

# IN DEFENSE OF RITUAL PROPRIETY

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**Abstract.** Confucians think ritual propriety is extremely important, but this commitment perplexes many Western readers. This essay outlines the early Confucian Xúnzǐ's defense of ritual, then offers a modified defense of ritual propriety as a real virtue, of value to human beings in all times and places, albeit one that is inescapably indexed to prevailing social norms in a non-objectionable way. The paper addresses five likely objections to this thesis, drawing on but going beyond recent Kantian defenses of courtesy and civility. The objections concern cultural relativity, insincerity, separating style from substance, elitism, and possible incoherence in the virtue itself.

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is difficult for contemporary Westerners to comprehend the intensely serious concern early Confucian texts display for *lǐ* (禮), customarily translated as “ritual” or “rites” when referring to the practices involved, and “ritual propriety” when referring to the virtue of performing those practices well. In what follows I first lay out what I take *lǐ* to be, then explore both why the early Confucians (i.e., those referred to as *Rú* in Chinese sources) care so much about it, and why until recently contemporary Western philosophers seemed to care so little. The situation has changed, however, with a spate of thoughtful and compelling essays, often from a Kantian perspective, arguing for the moral importance of courtesy, civility, and/or politeness as crucial ways to express obligatory respect for other people. Building on this work, I argue that ritual propriety is a real virtue (actually a complex of skill and virtue), of general value to human beings in all times and places, albeit one that is inescapably

indexed to prevailing local social norms in a non-objectionable way. I draw primarily throughout from the thought of the early Confucian Xúnzǐ (3rd century BCE), who provides arguably the most systematic justification for ritual in the early Confucian textual corpus.

## II. CONFUCIAN RITUAL PROPRIETY

The word *lǐ* (禮) in classical Chinese has both narrow and wide senses. Its narrow sense covers the sorts of practices generally referred to by the English “ritual”: for example, sacrifices to honor ancestors, mourning rituals, court ritual regulating the interactions of lords and ministers, rites of passage into adulthood marked by ceremonial donning of the appropriate hat, and marriage rites. But often *lǐ* has a much broader sense, far beyond the usual meaning of “ritual,” and includes all matters of interpersonal etiquette as well as personal appearance, deportment, dress, and speech; it also refers to proper behavior during musical performances, hunting trips, chariot driving, battle, and various communal dances, meals, and festivals, among other activities. The word thus covers all aspects of appropriate interpersonal behavior and regulates how all the most significant human practices are conducted.<sup>1</sup>

*Lǐ* thus includes both a wide range of specific *rules* that regulate practices and behavior, as well as what might be called “the spirit of the

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<sup>1</sup> Early Rú sources (i.e., “Confucian” texts from the Warring States [403-221 BCE] through the Hàn [202 BCE-220 CE] eras) contain a wealth of discussion of *lǐ*, but English language interpreters of the tradition habitually ignore many of the relevant texts, focusing only on the *Analects*, the *Mèngzǐ*, and the *Xúnzǐ*, supplemented in the recent past by archeologically recovered texts from the Warring States and Hàn eras. Despite this, the tradition as it developed at the time lavished attention on ritual, compiling and carefully transmitting textual materials as expansive and varied as *The Rites of Zhōu* (周禮), covering the supposed governmental organization of the revered Zhōu dynasty; the text now known as *Ceremonies and Etiquette* (儀禮), which describes in detail the ceremonial life of members of the *shì* 士 class, which was made up of the minor aristocracy and literate government functionaries; *The Record of Ritual* (禮記), a vast collection of texts mostly related to ritual, often (despite the title) providing more theoretical analyses than simple descriptions of ceremonies, although a fair number define technical ritual terminology; and the *Elder Dài’s Ritual Records* (大戴禮記), a more fragmentary collection from later in the Hàn dynasty. For English language overviews of these texts’ contents, composition, and textual history, along with fuller bibliographical references, see Loewe 1993. Judging by the effort expended on these texts and their commentaries, as well as the attitudes toward and discussion of ritual practice in the *Analects*, *Mèngzǐ*, and *Xúnzǐ*, *lǐ* was judged to be of critical importance by the early Confucians.

rules,” the guiding values that ritual practice is supposed to cultivate and exemplify. This spirit often seems to hinge on a sense of appropriate, refined *style* for action – a way of doing things that incarnates ritual propriety – and so includes but goes beyond explicit rules for action that can be written propositionally. The fundamental character of Confucian ritual propriety might be summarized as acting in a way that is respectful, deferential, or even reverent toward others, depending on the nature of one’s relation to them; restrained, formal, and generally but not always serious; alert and self-possessed; and caring and solicitous, incarnating the crucial virtue of benevolence. Ritual presumes a richly articulated and hierarchically differentiated society, with a variety of specific stations and relationships, both familial and extra-familial, all deserving of appropriate recognition and respect.

For example, in Book 10 of the *Analects*, the text depicts Confucius in the following way: “At court, when speaking with officers of lower rank, he was pleasant and affable; when speaking with officers of higher rank, he was formal and proper. When his lord was present he was cautious and alert, moving slowly and gracefully” (10.2); and “He would not sit down unless his mat was straight [or: correct]” (10.12). These depictions of the master may be read as counsel or even as strict injunctions, but what they suggest are as much a way of feeling and acting as they are a set of straightforward physical maneuvers to fulfill. As Confucius himself remarks sarcastically when discussing proper filial behavior, “Nowadays being ‘filial’ just means being able to provide food to one’s parents; but even dogs and horses are provided with food. If you are not respectful, where is the difference” (2.7)? In the next passage, responding to another disciple’s questions about filiality, he says: “What is difficult is the expression on one’s face. If there is work to be done, younger brothers and sons will do it, and when there is food and wine to be drunk, elders are given precedence, but can this be all that is meant by filiality” (2.8)? In other words, certain respectful actions to serve others are required by ritual, but performing such acts is only the beginning. One must do them out of a feeling of genuine concern and respect, or even love when serving one’s parents, and display the proper physical comportment and facial expression so that others see what is motivating the ritual actor. Anything less does not fully exemplify virtue or the Way. Ritual, in this conception, is both a presentation of the self as virtuously caring, and a way of properly treating and often serving others.

Why the early Rú should care as much as they do about ceremonies, interpersonal etiquette, and carefully styled performances of care and respect, however, has continued to baffle contemporary Western interpreters. Consider a story from the *Mèngzǐ* that the text tells twice for similar purposes (3B1 and 5B7). Defending his own fastidiousness in refusing to meet with rulers who summoned him without appropriate ritual politeness, *Mèngzǐ* says:

Once, Duke Jǐng of Qí was hunting, and he summoned a gamekeeper with a plumed staff. The gamekeeper did not come, so the duke was going to have him executed. Kǒngzǐ commented, ‘an intent noble does not forget that he may end up in a ditch. A courageous noble does not forget that he may lose his head.’ What did Kǒngzǐ find commendable in the gamekeeper’s action? It was that he would not come when it was the wrong kind of summons. (5B7)<sup>2</sup>

After a brief discussion of the proper way for a duke to summon a gamekeeper (with a leather cap), as well as the signals for other sorts of people, *Mèngzǐ* echoes Kǒngzǐ and lauds the gamekeeper’s resolve to risk his life over this point of protocol. He concludes his argument by saying that “Wanting to consult a worthy person without using his Way to do it is like wanting someone to come in but shutting the door in his face. Righteousness (*yì* 義) is the road, and ritual (*lǐ* 禮) is the door. Only a noble person is able to follow this road and go in and out through this door” (5B7). *Mèngzǐ* here presents ritual as the means by which one *joins* or *enters* the Way, the path of righteous living, and as something absolutely required for interpersonal communication and activity with those who are good. The deeper implication is that ritual is something cultivated human beings must constantly practice in order to actually fulfill the deeper demands of righteousness or justice (*yì* 義).

*Mèngzǐ* here quite clearly makes ritual as essential to the Confucian Way as a righteous concern for morality and justice, but even a reader as perceptive as Van Norden finds this stance, the resultant praise of *Mèngzǐ* and Kǒngzǐ, and the willingness of the gamekeeper to risk his life for such a point of etiquette, to be baffling, in need of creative interpretation. Van Norden suggests that given the cultural significance of ritual at the time, such a maneuver might be a way of recalling the Duke to his own role specific responsibilities, and thus “taking a stand ... against the unlimited

<sup>2</sup> Translation slightly adapted from Van Norden (2008: 140). For another version of this story, as Van Norden notes, see *Zuǒ Zhuàn*, Duke Zhāo 20 (Legge 1872: 684).

authority of the duke” (Van Norden 2008: 140). But in Mèngzǐ and even Kǒngzǐ’s eras, sticking up for the importance of ritual in all situations was a rearguard, conservative stance, trying to insist on something that was no longer widely practiced, and so such an interpretation seems anachronistic at best, even while it captures the moral significance of the gamekeeper’s action well. Van Norden also suggests that Kǒngzǐ’s praise “may be intentional hyperbole” of this “humble official’s quixotic fastidiousness,” designed to inspire others who are tempted to violate more serious principles (Van Norden 2008: 140). While this is certainly possible, I think we can make good sense of the text as a straightforward endorsement of the critical value of ritual in human life. It is also worth noting that the gamekeeper is risking only his own life, not anyone else’s, and Mèngzǐ elsewhere implies that it is obvious that one should suspend even basic ritual rules (such as the requirement that men and women not touch each other in public) to save someone else when his or her life is in jeopardy (4A17). For the Rú, such “discretion” or “weighing” (*quán* 權) of situational factors in the implementation of ritual requirements is a crucial aspect of practical wisdom. Mèngzǐ and other early Confucians clearly distinguish between taking a principled stand for ritual, even at great risk to oneself, and foolish or quixotic punctiliousness.

Despite this, it is no surprise that Van Norden and other contemporaries see such ritual behavior as extreme and misguided. While earlier Western thinkers as familiar as Kant and Hume thought such matters very important, etiquette in particular has come under sustained attack since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, in a way that has undermined and denigrated it as a self-conscious human concern (at least in the modern West). As Amy Olberding has argued, elite Europeans from the Renaissance to the French Revolution used to care a great deal about etiquette, ceremony, and public ways of recognizing and honoring people, but philosophers in particular no longer explicitly attend to these realms of social life as genuinely important and valuable, with rare exceptions. Olberding suggests that a number of factors contributed to these shifts: rapid economic changes destabilized class structures and allowed previously “common” people to seek higher social status by adopting the manners of their supposed superiors; literature on etiquette both reflected and contributed to these trends, and in effect “feminized” the concern with manners, as a responsibility of ambitious Victorian wives, rather than elite male moral theorists discussing the virtue of courtesy; and moral theory itself became ever more concentrated on autonomy, so that

respect for authority became internalized as respect for one's own rational judgment, and respect for cultural traditions of appropriate behavior came gradually to seem backward, unjustified, and far less serious than morality itself. At the same time, Romanticism celebrated strong and "authentic" feelings against traditional or rational restraints on its expression, for example through seemingly insincere politeness; and Europeans became ever more aware of the diversity of human cultures, which undermined the authority of particular cultural traditions of etiquette as local and hidebound.<sup>3</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that etiquette (and by extension the Confucian concern for "ritual" that includes it) has seemed to many contemporary ethicists to be parochial, unserious, and simply not as significant as true, universally and rationally binding moral obligations. And yet, this "modern" conception of morality has been under sustained attack for several decades now, often by those espousing what has come to be called virtue ethics, whose advocates have hoped to articulate a more capacious conception of ethics as concerned with all of life, rather than focusing solely on obligations founded on respect for autonomy or the principle of utility.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps partly inspired by these developments, multiple philosophers in the Kantian tradition have over the last fifteen years begun to argue that obligatory respect for persons as ends in themselves morally *requires* agents to act politely when addressing others. Only in this way can people properly respect others as ends in themselves.<sup>5</sup> Before delving further into this literature, however, let us first examine early Confucian justifications for ritual.

Early Confucian sources clearly regard ritual as crucial to human flourishing, although they frequently simply display this conviction, without arguing for it. When they do explain ritual's importance, their arguments tend to cluster in two areas. First, several texts exemplify

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<sup>3</sup> On these matters, I have been instructed by Olberding's fascinating work (2014), as well as the responses to her paper by participants, especially Dean Zimmerman, at the 2nd Rutgers Workshop on Chinese Philosophy in 2014. For a historical overview of these issues, which argues that Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son* (1774) was the last "courtesy book" that fused what now look like the separate subjects of morality and courtesy, see Curtin 1985.

<sup>4</sup> The classic statement of this dissatisfaction is Anscombe 1958. Other monuments to the trend include MacIntyre 1984 and Williams 1985, among many others. There are of course a variety of efforts to add nuance to obligation-centered accounts of morality, for example through the ranking and analysis of "prima facie" duties.

<sup>5</sup> For exemplary studies in this vein, see Buss 1999, Calhoun 2000, and Stohr 2012.

a broad sense of ritual as something that should pervade the whole of life, shaping not only special ceremonies, but also all matters of personal appearance and deportment, including dress, speech, and action, as well as the interpersonal etiquette governing all social interactions. This vision is most obvious in the *Analects* and the *Xúnzǐ*. Second, recent scholarship has articulated an alternate tradition of Confucian ritual theorizing that stresses the uniqueness of particular ceremonies as distinct from everyday life, which is visible in parts of the *Lǐjì*, or *Record of Ritual*, as well as the excavated text *Xìng Zì Mìng Chū* (性自命出: “[Human] Nature Emerges from the Decree”).<sup>6</sup> In these texts, ritual provides a kind of perfected alternative world where humans can act “as if” all were beautiful, harmonious, and orderly, even though everyday social and political life falls far short of these ideals. While both of these justificatory strategies are worthy of attention, I here focus on the first, which aims to have ritual pervade social life and transform the character of that shared existence. The fullest, most explicit defense of this sort of vision can be found in the *Xúnzǐ*.

*Lǐ* (禮) plays many roles in *Xúnzǐ*’s social thought.<sup>7</sup> On the individual and familial levels, it is a method for personal formation and moral development, as well as a way of expressing and effectively implementing one’s just treatment of and benevolent care for others. Ritual is also an essential basis of state power and genuine political authority, *Xúnzǐ* thinks, because it is much more effective at knitting the people and government together than mere regulations or threats of force. It does this by cultivating trust and mutual goodwill among the populace, as well as confidence in the social order itself (15/72/9-12).<sup>8</sup> Ritual also disciplines elites, training them into responsibility for the common good, and shaping the competition for status and honor in socially beneficial directions, while also moderating elite consumption of resources and leading to more just distributions overall (10/42/23-29, 10/43/9-16).<sup>9</sup> On *Xúnzǐ*’s account ritual even governs the harmonious interrelationship

<sup>6</sup> For discussion, see Puett 2008 and 2010, Seligman et al. 2008, and Ing 2012.

<sup>7</sup> The next five paragraphs are adapted from Stalnaker 2006.

<sup>8</sup> References to the *Xúnzǐ* are given in the form chapter/page/line, and refer to the ICS Concordance Series version of the text (*Xúnzǐ* 1996). Translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> I here gloss over details in *Xúnzǐ*’s account of the *relation* of ritual to other methods of administrative control that he advocates, such as regulations and punishments. For discussion, see especially Sato 2003, as well as Stalnaker 2012.

of humanity with heaven and earth, i.e., the natural environment; it is the linchpin of what P. J. Ivanhoe has called Xúnzǐ's "grand ecological vision" (2014). In sum, for Xúnzǐ, ritual is the key to harmonious and flourishing life, both human and non-human. It orders human life, shaping agents' motivations into more virtuous and refined forms, and moderating conflicts over resources and prestige so that we may live together in fruitful harmony. It is thus his general prescription for the misrule, unrest and chaos of his age.<sup>10</sup>

Xúnzǐ clearly conceives of *lǐ* in the pervasive sense outlined above. He writes:

When all exertions of blood and vital energy, intention, and reflection follow ritual, then order will permeate [the community]; if they do not follow ritual, then there will be agitation and chaos, [alternating with] slackness and laziness. If people's eating and drinking, clothing and dwelling, and movement and stillness follow ritual then they will be harmonious and moderate; if not they will be offensive and excessive, producing illness. If people's expression and appearance, bearing and deportment, approaches and withdrawals, and walk follow ritual, then they will be elegant; if not they will be arrogant and obstinate, low and wicked, common and wild. Thus people without ritual will not live, undertakings without ritual will not be successful, and states and families without ritual will not have peace. An Ode says: "Rituals and ceremonies completely correct, laughter and talk completely appropriate." This expresses it. (2/5/12-15)

What now seem to be fundamentally optional matters of personal aesthetic taste are for Xúnzǐ bound up in an integrated order encompassing personal and communal life as well as the ecology of our environment. Clear and correct standards for such things are available and can be known – human existence should be *yǎ* (雅), "elegant," and manifest *wénlǐ* (文理), "refined form and good order."

But how could anyone think that attending to one's manner of walking, one's clothes and abode, could be so essential that without it we cannot live as human beings? Obviously Xúnzǐ recognizes that many in his own day lacked correct ritual deportment and yet survived.<sup>11</sup> Xúnzǐ's point is more subtle. He thinks that to have a truly humane existence,

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<sup>10</sup> In what follows I concentrate on the first person perspective, but Xúnzǐ is at least as interested in an objective, 3rd person perspective on ritual's effects on social order. On these issues, see especially Sato 2003.



that is, one properly regulated by and as far as possible incarnating ideals of goodness and beauty, we must have ritual in his wide sense. Why? On Xúnzǐ's account, to flourish as human beings we need to live in community with others. To achieve this we must have good social order, he thinks, and to be orderly, hierarchy must be involved. In order for such an arrangement to be based on more than fear and intimidation on the one hand, and/or greed on the other, it needs to develop and rely on other emotions and desires: respect for the truly worthy, love for one's family, and loyalty to good leaders. But since on his account our raw dispositions are relatively better suited to being ruled by fear and greed, work must be done to heighten other sensibilities and reshape our dispositions.

This is where ritual as a practice of personal formation fits into Xúnzǐ's view. Through imitating classical models in the details of life, both personal and interpersonal, Xúnzǐ thinks we can cultivate the refinement, sensitivity, and subtle judgment of the sagacious Zhōu kings. When much of our existence is ritualized in this way, we are then sharing a superior form of life. Our every gesture and word is pregnant with meaning, beautiful, and appropriate. At the same time, this habitation of classical forms serves as a training in virtue by developing one's "taste" for the delights of good form in many aspects of life, and slowly retraining one's dispositions accordingly.

Although the two sorts of practice differ in various ways, Xunzian personal formation through ritual seems to share significant commonalities with the process of becoming an excellent musician or dancer.<sup>12</sup> In such practices, one must learn many basic rules and learn how to execute certain sorts of movements – and, eventually, performances – so that they are beautiful and good according to the standards of the practice in question.<sup>13</sup> Several related things happen

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<sup>11</sup> Xúnzǐ does appear to think that the moderation essential to a ritualized existence is much healthier, in a psychophysical sense, than a life without ritual, which would be marked by erratic excesses and deficiencies.

<sup>12</sup> These ideas are hardly original; on these issues, I have learned the most from conversations with Jack Kline. For other accounts that make similar points, see e.g., Lai 2003; Kline 1998; Ivanhoe 2000: 6-7, 29-37; and Kupperman 1968 and 2002.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that early Chinese thinkers, like many ancient Greek philosophers, did not see the "beautiful" and the "good" as separate categories of evaluation. For the Greeks, what is *to kalon*, "fine," is both good and beautiful. Similarly, for Xúnzǐ what is *měi* 美 is both good and beautiful. I thank P. J. Ivanhoe for comments on this issue.

as practice deepens. As one gains greater expertise, one begins to understand the rationale for aspects of the practice that initially seemed arbitrary, painful, or irritating. Skill of this sort, however, is just as much physical as mental – one learns how to play the violin beautifully with one’s fingers and hands as much as with one’s mind; one learns with both body and mind how to move smoothly and easily through various sorts of ritually regulated interactions. One also comes to appreciate better the subtleties that differentiate poor, middling, and fine performances. In the case of Xunzian ritual, a student must develop facility with appropriate speech, allusion and phrasing, bodily movement, and facial expression. One must also be both able and disposed to use these abilities in a timely and sensitive way, responding to subtle cues from others both artfully and effectively. In tandem with this growing sensitivity, one gradually develops what can only be called artful style in one’s practice, although here again there would presumably be a range of achievement. Perhaps most crucially, as ritual mastery increases, one gradually delights more and more in the beauty of the art one is creating through performance, and in one’s own and others’ abilities to perform so well.

Such delight reflects and relies upon an appropriately cultivated sensibility about human action and behavior. This cultivated sensibility suggests that ritual as a whole could also be compared to cooking, in that it makes an art form out of everyday activities, providing a tradition through which one can demonstrate one’s refinement to others, precisely as one honors and serves them in pleasing ways. And while there are many cookbooks filled with explicit rules and directions, these are only the scaffolding on which true mastery can be developed, which goes far beyond rule following. This cultivated stylistic sensibility surfaces most notably when rituals must be adjusted, or when a novel situation occurs that requires an improvisatory response to unusual circumstances or conflicts. Such a response can take the form of what appears to be unprecedented symbolic actions that reflect concern for the dignity and importance of others, as well as crucial values like loyalty, trustworthiness, or benevolence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> For an example, see *Mèngzǐ* 4B24, where an archer refuses to kill his master’s master with his own *dào* of archery, despite being on an official mission ordered by his king; instead, the man knocks off the tips of several arrows, fires them off into the sky, and returns home. Although this example comes from *Mèngzǐ*, given Xúnzǐ’s emphases on both refined form and the cultivated ability to respond to unprecedented changes, this seems like the sort of behavior he would approve.

For Xúnzǐ, then, the word *lǐ*, or “ritual,” refers to a widespread set of social practices, the skill or art of performing those practices well, and the virtue of understanding how and desiring to be ritually proper in one’s interactions with others, and even in one’s activity when alone (3/11/4-12). Ritual propriety is an essential art of living well, on Xúnzǐ’s account. It makes it possible to treat others as they should be treated, and to take effective leadership roles in communities and organizations. It knits groups together by making justice more fully beautiful and attractive, and provides a widely shared language of interaction to express benevolence and respect. It is a skill of performance, as well as a virtue, something that people master only over time via assiduous practice, with the help of teachers who are demonstrably much better at ritual than beginners are.

### III. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

Kantian defenders of polite behavior generally argue that the forms of etiquette, when properly understood, are effective, culturally sanctioned ways of expressing the respect and care due to other rational beings as ends in themselves. They communicate respect even more effectively than would explicitly telling someone “you have dignity.” The authority of the “principles of manners” underlying specific etiquette rules is thus a specifically moral authority, compelling the allegiance of thoughtful people. These principles of mutual respect also help to sort out which social conventions deserve more observance and which less, and guide people as they make exceptions to common rules in unusual circumstances (e.g., Stohr 2012: 20-34).

Xúnzǐ clearly considers the dictates of ritual to be morally right in a very similar manner. He speaks frequently of *lǐyì*, ritual and morality, as a compound, and argues explicitly that this integrated system of social norms is necessary for humans to live in harmonious order, rather than chaos (e.g., 23/113/3-14, 9/39/1-13).<sup>15</sup> Ritual, in other words, provides specific guidance that reflects the broader values and aims of morality, on Xúnzǐ’s account. It is worth noting that for Xúnzǐ, one of the primary purposes of social order is to appropriately recognize moral merit, so that society’s hierarchy is morally just, and thus acceptable, indeed admirable, to the human beings who must live within this order

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<sup>15</sup> The best overview of Xúnzǐ’s conception of *yì* is Hutton 1996.

(9/39/1-13). As I explore more fully below, Xúnzǐ's emphasis on what is often called proportional equality (i.e., that each person is evaluated and rewarded impartially, in accord with their achievements and deserts) generates intriguing differences with Kantian accounts of politeness that aim to recognize and sustain a more egalitarian vision of moral equality between rational agents who are all equally dignified members of the "kingdom of ends."<sup>16</sup>

This general approach, justifying politeness as morally obligatory respect for persons, allows both Kantian defenders of politeness, and neo-Xunzian defenders of ritual propriety, to respond convincingly to three common objections to etiquette conventions. The first centers on the cultural relativity of etiquette. A critic might ask how any culturally relative practice, such as bowing, or shaking hands while looking someone in the eye, or wearing a suit to a job interview, or saying "please" and "thank you" at the dinner table, could be morally obligatory, when in other cultures different procedures are required. In brief, a defender of ritual could reply as follows. The principles of respect for persons that make up good manners are instantiated as differing conventional modes of expression in various cultures. Precisely because such conventions should be widely shared in a given setting to function properly as expressive ways of communicating respect, one is indeed bound to follow the local conventions for such expression, even with the knowledge that such conventions vary almost as much as the conventions regarding human languages. While this response does not dispose of all interesting and problematic boundary cases, it does show that what is at issue in real disputes about conventions of polite behavior, such as European disputes about women choosing or being required to wear a veil in public, is a serious underlying disagreement about morality itself; the cultural variability of etiquette is not in itself a problem.<sup>17</sup>

Another common criticism of the value of politeness is what might be called the "style vs. substance" objection, which could be put as follows:

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<sup>16</sup> For a helpful overview of differing conceptions of equality, see Gosepath 2011.

<sup>17</sup> See Stohr 2012: 23-42, for a helpful discussion of these and related problems raised by this justificatory strategy. Xúnzǐ is of course not nearly as cognizant of cultural diversity as Stohr is, and he generally considers ritual propriety to be a universal standard, from general principles of respect for the holders of social positions and roles, to specific injunctions and requirements. But a neo-Xunzian defense of ritual could I think accept this strategy without real difficulty, and argue for the moral superiority of specific points as needed.

morally obligatory respect and benevolence require only saying and doing the right things, not doing them in a particular way, as politeness or ritual propriety dictate. The specific *manner* of respecting or caring for others is, in other words, morally irrelevant, and thus hardly obligatory. As Sarah Buss argues, however, this misunderstands human beings by failing to notice that we are embodied, social creatures who are richly attuned to each other's subtle bodily and emotional cues, which etiquette aims to cultivate and use for good. As Xúnzǐ argued long before, Buss (1999) notes that conventions of polite behavior train us to see each other as beings worthy of respect, cultivating appropriate feelings that can track our considered judgments about how people should be treated. Not only that, but "caring" given without appropriate politeness is at the very least ambivalent, and often harmful, because of the rudeness with which needed (or even unneeded) help is offered.<sup>18</sup> Effective beneficence requires accompanying ritual propriety to succeed. Reflecting on the value of ritual propriety helps us to see what is wrong with unnecessarily brusque caring for the sick, for example, and highlights the difficulties of properly expressing sympathy for others' distress. Skillful politeness is required to carry out such actions well.<sup>19</sup>

A third objection is also easily defused. A critic of politeness or ritual propriety might argue that propriety requires insincerity or even hypocrisy, which is bad, since propriety demands that we act as if we care about and enjoy each other even when we do not. Such performances do violence to our true feelings, which ought to be expressed, according to this sort of criticism. Xúnzǐ (and Kǒngzǐ) agree that the best ritual action is fully sincere, reflecting the true, virtuous feelings of the participants. But Xúnzǐ explicitly allows for a desirable form of emotional insincerity when less than fully virtuous people comply with the requirements of ritual. Such compliance with conventional expressions of care and respect is good because (1) it effectively cares for and respects others, treating them as they deserve to be treated; and (2) it accurately reflects the agent's considered commitments to the value of respect, beneficence, and ritual propriety, even if his or her disordered feelings or desires do not fully match this commitment. The objection presumes that one's immediate

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<sup>18</sup> Margalit 1998 makes this point well. I thank P. J. Ivanhoe for this reference.

<sup>19</sup> Buss is particularly alert to the way in which the moral requirements of respect and care provide grounds for criticism of existing etiquette conventions. Following Kant on perfect and imperfect duties to others, Stohr 2012 separates her discussions of respect (20-42) and beneficence (114-131), but makes similar points.

feelings deserve more respect and obedience than one's considered choices and aspirations, which is a peculiar stance to take, especially if one thinks, like Xúnzǐ, that full human virtue requires assiduous effort and practice to cultivate. Contenance need not be the enemy of virtue; on a Xunzian account of personal formation, it is a necessary stage on the way toward virtue. And thus the sort of insincerity practiced by aspirants to ritual propriety is both socially beneficial and morally admirable.<sup>20</sup>

More intriguing problems start to arise when we consider objections that show some of the differences between Xúnzǐ-inspired ritual propriety and Kantian politeness. A number of problems coalesce around the charge of elitism. It may seem that many etiquette rules either aim, or effectively function, to distinguish social elites from those with less status, despite the moral irrelevance of such degrees of status. Elaborate Victorian table settings, for example, seem to require considerable wealth to even set, and the sort of dinner parties that include silver fish forks and crystal goblets for wine can only be enjoyed by the wealthy and their guests. Anything of this sort must be optional at most, a reasonable person might suppose.

Stohr argues compellingly that such rules for table etiquette are relatively unimportant, except insofar as they express and cultivate the virtue of hospitality (2012: 147-165). She also makes the astute argument that the purpose of politeness is to make others feel welcome and comfortable, and even more importantly, to reinforce the moral equality of all human beings. Thus she argues that scolding others for misusing forks (or similar "mistakes") is in fact a notable form of rudeness, as an attempt to assert social dominance and put others at a disadvantage (Stohr 2012: 32-36, 147-148). While Xúnzǐ agrees that specific ritual injunctions gain their point as part of a practice that cultivates and expresses both virtue and good social order, he is not exactly a Kantian with regard to moral equality.

Like other early Confucians, Xúnzǐ contends that all human beings have equal moral potential, but he thinks there are significant differences

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<sup>20</sup> Stohr (2012: 70-91) makes similar arguments in more detail, drawing in interesting ways on the sociology of Erving Goffman. For an argument that Kantian liberals must engage in various kinds of hypocrisy as they support a tolerant regime, see Judith Shklar's analysis of liberal hypocrisy, which she classes as a tolerable "ordinary" social vice (1984: 45-86). I thank P. J. Ivanhoe for reminding me of this discussion. For an analysis of how the complex legacy of Augustine led to modern Western anxieties about hypocrisy, see Herdt 2008.

in the degree to which different people realize this potential through personal commitment and practice (23/116/13-14; 8/33/18- 8/34/9). There is thus a hierarchy of moral achievement, according to Xúnzǐ, and one of the primary purposes of ritual and morality is to appropriately recognize and reward the “worthy” (*xián* 賢), and distinguish different classes or grades of people (19/90/3-5). Indeed, Xúnzǐ argues that the ability to draw distinctions, and consequently order ourselves socially, is the defining characteristic of human beings:

What makes human beings truly human? I say it is because they make distinctions .... Now the *xīngxīng* ape resembles a human being in form; it too is a featherless biped. But the noble man sips *xīngxīng* soup and eats *xīngxīng* meat. Therefore, what makes human beings human is not that they are featherless bipeds; it is because they make distinctions. Even though there are parents and offspring among animals, they lack the proper affectionate relationship between father and son, and though there are males and females, they lack the proper separation between the sexes. Therefore among human ways of life none lack distinctions. Of distinctions, none is more important than those concerning social hierarchy, and of the ways to distinguish social hierarchy, none is more important than ritual. Of rituals, none is more important than those of the sage kings. (5/18/13-18)

Xúnzǐ thinks the rituals he advocates are valuable precisely because they allow us to order ourselves well within society. But this is not merely a pragmatic case for ritual. Xúnzǐ argues that morally justifiable social order needs to reflect differences in achievement and merit in order for people to accept it. Consider the following:

How can people form communities? I say it is through hierarchical divisions. How can hierarchical divisions be enacted? I say by means of just social norms (*yì* 義). Thus if people use just norms to divide themselves then they will be harmonious; if harmonious, they will be unified, if unified they will have greater strength, with greater strength they will be powerful, when powerful they will triumph over things, and thus may gain palaces and houses to live in. Thus when people properly follow the sequence of the seasons, employ the myriad things, and universally benefit the world, there is no other reason for this but that they have obtained these hierarchical divisions and norms of justice. (9/39/11-13)

The social norms by which human groups live need to be right or just in order for communities to be harmonious, Xúnzǐ thinks, because people will feel much greater loyalty and commitment to a morally well-ordered community. Only this will allow us to band together effectively as groups. And Xúnzǐ argues that justice requires that people be rewarded according to merit, i.e., achievement, rather than family background or any other basis.<sup>21</sup> Xúnzǐ is thus a strong advocate of proportional equality, and believes one of the great values of ritual is that it supports such fair distribution.

Given these views, how might a neo-Xunzian defender of ritual propriety respond to charges that ritual propriety fosters elitism, denigrating “common” people and bolstering unjust social hierarchies? A critic might, more specifically, charge that (a) only the wealthy can spend time cultivating ritual propriety; non-wealthy people must spend most of their energy simply surviving; and (b) Xunzian ritual is essentially concerned with reinforcing hierarchy, which is a dubious, unnecessary exercise when hierarchies of status and power have so much support already; these should be abolished or undercut, not supported, in an egalitarian society. To the first, I think a Xunzian could respond that the core of ritual propriety concerns how we treat each other, starting within families, and extending out toward others. Key social virtues such as care and appropriate respect for family members (and others), as well as hospitality to guests, do not require opulent furnishings or clothing to accomplish. While such luxuries are pleasant and Xúnzǐ thinks all people desire them (4/16/5-6, 11/53/12-13), the core of ritual and morality do not actually require lavish expenditures. Xúnzǐ argues clearly that virtue is much more valuable than riches or high position (8/29/14-8/30/3), which suggests that he thinks it is possible to cultivate ritual propriety without wealth.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps only the starving would be incapable of ritual propriety without extensive prior practice and commitment; but for this

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<sup>21</sup> Xúnzǐ’s commitment to a meritocracy of virtuous achievement is plain in numerous passages, including 9/35/3-12, 9/35/22-9/36/3, 9/38/5-7, 10/43/1-5, 11/52/18-21, 12/61/13-12/62/10, 18/85/5-15, etc. I provide an overview of Xúnzǐ’s social views in Stalnakar 2012: 101-103. The classic discussion of his views in English is Rosemont 1970-71.

<sup>22</sup> We should also note that Xúnzǐ’s account of ritual aims to place clear limits on consumption by elites, by specifying appropriate sumptuary standards for various official ranks; and seeks to reorient human attention from satisfaction of desires and straightforward economic “benefit” to higher goods, shaping people to desire a reputation for virtue more than simple wealth.



they would hardly be blameworthy, on a Xunzian picture. Political elites in such a society would be responsible for such grave disorder, from Xúnzǐ's point of view.<sup>23</sup>

Xúnzǐ certainly thinks rituals do and should reinforce social hierarchies – if they are actually just. I have argued this in greater detail elsewhere, but early Confucians, including Xúnzǐ, contend that deference to superiors in various sorts of hierarchies contributes greatly to harmonious social order, and is in fact morally praiseworthy.<sup>24</sup> Their argument for this position becomes clear in the details of their analysis of relating to moral superiors, i.e., teachers, and social or political superiors, i.e., political figures who wield military or governmental power, or parents and elders. Xúnzǐ is adamant that morally cultivated individuals have a duty to act on their own conscience, for example when he argues that one should “follow the Way, do not follow one’s lord” (13/64/8, 29/141/19), and “follow what is right, do not follow one’s father” (29/141/19). On a Xunzian account, ritual practices provide a socially authorized way to honor and respect others, including both superiors and inferiors, but also serve to call superiors in particular to remember the moral underpinnings of their authority, and to their role-specific duties to wield power benevolently and justly. The idea is that respectful treatment focuses on the holder of a dignified *office*, not the person who holds that office apart from his official role responsibilities. He is explicitly critical of inherited class distinctions and familial nepotism, and aims to replace them with merit-based distinctions between people based on their justly earned social roles and offices.<sup>25</sup> Thus Xúnzǐ thinks ritual allows us to not only honor those who are genuinely worthy of

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<sup>23</sup> One could perhaps argue that Xúnzǐ's account of funeral rituals in chapter 19 show that non-elites with limited financial resources could not truly fulfill the demands of ritual in the crucial instance of mourning one's parents. Given the total range of the evidence, I think we should probably say that full performance of cultural arts like music and some forms of ritual does require some wealth, on Xúnzǐ's account, but that someone could still make do with more limited resources and adequately perform ritual requirements even in crucial situations like funerals, even if such a situation is less than ideal and not fully satisfying to cultivated human desires for ritual recognition of key life events. And regardless of Xúnzǐ's own views, a modern defender of ritual propriety would need to take such a line.

<sup>24</sup> For an analysis of these issues that focuses more on Mèngzǐ's ideas, see Stalnaker 2013. I discuss Xúnzǐ's views of legitimate social hierarchy in Stalnaker (unpublished), and address the special case of obedience to superiors in the military in Stalnaker 2012.

<sup>25</sup> See the textual references in note 19 above.

admiration and deference, but also provides the necessary communicative tools to engage in constructive social criticism – which is obligatory, on his account, not optional, at least for those who are morally mature.<sup>26</sup>

On balance, then, Xunzian ritual propriety functions to criticize and undercut morally dubious hierarchies of wealth and family connections, albeit gently, through polite, reasoned criticism, and in conjunction with careful selection of good office-holders. The hierarchies it aims to support are primarily based on moral merit.<sup>27</sup> The criticism, then, aims at the wrong target; unless *all* hierarchies are morally repugnant, which is hard to fathom, then it seems right to suggest that the proper recognition of morally relevant differences in status is actually good, a strong point in favor of neo-Xunzian ritual propriety.

Properly responding to differences in social status, especially office or role membership, and also to degrees of respect-worthiness, allows ritual propriety to address a real difficulty generated by Kantian defenses of politeness. As Stohr argues, Kantian politeness aims to cultivate and recognize the moral equality of different people. But this goal creates a noticeable degree of anxiety over any deviations from equal moral status, at least on Stohr's account. She writes: "Kant believed that our ability to maintain respectful relationships with people depends on our being able to engage with each other as equals. When that equality becomes unbalanced, it threatens the relationship and the associated respect" (Stohr 2012: 87). This may not seem problematic at first blush, but on Stohr's own account this Kantian conception renders a number of crucial human relationships potentially alarming and threatening

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<sup>26</sup> Xúnzǐ's sense of the circle of those who are sufficiently morally cultivated to offer criticism of public officials may be much smaller than any contemporary person's would be. The textual issue is how to square his strong statements about following one's own judgment rather than social authorities like lords and fathers, which supports a wide circle, with his equally strong statements about the need for following a teacher and the model of past sagely exemplars (1/1/3-5, 2/8/1-4, 4/15/14-17, 23/113/9-10, etc.), which seem to accent the need for a high degree of cultivation before engaging in such critical independence.

<sup>27</sup> I say "primarily" because Xúnzǐ does seem to support certain early Confucian social hierarchies that are not based on moral merit, but instead on the greater prestige in his context of males over females, and the elderly over the young. But any contemporary neo-Xunzian defender of ritual propriety should obviously not defend male dominance, and should probably assimilate respect for the aged to care for the infirm, and respect for the wise. For an introduction to contemporary reflection on the relation of Confucian and feminist thought, see Li 2000.

to one's self-respect, including family relationships (often unequal), relationships of teachers and students (by definition unequal), and even friendships. This cannot be a fully adequate account of politeness, let alone the more capacious virtue of ritual propriety.

Ironically, Stohr's account of Kantian politeness generates unnecessary difficulties by running together different kinds of respect, which makes hierarchical relationships seem much more dangerous than they are. Immediately after the passage quoted above, Stohr addresses "the destabilizing effects revealing our flaws can have on our friendships" (Stohr 2012: 87). She then proceeds to quote Kant: "From a moral point of view it is, of course, a duty for one of the friends to point out the other's faults to him; this is in the other's best interests and is therefore a duty of love. But the latter sees in this a lack of the respect he expected from his friend and thinks that he has either already lost or is in constant danger of losing something of his friend's respect, since he is observed and secretly criticized by him" (Stohr 2012: 87, citing Kant 1991: 262). Stohr accepts this as insightful analysis of a real tension in social life, which politeness addresses. But this is a strange amalgamation of two different kinds of respect: what Stephen Darwall (1977) has called "recognition respect" and "appraisal respect." We owe recognition respect to all other human beings as "ends in themselves," that is, as moral agents capable of responsible action in pursuit of chosen ends. We owe appraisal respect only to those people who manifest excellence in some sphere, in proportion to the value of that excellence.<sup>28</sup> It is unclear, on Kantian premises, how moral imperfections (of character, say) could jeopardize the right of the imperfect person to my recognition respect.<sup>29</sup> Moral criticism of one's friends here seems both a duty and a real moral error, on Kant's account. We need to see that, when interpreted in a way that makes mutual criticism suspect, the desire to maintain moral equality of status interferes with crucial dimensions of human relationships, in this case friendship.

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<sup>28</sup> The situation is somewhat more complicated than this short summary suggests. For a fuller analysis of Darwall's views of respect in relation to Confucian ideas, see Stalnaker 2013: 451-5.

<sup>29</sup> It is also unclear how respecting another's moral agency is actually better served by refraining from offering criticism, at least in cases of real friendship, where both parties know each other well enough to have reasonable hopes of making insightful judgments of each other's acts and character. The sort of pride that would be threatened by such behavior seems deluded. I return to this theme below.

Similar difficulties crop up when Stohr analyzes beneficence, where she provides another quotation from Kant, who she says “was especially sensitive to the potentially destabilizing effects that beneficence can have on a relationship,” and who thus fears that doing a good turn for another will be threatening to his or her self-respect (Stohr 2012: 129). She summarizes: “The feeling of being in someone’s debt, Kant thought, is one that self-respecting people want to avoid having and that truly considerate people want to avoid creating” (Stohr 2012: 130). We should thus disguise our gifts and beneficent actions so that others will not recognize such actions as what they are, so they will not feel indebted to us (Stohr 2012: 130).

From a Confucian point of view, this is a bizarre aversion to central aspects of relationships of ongoing mutual care and concern – that is, to central features of the most important relationships people have, including family relationships and friendships. Kantian politeness, at least as represented by Stohr’s account, seems excessively reticent about both supportive care for others, and critical engagement with them even when this is clearly warranted. Xunzian ritual propriety provides a repertoire of symbolic gesture and action that can help us not merely cope with relationships between unequals of various sorts, but flourish, and enjoy the fruits such relationships can provide, especially over time as reciprocal care and criticism help both parties live well. It simply is not a problem that human beings have ongoing relationships of mutual indebtedness, and any moral theory that makes such relationships seem problematic is excessively individualistic.

Stohr seems to accept at least part of this line of thought, for example when she suggests that reciprocity of beneficence is a good standard for long-term relationships, although she notes that in practice some inequalities of beneficence may be inevitable in certain cases (she mentions serious illness; Stohr 2012: 129-131). But on her own account, Kantian politeness seeks to avoid or at least disguise such beneficence and criticism in the majority of cases. An admirable contemporary form of ritual propriety would need to provide resources both to recognize everyone’s shared human dignity, and to appropriately respond to moral merit and demerit across the wide range that people exhibit. Recognizing differential levels of respect-worthiness, even with regard to moral character, seems both possible and desirable, albeit with cognizance of the difficulty of discerning differences of character. But appropriately recognizing the respect-worthiness of teachers, parents, and public

office-holders, among others, requires a richer symbolic repertoire of language and action than the tight focus on moral equality alone that Stohr's conception provides.<sup>30</sup> All of this suggests that contemporary ritual propriety must recognize and respond to equality of basic human dignity, as well as to differentials of achievement where they are morally significant.

The greater range of ritual propriety, as compared to Kantian politeness, suggests a final possible criticism worthy of analysis and response. A critic might wonder whether "ritual propriety" does not name a single virtue, but rather runs together too many disparate things, since it combines interpersonal politeness with proper ceremonial bearing, along with apparently extraneous concerns like proper clothing and body posture. This is an interesting and subtle objection. Xunzian *lǐ* does include these various aspects, and in this he is typical of most early Ru theorizing about ritual.

Bryan Van Norden, in his fine work on virtue ethics in early Chinese thought, has analyzed Mèngzǐ's four main virtues in terms of their relation to "spheres of action and experience" discernible in human life generally (2007: 350-354). Van Norden argues that ritual propriety should be seen as the excellence proper to "the production and appreciation of the beautiful" (2007: 351). While this view of the matter accurately captures the early Confucian concern with good form, expressed as the desire to make human existence *měi* 美, "fine" and "beautiful" (e.g., *Xúnzǐ* 1/3/17; 1/4/16), this way of putting things risks failing to attend to crucial social constituents of most rituals.

In my view, the core aim of the virtue of ritual propriety is the proper performance of human relatedness, which allows the other virtues, especially including benevolence and righteousness, to operate in such a way that relationships are nurtured and cultivated to be strong and good. Respect and benevolence in particular need to take appropriate form to work properly with creatures like us, who are alert to subtle social and bodily cues from each other in myriad ways. Thus bodily comportment and personal appearance, even dress, as well as speech, are all significant components of our self-presentation to others, and

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<sup>30</sup> Again, it is worth noting that the neo-Xunzian sort of ritual propriety I am advocating recognizes the possibility of *unworthiness* in office holders, as well as worthiness, as outlined above regarding ritual propriety as a mode of social criticism of elites.

affect how those others understand and respond to our actions and words. These vectors of human interaction are thus all appropriate areas of concern for the virtue of *li*. The pleasing beauty of such appearances, and graceful style in performing ritual requirements, contributes greatly to accomplishing these ends.

Xúnzǐ clearly values ceremonies highly, and singles out death rituals, musical performances, and banquets for attention and analysis in chapters 19 and 20. The more ceremonial moments of Xunzian ritual appear to serve two crucial functions: they mark critical transitions in relationships between people (marriage, death, the transition to adulthood), and they provide communal occasions for harmonious delight in beautiful or otherwise pleasing shared activities, which strengthen interpersonal bonds by building mutual care and respect. Thus a concern for ceremonies of the sort the early Ru value is also an appropriate object of this virtue's operation. Even in the contemporary United States people invest considerable attention and resources in marriage, graduation, and funeral ceremonies. Such rituals can and should be much more than occasions for conspicuous consumption – and often are. Ritual propriety is the complex of cultivated skill and virtue that allows us to perform our duties well on such crucial occasions. Our many varied relationships with each other require the practical, symbolic resources provided by ritual traditions, as well as the virtue of gracefully performing such rituals, whether momentous or quotidian.<sup>31</sup>

This defense of ritual propriety as a real virtue is inevitably incomplete. I have failed to address all possible objections, including important objections related to contemporary pluralistic societies that fail to share robust ritual traditions across all sectors of the populace, but do share them in certain subgroups.<sup>32</sup> But I hope to have made a real start, sufficient to suggest the power of this general justificatory strategy, and to evoke the attractiveness of ritual propriety as a virtue for contemporary people, a virtue that does not suffer from the ambivalence about human relatedness embedded in recent Kantian defenses of politeness.

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<sup>31</sup> P. J. Ivanhoe (2013: 31-44) gives an astute analysis of the value of rituals and ritual propriety in contemporary life, drawing in particular on the Confucian *Analects*.

<sup>32</sup> Van Norden (2007: 354-355) recognizes this as an important problem, but can find no “principled solution” to it. The issues regarding ritual propriety in relation to pluralism and “multiculturalism” are sufficiently complex that they would need lengthy treatment of their own to be adequately addressed.

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