conception of emotional development. The most promising account can be found in *Analects* 15:18: “Exemplary persons have a sense of appropriateness (*yi* 義) at their basic disposition (*zhi* 質), develop

it through observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮), express it with modesty, and consummate it by making good on their word (*xin* 信).” Elsewhere (*Analects* 6:18), Confucius notes the need to refine or socialize one’s disposition through culture—being careful, though, not to overwhelm it. One cannot help but conclude that Confucius felt our basic emotions to be partly trustworthy, needing only refinement and exposure to other humans.

Ronald de Sousa’s account of emotional development may help complete this picture. According to de Sousa in *The Rationality of Emotion*, the basic affect-response programs and primitive instinctual responses of infants are all too raw and amorphous to count as emotions (182).¹² Instead, humans first acquire emotions in concrete episodes or “paradigm scenarios” experienced in early childhood: “The quality of every emotion is rooted in a dramatic, situation or episode type, associated with a characteristic *feel* . . . and characteristically also with components that can be identified as target, motivating aspect, and motivational aim.”¹³ Thus, an essential part of emotional education consists in being attentive to natural or “genetically programmed” reactions in the child and naming these reactions within the context of the concurrent scenario, thus teaching the child that it is experiencing a particular emotion (de Sousa, *Rationality of Emotion*, 183). In these scenarios, we likely learn not only our roles but those of the other participants as well. Because of this, the normative enters irreducibly into the very fabric of the psychological at this constituent phase of our emotional education, as our responses can be subject to correction or disapproval (de Sousa, “Emotions, Education and Time,” 440).

Emotions are thus forged when instinctual or biological responses are fit into social “stories,” which ultimately define the meanings of the emotions themselves. At this point, we may be tempted to equate paradigm scenarios with Confucius’s *li*, but that would not be quite right. For de Sousa, the emotions forged in these early paradigms affect the nature of later episodes; they are not the end product of one’s emotional education, but rather its foundation. They afford us with some prototype emotions keyed to certain social situations or configurations. These foundational emotions are similar to what Confucius referred to as one’s *zhi* (質)—basic substance or disposition. However, since these emotions come first, they enjoy ontogenetic privilege and will necessarily affect the way we react to future situations. At times previously learned reactions will align with future situations; at times, they will not. Superficial similarities in context can elicit emotional reactions that may be inapt. Only through further experience and education can one’s emotional prompts hope to be fine-tuned so as to transcend their prototypes and align correctly with the immediate social context. As de Sousa puts it, “[T]he principal

achievement of emotional life is one which paradigm scenarios make *possible*, at the same time as they constitute an obstacle to its full realization. It is an ability to transcend emotional repetition, and achieve genuine emotional connection with the present” (“Emotions, Education and Time,” 445). Confucius might paraphrase along these lines: “The principal achievement of a virtuous life is one which our original dispositions (*zhi* 質) make possible, at the same time as they constitute an obstacle to its full realization. It is only by refining (*wen* 文) these dispositions through participating in social rituals (*li* 禮) that emotions enable one to connect appropriately (*yi* 義) with the present.”

III. INTELLIGENT EMOTIONS AND REASONED INTUITIONS

Already implicit in Confucius’s account is that our nascent dispositions have access to values and that one’s education serves primarily to guide and refine them. Indeed, several philosophers now employ the basic hypothesis that emotions are modes of perception, presenting the world to us as value-laden.¹⁴ Accordingly, our emotions are not indiscriminate responses to random external triggers but instead perceive relatively objective values (relative insofar as they are meaningful only to humans and human life). Emotions are thus sensitive to *axiological* information and, as with other modes of perception, are “passive.”¹⁵

De Sousa believes emotions solve the “philosophers’ frame problem,” which may be characterized as follows: Out of the potentially infinite number of facts that may be relevant to formulating our present actions, how are we to choose the relevant ones? How are we to remain undistracted by irrelevant facts? Practical reasoning is insufficient for the task, and de Sousa, as explained in *The Rationality of Emotion*, believes emotions fill the gap; they perceive values and control their salience, channelling attention to what features of the situation are most important. Moreover, the “narrative” aspect of emotions highlighted by de Sousa suggests how emotions are also connected with certain paradigmatic outcomes. When emotions draw attention to values in the situation at hand, these values are not divorced from a narrative context. Certain outcomes are already prefigured at the moment of detection, an insight common to many thinkers in early China. “The Chinese assumption is that action starts from spontaneous motives and that before asking ‘What shall I do?’ I am already being drawn in one direction or another.”¹⁶

We find a similar account in Antonio Damasio’s persuasive somatic-marker hypothesis in *Descartes’ Error*. According to Damasio, as the reasoning process begins the mind is “replete with a diverse repertoire of images, generated to the tune of the situation you are facing, entering

and exiting your consciousness in a show too rich for you to encompass fully” (169). Each of these images (we might say “latent responses”) will, as a result of learning and experience, be marked with a certain qualitative feel or emotional valence (for example, “that might be good,” “this might be bad,” etc.); negative outcomes are discarded, while positive outcomes are pursued. Hence, these emotional markers work as a kind of “biasing device,” effectively limiting the possible outcomes we need consider or reason through. “There is still room for using a cost/benefit analysis and proper deductive competence, but only *after* the automated step drastically reduces the number of options. . . . Somatic markers probably increase the accuracy and efficiency of the decision process. Their absence reduces them” (Damasio, *ibid.*, 173).

We now have plausible reason to believe Confucius’s claim to effortless, spontaneous, and appropriate response. Using Damasio’s terminology, Confucius’s program of incessant self-cultivation will produce countless somatic-markers, extending the range of stimuli that become automatically marked. The accrual of these markers over time fine-tunes and *accelerates* the decision-making process; at the limit, the correct course of action would come to mind immediately, with compelling emotional valence. In completely novel situations, we may be at a loss for an appropriate response, leaving us immobile. Similarly, where social configurations trigger overlapping schemes associated with multiple markers, we may be perplexed and unsure how to react. This can occur, for example, in situations where we find individuals playing roles we are not accustomed to seeing them play or when we encounter individuals acting according to situational norms that conflict with our own. However, familiarity with a *broad* range of emotions, facilitated through exposure to literature, art, and social rituals, will allow one to perceive values in a *wide* range of scenarios, thus improving the likelihood of responding appropriately in any *particular* situation. An expansive emotional repertoire steers us away from stereotypical (we might say “ritual”) responses and allows us to respond to the particulars of the present situation (as opposed to the particulars of a merely similar situation we have encountered in the past).

This again highlights the limits of propriety, which both enables and imperils the exercise of virtue. Without participating in social rituals and conventions, a human being cannot even begin to learn virtuous conduct, yet the “ritualistic” aspect of propriety can desensitize or blind the virtuous agent to the need for particularized response.

Honing Perspicacity

Limiting ourselves to our own experiences—however broad—may tend toward subjectivity. Yet we can improve the accuracy of our emotional

responses through a method of reflective equilibrium: evaluating our emotional responses in light of other perspectives or other emotions. “To judge the validity of ordinary sense-perception, we bring to bear background knowledge, reason, logic, and corroborating or conflicting perceptions. We do the same in coming to judge of the validity of any particular emotion.”¹⁷ For example, we frequently talk about what is and is not funny, shameful, enviable, or disgusting. This shows that it matters to us whether our feelings or emotions are accurately tracking those properties or values of which they purport to be perceptions (D’arms and Jacobson, “Moralistic Fallacy,” 69). When we hear of another’s jealousy, for example, we most likely want to know what is causing the jealousy and judge its appropriateness ourselves. Instead of discussing morals (“it’s wrong to be jealous”), we discuss fit (“is there a reason to be jealous?”).

I agree with Justin D’arms and Daniel Jacobson that discourse on the fittingness of an emotion can sometimes be more effective in regulating our emotional responses than other kinds of discourse, such as moral or prudential (“Moralistic Fallacy,” 73). For example, rather than ask whether it is prudent or morally suspect to feel jealous of a successful colleague, we often discuss whether there is anything to be jealous of, whether the occurrence (or the intensity) of the emotion fits the particulars of the situation—in this case, the relative success of the colleague and what sort of relationship exists between the persons involved. Indeed, if emotions were not open to this kind of objective evaluation, we would lose the ability to have these sorts of discussions, which constitute an enormous part of our social lives.

Reading the *Analects*, one is struck by the prevalence of this practice of noting the particulars of the situation under moral evaluation and the relationships of the individuals involved. Evaluating the actions of historical figures and contemporary personages—often to determine whether they were appropriate or exemplified virtue—was an important pedagogical tool for Confucius: “Carving, polishing, cutting, grinding (1:15)—emotions are shaped through dialogue and reflection. Isolated from others’ perspectives, emotional education is handicapped; it is through juxtaposition that we inform and enhance the reflective process, sharpening intuitive faculties.

IV. MIND READING

Many will perhaps grant that intuitions, as outlined above, are reliable in familiar or ordinary circumstances. We are, after all, at an epistemic advantage when exacting highly particularized responses toward those we know well since we are conversant with their individual histories and

sensitive to their moods. On the other hand, much of our interactions involve persons whose histories and idiosyncrasies are relatively (if not completely) unknown. How reliable will our intuitions be in unusual situations? Even with an expansive emotional repertoire cultivated from diverse sources, our emotional stories may not “match” those of strangers.

This is a considerable objection. Indeed, Confucius seems implicitly aware of it, for throughout the *Analects* we find him hinting at a possible solution: mind reading. As noted at the outset, propriety requires emotional “presence” to be considered virtuous. This suggests that our emotions are, to a large extent, transparent. As D’arms and Jacobson observe, “[I]n normal human psychology . . . the relationship between feeling an emotion and expressing it—especially in involuntary behavior such as blushing, cringing, or crying—is exceedingly tight. Moreover, others are notoriously perceptive at sensing when we are inwardly amused by their plight or attempting to conceal our anger” (“Moralistic Fallacy,” 77–78). Nicholas Humphrey describes the relationship as one of “contingent correlation.”¹⁸

In several passages, Confucius directs attention to this transparency of emotions (1:3, 5:5, 5:10, 5:25, 6:16, and 8:4), and commands his disciples to remain attentive to axiological clues (2:10, 7:28, 9:24, 11:21, and 12:20). Hence, those who seek appropriateness (*yi*) “examine what is said, are keen observers of demeanor and are thoughtful in deferring to others” (12:20). By “mind reading,” then, I mean nothing more than what we engage in everyday—inferring motives, meanings, and intentions from words, gestures, and expressions.¹⁹ Virtuous conduct requires constant fine-tuning, and mind reading is indispensable in fine-tuning our interactions with others. Indeed, since ritual is itself a vehicle for expressing emotion, a sensitive practitioner of ritual will be effective at inferring the inner states of other advanced practitioners. Reading minds, in this sense, is a substantial (though overlooked) theme of the text.²⁰

There is a direct relationship between education and mind reading on one hand and cultivated intuitions on the other. Neither inborn nor the prerogative of an elite substratum of society, intuition results from practice—which is open to *anyone*; indeed, it is difficult to see how one could have any intuitions in the absence of education and socialization. Hence, those concerned with virtue risk deleterious consequences if isolated from others. In the apt words of Joel Kupperman, “[W]e take for granted the phenomenon of the literarily accomplished man who is exceedingly childish. In traditional China, such a man would be considered to represent a failure of education” (“Confucius and the Problem of Nat-

uralness,” 181).²¹ Thus, above and beyond study and reflection—both of which can be done in isolation—Confucius emphasized practice (that is, observing social rituals) and attentiveness (that is, mind reading). The resulting spontaneity is not anomalous but rather highly intelligent and sensitive.²²

V. SOCIAL MAGIC

Before concluding, we should note that Confucius believed this intuitive ability to have benefits beyond the locus of the individual; skilled virtuous exemplars will also benefit the world by “just being themselves,” as it were. Minimally, this means that we can expect virtuous exemplars to be generous, just, and helpful. However, Confucius obviously believes they effect harmony through more than concrete acts of virtue. Over and above these, they will possess a type of “excellence” or “potency” (*de* 德) to which others acquiesce. This is suggested in a number of passages in the *Analects*, for example,

The excellence of an exemplary person is like wind, the excellence of a petty person like grass. Let the wind blow over the grass, and it is sure to bend (12:19).

If for a single day one can overcome oneself and observe ritual propriety, the whole empire would defer to his humanity (*ren* 仁) (12:1).

The Master wanted to settle among the nine barbarian tribes of the Eastern Yi. Someone said, “But could you put up with their crude ways?” The Master replied, “Once an exemplary person settles among them, what crudeness could there be?” (9:14)²³

How can we account for these “magical” effects in terms of the axiological model described above? The most plausible answer is this: virtuous exemplars, finely attuned to the axiological level of reality and attentive to subtlety and nuance in human interaction, will respond *comprehensively* to the relatively objective values at play in most social situations. Whereas inexperienced and insensitive individuals will be confounded when facing an ethical dilemma, virtuous exemplars will simply “read” the situation and respond readily and authoritatively. Hence, their abilities will seem magical to onlookers. Further still, their intuitions will be supported by widespread recognition—others will “bend” to their charisma—and their very existence thereby reduces friction and effects harmony. As A. C. Graham has noted, “The ritual act, influencing through interrelations which the agents do not analyse, does have an efficacy different in kind from the act calculated as means to an end. The man of Potency [*de*] who has, not an abstract knowledge of conventions, but an effortless skill and grace in operating with them, although ‘doing

nothing,' does enhance the order around him" (*Disputers of the Tao*, 25).²⁴ Here, *pace* Herbert Fingarette, the magic is not in the ritual act itself but in the intuitive ability of the virtuous exemplar to apply rituals consistently to their appropriate settings.²⁵ For example, not every handshake is reciprocated, nor every request for assistance fulfilled, and though children are taught early on to use the magic word "please" to get what they want, they are doomed to disappointment. The efficacy of a ritual lies in its proper application.

It may be helpful to compare "ideal axiological agents" (whose responses are always spontaneous and fitting) with consummate comedians (whose jokes always get a laugh). A comedian uses scripted jokes as well as direct improvisation; yet without a keen sense of timing and the ability to read and respond to the ebb and flow of the audience's reactions, a comedian's jokes will not produce laughter. They will lack the requisite spontaneity and authenticity. The ability to know when to stick to the "routine" and when to improvise is what distinguishes *skilled* comedians from hacks. Likewise, a virtuous agent will observe conventional propriety until she senses the need to depart from the "script" and respond to the particulars of the situation at hand. Sticking to the routine will not do for great comedians, and sticking to "conventional propriety" will not do for Confucius's virtuous agent.

Notwithstanding the popular expression, "everyone" is *not* a comedian. Some people seem to be funny "by nature," just as some people seem naturally virtuous. Nevertheless, everyone possesses a *sense* of humor, just as everyone possesses a *sense* of virtue. The important thing is to cultivate them.

VI. CONCLUSION

Can self-cultivation and mind-reading lead to error-free virtue? Confucius's standard is impossibly high, and it is safe to say that the "ideal axiological agent" (or Confucius at seventy) remains a myth of ethical theory. Social values are in constant flux, and our "emotional idiolects" will have to adapt to an ever-changing axiological landscape.²⁶ Memory loss or inattentiveness will greatly affect our intuitive abilities, and tragic episodes or luring vices could unhinge or undo the best of us; even a poor diet can disrupt cognitive processes. Hence, no matter how persistently we study, how deeply we reflect, or how extensively we practice, we must always maintain an *ironic stance* toward our own emotional responses (de Sousa, "Moral Emotions"). Emotions reveal values in many situations, and we can improve our emotional responses overall. Emotions cannot, however, be made immune to error; as with other modes of perception, they are fallible. Indeed, with success, the virtuous agent is

liable to fall victim to ego or vanity or other, more benign, instances of emotional projection.²⁷ Hence, Confucius promoted flexibility, deference, and awareness of one's ignorance (for example, 9:4). Wholly trusting one's emotions requires sustained, prolonged, incessant practice. After all, it had taken "the Sage" himself over half a century. Ironic, indeed. Still, if we find it reasonable to rely on our vision even while occasionally falling victim to illusion, then we should not abandon emotions as guides to value, even if they prove fallible.

Confucius's greatest anxieties arose from his observation that social rituals—the most critical method of cultivating emotions—were on the decline, performed rarely and with neither the correct form nor the appropriate spirit. This perennial lament can be found in almost any society. Yet if we are to take the role of emotions seriously in the conduct of life and if we accept that rituals are pivotal to shaping emotions, then we might wonder, along with Confucius, how likely it is to effect social harmony in their absence.²⁸ To many, the ritual minutiae that comprise most of book 10 of the *Analects* will seem quaint at best, priggish at worst. Many of the things that Confucius saw as *ethically* significant tend to be viewed by modern people as matters of taste or style (Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*). This is true, but there is more at stake here than taste. For if the richness of our emotions is—at least in part—a reflection of the richness of the rituals we engage in, maybe he was not such a prig after all. Maybe Confucius was really on to something: that the magical realm of human intercourse is steadily eroded when we fail to observe our rituals. We hardly notice it, but oftentimes a kind smile from a friend, a playful wink from a stranger, or a meaningful handshake from a supportive colleague can completely change our attitudes. Rituals connect us emotionally, and impoverished emotional repertoires can only hinder social contact and bleed our worlds of meaning.²⁹

The ideal of emotional perfection, that effortless and unself-conscious action of Confucius at seventy, may seem daunting, even hopeless.³⁰ Notwithstanding the neat biography sketched at the outset, Confucius would largely concur: "Even with a man who urges himself on in his studies as though he was losing ground, my fear is that he may not make it in time" (8:14).³¹ Such reservations can be found throughout the *Analects*.³² Yet the ideal should not be abandoned, if only to serve as a *telos*, a waypoint to prod the weary disciple and vindicate the excruciating demands of virtue. After all, fifty-five years of self-cultivation is no sinecure.³³

Baruch College, CUNY

NOTES

1. In all likelihood, this biography was composed by later disciples. Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that all of the twenty books comprising the *Analects* contain interpolations by successive generations of disciples. Hence, some Sinologists or historians of Chinese philosophy will balk at my references to “Confucius’s beliefs” and “Confucius’s teachings” when I quote from the text. For purposes of this paper, I take the text as representative of a group of individuals who shared certain values, aims, and practices and saw themselves as expanding and elaborating on the original teachings of the historical Confucius. Thus, my references to Confucius should be understood as referring to the content of the *Analects* itself, not to any historical person.

2. Book and chapter numbers (e.g., X:X) shall be used to cite passages from the *Analects*. All translations are my own, using the Chinese text that appears in *Confucius: The Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau (Shatin: Chinese University Press, 1992).

3. Indeed, this was a broad ideal advocated by several different thinkers of the classical period. For a detailed account, see Edward G. Slingerland, *Effortless Action: Wu-Wei as a Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

4. Compare de Sousa (322): “One natural requirement to place on an emotion’s origins is that it should not merely be a *ritual*. For authentic emotion, almost by definition, is an individual response. It may be partly socially determined, but it must be *spontaneous* in the way that a ritual is not. Yet that is not quite right. For sometimes a ritual is what gives form and meaning to an emotion” (Ronald B. De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987]); the italics are in the original. Subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text. The last sentence suggests that rituals both hone emotions (we might call this their *developmental* role) and provide avenues for their expression (their *communicative* role). Philip Ivanhoe has proposed an illuminating analogy to 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” (Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Thinking and Learning in Early Confucianism,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 17 [1990]: 491).

5. Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 1985), 79.

6. The last criterion signifies a consequentialist strain in Confucius’s ethics. Indeed, according to *Analects* 1:12, “Achieving harmony (*he* 和) is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety.”

7. Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation*, 2d ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 2; subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.

8. Perceptive accounts of analogical reasoning can be found in Philip J. Ivanhoe, "Reweaving the 'One Thread' of the *Analects*," *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 1 (1990): 17–33; and David B. Wong, "Reasons and Analogical Reasoning in Mengzi," in *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, ed. Xiusheng Liu and P. J. Ivanhoe, 187–220 (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), for Confucius and Mencius, respectively.

9. Wei-ming Tu, *Centrality and Commonality* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), 52.

10. I borrow the phrase from Bernard Williams, though my usage obviously departs from his.

11. Joel Kupperman, "Confucius and the Problem of Naturalness," *Philosophy East and West* 21, no. 2 (1968): 184.

12. To a considerable extent, de Sousa's "primitive instinctual responses" are analogous to Antonio Damasio's "primary emotions" (*Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* [New York: Avon Books, 1994]) and Paul Griffiths's "affect-programs" (*What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychological Categories* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997]).

13. Ronald B. de Sousa, "Emotions, Education and Time," *Metaphilosophy* 21, no. 4 (2001): 435; subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.

14. Justin D'arms and Daniel Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy: On the 'Appropriateness' of Emotions," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61, no. 1 (2000): 65–90; subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.

15. Robert M. Gordon, "The Passivity of Emotions," *The Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 339–60.

16. A. C. Graham, *Disputers of the Tao* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1989), 29.

17. Ronald B. de Sousa, "Moral Emotions," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 4 (2001): 122; subsequent references to this work will be cited in the text.

18. Nicholas Humphrey, *Consciousness Regained: Chapters in the Development of Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 43. Some will object that emotional expression is, to a large extent, manageable. This is true. Nevertheless, it is hard to mask expressions entirely, for prior to exercising control, there is often what is called a "microexpression" or the micromomentary occurrence of a characteristic emotional response, which is *subsequently* replaced by deliberate control. See Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are*, 53. These microexpressions go largely undetected, though they are inescapable to trained eyes, such as those belonging to the redoubtable Stanley Tomkins. For his story and his relationship to Paul Ekman, see Malcolm Gladwell, "The Naked Face: Can You Read Someone's Thoughts Just by Looking at Them?" *The New Yorker*, August 5, 2002, 38–49.

19. A readable summary of Paul Ekman's pioneering work in "face reading" can be found in Gladwell's "The Naked Face." See also Griffiths's *What Emotions Really Are*, especially chapter three. A brief yet edifying account of the evolution of this phenomenon can be found in Humphrey, *Consciousness Regained*, especially chapters three and four.

20. There has been growing interest among scholars concerning this dimension of the *Analects* in particular and early Confucian thought in general. See, for example, Hahn Chaibong, "Confucian Rituals and the Technology of the Self: A Foucaultian Interpretation," *Philosophy East and West* 51, no. 3 (2002): 315–34; Edward G. Slingerland, "The Problem of Moral Spontaneity in the Guodian Corpus," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (2008): 237–56; and Mark Csikszentmihalyi, *Material Virtue: Ethics and the Body in Early China* (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007), especially chapters 2–4.

21. Damasio elaborates on this theme: "We all know persons who are exceedingly clever in their social navigation, who have an unerring sense of how to seek advantage for themselves and for their group, but who can be remarkably inept when trusted with a nonpersonal, nonsocial problem. The reverse condition is just as dramatic: We all know creative scientists and artists whose social sense is a disgrace, and who regularly harm themselves and others with their behaviour. The absent-minded professor is the benign variety of the latter type" (*Descartes' Error*, 169).

22. R. Jay Wallace has outlined two models of intuition: a "connoisseurship" model and a "rational intuitionism" model. See his "Virtue, Reason, and Principle," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (1991): 469–95, especially 484–89. Wallace compares virtue connoisseurs to wine connoisseurs, which is entirely apt, though we must emphasize that wine connoisseurship is not inborn talent but a cultivated faculty, requiring lessons, tutelage, and years of training and practice. Presumably, this intensive training allows the connoisseur to (a) immediately grasp whether the wine is good or not and (b) articulate the reasons why. "Connoisseurs" are thus able to provide justification for their discriminations—which have normative force—whereas "rational intuitionists," for reasons unspecified by Wallace, are unable to do so. The intuitionism of this paper, grounded in intense training and heightened sensitivity, would not seem to leave the agent at a loss to account for her intuitions. Hence, it seems closer to the "connoisseurship" model just outlined. There is more to be said about Wallace's stimulating article, though restrictions in space do not allow for it. For an edifying assessment of Mencius's ethics using Wallace's framework, see Eric Hutton, "Moral Connoisseurship in *Mengzi*," in *Essays on the Moral Philoaphy of Mengzi*, ed. Xiusheng Liu and Philip Ivanhoe, 163–86 (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing 2002).

23. Confucius's comments about the barbarians convey a deep-felt optimism about the universality of virtues. For example, *Analects* 13:19 suggests that all humans—even recalcitrant barbarians—will recognize and respond to virtues such as deference and respect: "Be deferential at home, handle public affairs

respectfully, and do your utmost in your relationships with others. Even if you were to go and live among the Yi or Di barbarians, you could not do without such an attitude.”

24. Of course, there are other aspects of the virtuous exemplar that might have a transformative effect on others, such as acts of kindness that lead to reciprocating acts of kindness or acts of good will that lead to reciprocal acts of good will.

25. See Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), especially the first chapter.

26. The term “emotional idiolect” is from de Sousa, *Rationality of Emotion*, 258.

27. Note as well that the virtuous exemplar may be tempted to use her “magical powers” of intuition and mind reading for personal gain. Therefore, the consummate individual “on seeing a chance for profit will think of appropriate conduct” (14:12).

28. David Wong has discussed the need for shared rituals in fragmented liberal democracies in “Harmony, Fragmentation, and Democratic Ritual,” in *Civility*, ed. Leroy S. Rouner, 220–21 (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000).

29. In this light, the consistent erosion of both the quality and quantity of humanities-based education has grave implications.

30. De Sousa’s assessment of a similar ideal at the end of *The Rationality of Emotion* is hardly encouraging. See especially 332–33.

31. The translation is from *The Analects*, trans. D. C. Lau (London: Penguin Books).

32. Did Confucius consider himself an exception to this rule, or is his self-assessment at seventy mere show? Neither answer seems plausible. (Indeed, he emphatically rejected any claim to be “gifted” or born with knowledge—for example, 7:20). Hence, my own interpretation is that, in the face of persistent questions from his disciples (who must have looked to him as some kind of magical master), Confucius wished to emphasize that his considerable virtue *was a product of education*. In other words, while this paper has focused on the last line of the biography, he would rather draw attention to the first: “At fifteen I set my heart-and-mind on learning . . .”

33. My thanks to Ronald de Sousa, Marion Hourdequin, Eric Hutton, Donald Munro, Ted Slingerland, and David Wong for insightful comments on previous drafts of this paper.