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# The Religious Imperative of Confucianism

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## RELIGIOUS STUDIES DEPARTMENTAL HONORS THESIS

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## Abstract

Confucianism prescribes for society an immensely rich, sophisticated, and utilitarian modality of social relationship. Not only has this served as China's social and political bedrock, but it has actually evolved from, and thus suggests, the deep religious dimensionality of Confucian thought. I aim to, through the medium of Confucianism, unveil the social entity of this religious dimension as an intuitive depth and unifying reciprocity which has since the dawn of civilization been preserved and expressed as the most quintessential aspect of human life.

With an exploratory dive into the farthest metaphysics that underlie the foundational Confucian society, the true sacrality of social order becomes exposed as a model for human progress. It is the individual and collective embodiments of this sacred social modality and its innate ethical posture which carve true, lasting moral shape into our lives. The ontological controversy that will be found between contrasting expressions of this reality, especially between dualism and monism, will be discovered as an illusory barrier, entirely undermined by the Confucian dialog which effectively welds the religious to the secular, the sacred to the profane, the spiritual to the material, and the society to the individual.

From this religious quest of anthropocosmic harmony which renders society as a collectivity of sacred relativity, Confucius has presented for history the blueprints of utopia. This essay will, in framing religion as the same co-arising moiety of society, attempt to recover the shattered debris of the religious ethic, the true sincerity and seriousness of sagehood, and the innate universality of reciprocity. From this frontier, it is then possible to clearly see the profound religious imperative of Confucianism as neither a fanatical nor lethargic, overbearing nor naive religiosity, but as a simple expression of the perennial image of humanity, which is, when measured in eternity, both the secular and spiritual ideal.

## Familiarization

Throughout much of China's history, the Confucian tradition, as it is popularly understood, has served as a social and political authority, perpetually orienting the civilization's laws, basic values, and collective identity in concord with a fundamentally moral ground. While the accuracy of this view undeniable, it often captures merely the secularized aspects of Confucianism and therefore oversees its inexorable religious dimensions. The ambiguous religiosity of Confucianism arises from both its long, onomasiologically variant history throughout the numerous dynasties and their respective thinkers, as well as from its subjection to the thrasher of modern religious scholarship. After all, because religion weaves through so many spheres of human experience, in some form or another, it is spectacularly difficult to define, identify, and understand—and so the question of what actually constitutes a religion is still the single largest source of controversy within the entire discipline of religious studies.

Nonetheless, the relatively novel field of religious studies has provided this investigation of religion with the academic footwork and methodological reservoir that it naturally deserves. Resultantly, there has been substantial progress in the development of consistency and accuracy within the discipline, a quest which by default has no end. Despite the field's eternal condition of imperfection—as even the most influential theories and methods stand upon ticklish ground—an overarching thematic symmetry is found, as the collective modules of many diverse theoretical approaches, which recognizes the most essential expressions and features of religion. Amidst this aggregate of themes lies the motif of ultimacy, which, because of the frequently subtle and implicit nature of Confucian religious expression, functions as the best referential framework for expounding an accessible and illuminating rendition of the inner religious character of Confucianism.

Accordingly, this essay will anchor its theory of religion on Fredrick Streng's work, *Ways of Being Religious*, and with his central definition of religion. As a general term for the numerous ways by which people seek to "reach a state of being that is conceived to be the highest possible state or condition,"<sup>1</sup> religion is principally "a means of ultimate transformation."<sup>2</sup> The ultimacy involved with this transformation necessarily depicts not just an absolute, but also the expression of a relationship between the absolute and the individual seeking to eventually attain or become it. In the case of Confucianism, without exception, this absolute is *tian* 天, meaning 'sky,' and 'Heaven.' It is both the defining and animating force of the cosmos. It does not mean 'Heaven' in any Western sense at all, but rather it is the fully interactive, quasi-dualistic metaphysic of what for the Chinese was a critically undifferentiated, anthropocentric monism. To aid in the needed mental division from the Western

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Streng, Charles Lloyd, and Jay Allen, *Ways of Being Religious: Readings for a New Approach to Religion* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1973), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

'Heaven,' I will refer to *tian* as *tian* or as in quotations until its meaning becomes more clear. There are many ontological intricacies and basic principles of *tian* which will be covered thoroughly as they arise relevantly throughout the essay, and each of them is related to this premise of ultimacy. Although *tian's* highly religious substratum can be reasonably extrapolated and unearthed from the predominantly worldly, secular language of the first sequence of Confucian texts, subsequent works which illuminate and expand upon these original texts will be utilized to feature more competently the ubiquity and vitality of Confucianism's religious undercurrent. And so, alongside with the original corpus of classical Confucianism—including the *Analects*, the *Greater Learning*, the *Doctrine of The Mean*, and the *Mencius*—this essay will also consult primary sources from ZhuXi, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Neo-Confucian philosopher, and his compelling rearrangement of these Four Books, including the expanded array of subsequent annotations and commentaries. Though more audibly in some than others, overarching through all of these vastly influential texts is the principle of *tian* and its critical relationship to the social individual. It is the source of moral order within the universe, and therefore, within the realm of politics and society. Recognizing and harmonizing ones actions with *tian* is, accordingly, the only way to achieve this ultimate transformation, socially and individually.

## Core

The most critical point of discussion lies at the religious nature of this activity. The Confucian tradition is often seen as an ethical or moral philosophy, with only peripheral religious content. This view is, in and of itself, not wrong; however, the modern desensitization to—and casual delivery of—ethical principles, their range of application, and their implications strips the interpretation of Confucianism from its true significance and profundity. As such, the religious voice of Confucius and other Confucian philosophers will be recovered to properly capture the existential seriousness of morality as social empathy and social order. It is often found in the subtlety of secular language, in overlooked linguistic patterns such as the *superlative qualifications* of the virtuous person and the true Confucian society. It is what separates the greatest and most prosperous civilizations from the ever distancing mirage of utopia. It is the final step of collective progress which from its impalpability taunts the language of social modality and entrances it with the authoritarian voice. What often escapes, from both Confucius' influences as well as the modern perception of these influences, is the profoundly religious dimension of this principle. It is the explicitly articulated perfectibility of each individual, and thus of the entire civilization. This alarmingly real capacity for perfection is actually the most acute expression of Confucian thought, one which, by necessity, prescribes a means of ultimate transformation and is likewise inherently religious. It extends as a singularity through our individual character into the expansive realm of social procedure. From there it casts beyond the earthly tethers of life and into the deepest patterns of nature and the divinity of cosmic animation. Establishing

unity and harmonic relativity between all modes and spheres of reality, it ricochets back to the cozy inglenook of personal self-cultivation. The ethicoreligious import of what on the surface appears as mere social configuration is the cascading utopian vision of humanity and its foreshadowed teleology. The serendipities of political order, familial regularity, and moral exactitude are inescapable byproducts of the individual dialogue with *tian* and its consecration upon the greater societal pastiche. A thread of continuity pierces through each and every manifold expression of this ultimate reality, which empowers the concrete affairs of humanity with the sacrality of social and thus cosmic harmonization. Realizing and embodying this sacred geometry is the final masterpiece of the universe. But, the substance and value of this social design is often threatened by both the criticism of its religiously detached and dogmatic manifestation in ancient China as well as the lifelessness of its peripherally religious and casual interpretation in modernity. Quintessentially, however, this deed is the religious and existential imperative of Confucianism.

### Incipient Religiosity

Nonetheless, for Confucius, rambling on about the omnipresence and metaphysical splendor of *tian* proved to be more distracting than helpful, and he was primarily concerned with 'real world import.' While absolutely not forgetting the religious root of his advice, Confucius focused on *tian's* moral implications, and less on its cosmological ones. He kept most of his discourses simple yet poignant, directed yet universal, and secular yet rapturously so. Although this tame style of quasi-religious prose is undoubtedly another factor which contributes to the categorical uncertainty of Confucianism, its assertions are just as undoubtedly saturated with internal religious meaning; not to mention that, in an anthropological and functional sense, Confucianism is comparable with many of our world's other religions. It has functioned as a basis for the creation of community, and of social order, through an enactment of ritual, with "the myth upon which ritual is based [describing] a world in which chaos is being, or is to be, replaced by order."<sup>3</sup> For Confucianism, this progression from chaos to order is captured as the union between the microcosm and the macrocosm. In other words, from the proper cultivation of oneself, from rectifying one's own thoughts and heart, one then can extend outward to regulating their family properly, and from there the state, and eventually the world. This creation of community, social organization, and political structure is the external byproduct of self-cultivation and its fruition, which is ritualistic in that its entire evolution, from beginning to end, is uninterruptedly informed by *tian* and nothing else. Surprisingly, however, the Confucian pedagogic centerpiece, known as the *Greater Learning*, which depicts this process of cultivation and extension in its most basic framework, does not include even a single explicit mention of *tian* in this

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 157.

way. Rather, it articulates the tangible aspects of cultivation which are given finite categorical representations:

Wishing to order their states, [the ancients] first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things."<sup>4</sup>

In this explanation, it is presumed that if one investigates things with enough thoroughness, and with enough discipline, the conclusion will always be the same, as if guided by a kind of 'intellectual intuition,'<sup>5</sup> one which fully develops the behavioral implications of its initial discovery that, as Tu WeiMing writes, "A linkage will always be found between any pair of things in the universe."<sup>6</sup> Likewise, in his words, "To be religious, in the Confucian sense, is to be engaged in ultimate self-transformation as a communal act. Salvation means the full realization of the anthropocosmic reality inherent in our human nature."<sup>7</sup> The inherent quality of this anthropocosmic reality is what designates the consistency of intellectual intuition, guiding those who seriously engage in learning to the same religiously infused cosmology that, ultimately, a single root principle is what quietly dictates the world's complex and dynamic ontological relationships. Correspondently, in a preface to the *Doctrine of the Mean*, a Confucian text which logically follows the *Greater Learning* and was allegedly written by the only grandson of Confucius, the philosopher Cheng writes, "The book first speaks of one principle; it next spreads this out, and embraces all things; finally, it returns and gathers them all up under the one principle. Unroll it, and it fills the universe; roll it up, and it retires and lies hid in mysteriousness. The relish of it is inexhaustible."<sup>8</sup> Although the *Doctrine of the Mean* is included in the canon of Neo-Confucianism, which is known for its highly religious and metaphysical expression, the doctrine itself, as well as the other three of the Four Books, were written more than a millennium prior to the crystallization of Neo-Confucianism. It is, on its own accord, subtly yet acutely religious, though not explicitly so, with the same inferentially religious voice of the *Analects*. Fundamentally, both the original corpus of Confucianism as well as its Neo-Confucian evolution operate from the same religious premise, one which not only captures the latent harmony between all facets of human experience, but

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<sup>4</sup> James Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 358.

<sup>5</sup> Tu WeiMing borrows this term from Mou ZongSan to describe the not just the intuitive curiosity of the mind but also its universality in humans, its implications, and its eventuation; see his *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1985), 165.

<sup>6</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>8</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 382.

more importantly grounds this ontological truth with the same anthropocosmic framework as orchestrated by the same 'Heaven.'

## The Neo-Confucian Evolution

Nevertheless, even with this basic underlying congruency which unites classical and Neo-Confucianism, and perhaps even Daoism, there are still critical differences between their modes of articulation and historical conditions which need to be accounted for in order to properly assess and untangle the various complexities and nuances found amongst their religious expression. The most obvious catalyst in the development of these changes is the cultural and intellectual paradigm shift, spanning relevantly from the early Han dynasty to the later Song, resulting from the maturation of Daoism and the influx of Buddhism from India. It is probable and widely accepted by scholars that the Daoist and Buddhist influences on China's cultures and philosophies led to a greater presence of metaphysical concerns, and of metaphysical justification for morality. As such, Confucianism develops its metaphysics in response to the intellectual climate of Buddhist and Daoist traditions, yet still as a fundamentally Confucian entity. The preexisting, theocratic order of ancient China's society and government, the amalgamation of new religious traditions, the inescapable feudal life, the inexorable intellectual evolution of civilizations over great spans of time, and more obviously, the respective forces of common thought within ancient Chinese culture, collectively forge together a new reflection of principle and mythology from the crumbling societal precipices of classical Confucianism. While Confucianism becomes saturated with new ideas and exposed to novel intellectual climates, it desperately clings onto the wisdom at its core, reframing and revamping its style to better suit the status quo, one which was much more intimate with metaphysics than before. Regardless of this shift, the tendencies of Neo-Confucian philosophers towards metaphysical explanations and interpretations aren't at all in conflict with the classical Confucian standpoint, but actually expand its ontological scope and secure its rigid angles on morality by articulating new, heuristically warranted representations of the tradition, ones which better suited the historical locale. Of course, that isn't to say that metaphysical ideas and justification, specifically with respect to classical Confucianism, were entirely absent prior to this development, but rather that they were less vocalized, embedded in secular language, in seemingly mundane activities, and as the underlying structure of society.

## A Cosmological Overview

To estimate the true closeness between classical and Neo-Confucian views is neither to critically dilate, and thus somehow resolve their contrast, nor to

naively blend together, and thus somehow collapse their legitimate diversity of expression. Instead, it is to diplomatically investigate primary and secondary sources, recognize the sheer scale of time and the immensity of forces involved in shaping their evolutions, and only then contextualize their passages and ideas respectively, by extracting salient points and maintaining a proper equipoise between analysis and synthesis. Although this is ultimately an unending investigation, and will be inevitably shortchanged, it starts with the same primitive sketch of ancient China's most prevalent cosmological ideas. Of these, the most ubiquitous idea is indeed *dao* 道, the *Dao* of Daosim, meaning 'The Way,' which is understood as the absolute essence of the cosmos, as the space between cause and effect, the eternal flow of primordial energy, the apex of sagehood, the infinitely complex yet profoundly simple truth, the ultimate natural source of life's animation, and as the mysterious innerworkings of the universe. *Dao* weaves its way in and out of the Confucian peripheral, and naturally becomes ingrained as a vital expression of Heaven. Another one of the most common ideas is *de* 德, often translated as 'virtue,' and, according to Peter Boodberg, it is likely that the term "originated in the mytho-magical period of Chinese speculation when *de* was conceived as a kind of *mana*-like potency inherent in substances, things, and human beings, a potency which, on the one hand, made them true to their existence, and, other the other, made possible their influencing of other entities."<sup>9</sup> *De* is a fundamental concept in Chinese culture, and easily maneuvers itself between religious traditions. Apart from these two concepts, there are the *wuxing* 五行, meaning the "Five Phases"—characterized by *mu* 木, wood, *huo* 火, fire, *tu* 土, earth, *jin* 金, metal, and *shui* 水, water—which are the five core elemental activities of reality and are intimately connected with other pattered depictions of the universe, such as "the five directions, the five primary colors and the five sacred animals. The four seasons were assigned to four of the activities, Earth being excluded because it represented all seasons."<sup>10</sup> Each categorization has its particular set of symbols and relational ideas, which correspond to each other as well as to certain aspects of reality; the relationships themselves, between certain symbols, also serve as metaphors for the relationships, processes, and structures in reality and life—which collaboratively express a fibrous, interconnected prism of cosmic architecture that is both inseparable and inescapable. This is of course seen as congruent with Confucianism and in union with the sacred relativity of the individual, social, and political spheres of life. Amidst this intricate design, *tian* is the facilitator of interaction and the basis of those interactions' underlying moral structure. *Tian* in this way is also the monistic base from which *yin* and *yang*, the dualistic moieties of all activity, such as pull and push, female and male, dark and light, and moon and sun, burst outwards in the sacral image of union and then scatter into the counterbalancing forces of labyrinthine duality. This ontological wafture between monism and dualism became an important metaphysical

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Boodberg, "The Semasiology of Some Primary Confucian Concepts," *Philosophy East and West* 2, no. 4 (1953): 324.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Schafer, *Ancient China, Great Ages of Man* (New York: Time Life, 1967), 104.

conversation for Neo-Confucianism and thus for *yin* and *yang*. In addition to this, even the Heavenly stems, the lunar calendar, the all-pervasive flow of *qi* 氣, the basic Rites *li* 禮, the highly intelligent and sensitive reciprocity of *ren* 仁, the social depth of *xiao* 孝 in filial piety, the divine behavior of righteousness *yi* 義, the five cardinal relationships, and many, many more, all find their proper places—somewhere, somehow—in this wondrous matrix. These systems intertwine and correlate with each other not only as they collectively inform the development of Confucianism, but as they absorb the pulses of Buddhism and Daoism, extending outwards from their initial origins, many of which were actually Confucian. As Robin Wang writes in his construction of Confucian metaphysics, with reference to the cosmological diagram of Zhou Dunyi, one of China's most prominent Neo-Confucian philosophers, "The *Taijitu* and *Taijitu-shuo* take a cosmology derived from the Daoist and Buddhist tradition, and transform it into a dynamic and progressive Confucian metaphysics. This metaphysical vision of the universe sustains a Confucian account of morality that can be convincingly justified."<sup>11</sup> For Example, "The moral virtues, such as *ren* (benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness) are patterns reflecting the *yinyang* interactions that constitute the universe,"<sup>12</sup> and as such, "The *yinyang* theory remains constitutive of human moral standards... [and] the cultivation of *yinyang* harmonies in all human relationships is central to ethics."<sup>13</sup> As with each of these cosmological systems, their unavoidable contradictions and individual complexities cater to, and develop in response to, not only the different levels of society, different subcultures, and different historic moments, but also to the independent nature of each idea as a real, authentic aspect of the cosmos itself. The convergence and amalgamation between them is indicative of their intrinsic potency as cultural and political forces, as each posits, ideally in concord with the others, a reservoir of inferential tools and symbols with which individuals and groups may map out and thus reinforce their cultural bond to the society and, unconsciously perhaps, their symbolic bond to the divine. Although this broad social praxis lacks the same concentration and determination of consciously engaging in something such as self-cultivation, it echoes as a religious expression of humanity, unbound to any particular form of expression or enactment, yet envisioning a particular design of society in which each and every member has become harmonized with the whole. Mary Evelyn Tucker describes the finale of this process as becoming fully human, explaining that "To be fully human means to locate oneself in patterned relationship to the changes in the cosmos, to the fluctuation of the seasons, to the rhythms of the agricultural cycles, and to the varied demands of human life."<sup>14</sup> Then, by default, one is also properly located within the society, as an impossibly small yet surprisingly critical part of the grand scheme. This aggregate of cosmological symbols and resulting 'religions' operate as manifold instruments, often times

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<sup>11</sup> Robin Wang, "Zhou Dunyi's Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained (*Taijitu Shuo*): A Construction of the Confucian Metaphysics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66, no. 3 (2005): 323.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Evelyn Tucker, "Religious Dimensions of Confucianism: Cosmology and Cultivation," *Philosophy East and West* 48, no. 1 (1998): 19.

conjointly, to not only orient individual members about the central societal axis, but about the symbolic divine axis. It is from this intimacy with the divine, with *tian*, that such schemes can retain their texture and structure throughout time. It is from this that they can confidently resonate with an obscured sense of singularity, and that they can serve as fully exhaustive teleological maps—entailing both the means and the ends of cultivating profound moral character, of engaging in proper behavior and interactions with the world, and of enabling individual and cosmic harmony.

## Origin and Aftermath

The brutal simplicity and apparent syncretism in the above analysis is hardly a conclusive or substantial basis for understanding even the most basic designs and principles behind many of China's cosmological ideas. However, it is intended to expose the juxtaposition between the historical conditions, of ancient China's complex and vast network of religious symbols, and the relatively stable evolution and incorporation of that complexity into Confucianism. The unique aspects of each system naturally gained Confucian relevance, procuring a nexus of coevolving symbology and ontological expressions with which different spheres of human experience could be meaningfully interpreted and out of which the most basic cultural solidarity was carved—one that included elements of art, musical performance, poetry, pedestrian labor, governance, filial piety, politics, archery, astrology, alchemy, medicine, and explicit religious practice, all of which could be faithfully traced back to a same kind of relativity within the anthropocosmic model. There is an undeniable consistency and similarity between the Confucian and Neo-Confucian renderings of such social and political activities—musical perfection still symbolizes spiritual harmony, bull's-eyes in archery still represent inward balance and awareness, poetic mastery still derives from a divinely channeled linguistic prowess, and political commands are still ultimately, ideally, expressions of the order of *tian*. It is in this universal and perpetual reference to the divine, throughout all ages, that ancient Chinese thought preserves its essential character, and that Confucianism retains its singularity and its religious dimensions, as "All men accepted the fact that this great picture of the universe could be reduced to a symbolic pattern or miniature replica and incorporated into the design of a holy shire, the structure of a palace, the plan of a city and the layout of a garden,"<sup>15</sup> and by extension, of course, the hierarchy of a society, the order in the family, the rules of interaction with the world, and the organization of personal thoughts. While Neo-Confucianism addresses this singularity and profound relativity between different spheres of human experience in terms of a metaphysical grounding, Confucian discourse viewed it as self-evident and therefore focused on its tangible social and political manifestations. Mary Tucker references an

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<sup>15</sup> Schafer, *Ancient China*, Great Ages of Man, 101.

unpublished manuscript of Thomas Berry, a notable theologian and scholar, titled "Affectivity in Classical Confucian Tradition," in which he explains,

Confucianism sees the interplay of cosmic forces as a single set of intercommunicating and mutually interdependent realities. These forces, whether living or non-living, were so present to each other that they could be adequately seen and understood only within this larger complex...Because of the intensity with which the Chinese experienced this interior, feeling communion with the real, they set themselves on perfecting the human being and the universe by increasing this sympathetic presence of things to each other within a personal and social discipline rather than by intellectual analysis and understanding.<sup>16</sup>

Similarly, the great span of Confucian influence and relevance exceeds the confines of a single mode, even when Confucius speaks only in terms of a single art, practice or facet of life, and especially considering that many of these activities and human experiences were not at all explicitly religious. For this reason, as this essay further articulates the religious dimensions of Confucianism, it will do so in acknowledgment that the degree of commensurability between the two traditions, of Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, is not only informed by methodological interpretation or academic theory, but can be guided at a deeper level by the presence of their innate compatibility. This is why the separation between Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism is so crucial, because not only can their differences be expounded as markers of disagreement, but their intuitive similarity and historical coherence of development can be aligned with their contrast in such a way that they can become—at once—both entirely unique, peculiar expressions of reality as well as modular reflections of the greater, overarching symmetry. Not only do such expressions behave as if their dimensions somehow exceed their specific context, but they gain authenticity, authority, and efficacy from this, traits indicative of the singularity of their source.

## Transcendence and Immanence

One of the most irrefutable expressive mechanisms in both classical Confucian ethicality and Neo-Confucian cosmology is conceptual dualism. Both traditions frequently expound their spiritual reality in terms of a dualistically structured filter in order to deliver to the conceptual, material world what could not be delivered otherwise. That being said, ultimately, the apparent distinction between the spiritual and the material is just that, apparent. Found along this same vein of duality are, respectively, the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, the transcendent and the immanent, the infinite and the finite, the metaphysical and the physical, and the exceptional and the conventional. While it could be said that Confucian interests lie primarily with the latter set

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<sup>16</sup> Tucker, "Religious Dimensions of Confucianism: Cosmology and Cultivation," 18.

and Neo-Confucian interests are nearer to the former, the unobvious fallacy of this distinction, and thus the resolution of its illusory confusions, is that it is actually contrived from the inappropriate application, of a very Western sensitivity to dualism, upon a system of thought almost entirely immune to its ontological assumptions and implications. *Nonetheless*, the key idea here is 'almost.' When Neo-Confucianism grounds its moral justification in the spiritual metaphysics of 'Heaven'—not as a kind of transcendence, but as an immanence tragically overseen—this is mistakenly positioned as transcendent and exceptional, from the secular and conventional perspective. It is this conventional perspective on the exceptional that delivers its transcendence, which Tu WeiMing cataphorically identifies when he depicts the Confucian way of being religious to be "Ultimate self-transformation as a communal act and as a faithful dialogical response to the transcendent."<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, he continues,

Despite the difficulty of conceptualizing transcendence as radical otherness, the Confucian commitment to ultimate self-transformation necessarily involves a transcendent dimension. The idea of going beyond the usual limits of one's existential self so that one can become true to one's Heavenly endowed nature entails the transformative act of continuously excelling and surpassing one's experience here and now.<sup>18</sup>

However, when what is truly immanent, 'Heaven,' is not known as such, it assumes a kind of fugacious transcendence, one which plays to the very same false dualism entertaining dystopia. Accordingly,

To fully express our humanity, we must engage in a dialogue with Heaven because human nature, as conferred by Heaven, realizes itself not by departing from its source but by returning to it. Humanity, so conceived, is the public property of the cosmos, not the private possession of the anthropological world, and is as much the defining characteristic of our being as the self-conscious manifestation of Heaven.<sup>19</sup>

As Neo-Confucian philosophers wrangle with, albeit rather successfully, the dualistic conceptual structure between the spiritual and material, and the metaphysical and the physical, Confucius unknowingly subverted that possibly of ontological dualism, by speaking as if it didn't exist, as if it was this conceptual separation itself, between 'Heaven' and earth, which was actually responsible for the world's chaos. His phraseology instead embodies an ironic dualism between this ideal monism of the singularity of 'Heaven' and the dystopian dualism of the material separation of the world by dichotomizing the 'noble person' not as the opposite of the 'small person,' as the 'good person' would

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<sup>17</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 94.

<sup>18</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 136.

<sup>19</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, 102.

be, but as on an entirely different level. This is what Confucius speaks to, the difference between the 'finite' good and the 'infinite' perfect, when he says, "I dislike the weed for fear it will be confused with the grain; I dislike flattery for fear it may be confused with rightness; I dislike verbal facility for fear it may be confused with faithfulness...The Noble person turns back to an invariable regularity, that is all."<sup>20</sup> This invariable regularity is the reflection of *tian*, and in order to keep its mirror perfectly clean (as the Buddhist's might phrase it), it must be left with no room for the dust of dualism. After all, it is, ultimately, ultimate, not finite. The merging between these two hemispheres is what enables the Confucian dialog to take place spiritually and materially in the same place, with the same words, as something that embodies a tangible wisdom taken for granted far too easily, and that is much more profound than it sounds. This classical Confucianism grounds its moral justification with metaphor, as immanent and mundane ideas which reflect a higher metaphysical, spiritual reality, without placing nearly as much explicit emphasis on that reality because that would inadvertently assume a degree of separateness. This is why, for Confucius, "The reality that the perfect sage symbolizes is not a superhuman reality but a genuine human reality."<sup>21</sup> It is superhuman only from the perspective of mediocrity. In a description of self-cultivation with respect to 'Heaven,' Tu WeiMing continues, "Since this identification is in essence the way of man, its actualization depends upon human effort. To actualize this underlying identity, however, is not to transcend humanity but to work through it."<sup>22</sup> The cultivation of oneself with respect to this spiritual reality, with respect to *tian*, is the closure of the fissure between the transcendent and the immanent, between the religious and secular, the spiritual and material, the macrocosm and microcosm, and the sacred and profane—a fissure which, for the language of Confucius, never existed in the first place, and for the Neo-Confucians, existed only to be reaffirmed of its falsehood. This collapse is how "'Filial piety and loyalty became absolutes.' The inability of even the most brilliant minds in Confucian China to develop a soteriology beyond politics clearly indicates that the idea of transcendence, as radical otherness, was not even conceived as a rejected possibility in Neo-Confucian thought."<sup>23</sup> To the untrained eye, what is actually immanent is mistakenly seen as transcendent, but as one truly learns, what was mistakenly seen as transcendent becomes immanent. Similarly, as in experiences of the profane and secular, what is actually exceptional is mistakenly seen as conventional, and once in audience with the sacred and religious, what was mistakenly seen as conventional becomes exceptional. With this Confucian spirit, Tu WeiMing writes that we must "first realize that The Way is inseparable from our ordinary daily existence."<sup>24</sup> And in a sense, dualism becomes practically

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<sup>20</sup> William Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 2nd ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 158.

<sup>21</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, 77.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

irrelevant, because for the determined Confucian disciple, transcendence's immanence is imminent.

## Linguistic Recognition of Intangibility

The linguistic ambiguity of classical Chinese, which has served as the primary expressive medium of Confucianism, is yet another element which both constitutes and reveals ancient China's intellectual and cultural archetype as one that has been ontologically weary of the stark, differentiating, and sometimes hindering tendencies of conceptually dualistic thought. Rather, it encourages a kind of inferential plasticity. For example, *tian* 天, doesn't just mean 'Heaven,' but as mentioned earlier, is just as frequently used as 'sky;' in fact, when uttered during this archaic time, it probably sounded to the Chinese ear as just this, 'sky,' in its simple poignancy, and not as alien or abstracted as 'Heaven' sounds to us. It was very forthright, just like Confucius. Another example is *dao* 道, which was used commonly as a word for road, or pathway; the immense metaphysic of The Dao was thus captured in its ultimate candor and modesty, as a mere road. Furthermore, *junzi* 君子, originally meaning lord, a noble person in the societal sense, was not a term with moral and religious connotations until Confucius used it that way. The *junzi*, just as with the other examples, remained the word for its mundane counterpart too, which therefore imposed the moral and cosmic ideal of fusion between the two kinds of *junzi* upon society which was simply not ready for that rawness of sacrality. Thus, the *junzi* in bureaucratic positions were able to milk the powers associated with the great moral posture they did not truly have. No matter, this is only a very rudimentary breakdown of these three terms, as each of them can also be paired with other characters, pronounced with different intonations, or infused with other radicals to subtly or drastically alter their meaning. The same is true for nearly every Chinese character, as each can also function as a verb, adjective, noun, and adverb, which is why English translations are often times only faithful in the specific context of translation, if then. Each word can, at any time, and more importantly (for a sacred society) at the same time, function as both a religious metaphor and a literal notion. On top of this, characters frequently have more than one literal meaning, and can serve as puns for other vocally congruent words. The intrinsic versatility of many religious or spiritual terms evolves from their near universality of application, and as such, there naturally becomes a kind of paronymic attraction between explicitly religious words and their most appropriate secular or mundane counterparts. Resulting from this is the onomasiological flexibility of the classical Chinese language, which contributes significantly to the basic mixing between the secular and the religious—as if those were even categorical distinctions in ancient China. Moreover, it engenders the terminological and linguistic environment in which both the conceptual and ontological synthesis between Daoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and the basic anthropocosmic culture of the masses could commence, while neither threatening the uniqueness of each tradition nor imposing religiously biased language. In a specific example of this,

Tu WeiMing describes the assimilation of *dao* into the Confucian vision, as an extralinguistic referent, according to John Berthrong, who writes,

In terms of Confucian religiosity, this extralinguistic referent, when it gives meaning to the person and orients the person toward the Dao, becomes the locus of Confucian transcendence. Tu is careful to point out that this is never a reference to a transcendence beyond the world of mundane human activity. Nor is it a revelation from the spirit world; the Cheng brothers were human beings who were able to comprehend what the texts really taught in terms of their own lives.<sup>25</sup>

When talking about *tian*, 'Heaven,' it was not some abstract concept, it was right there, as the sky, looking down. When talking about *ren* 仁, 'reciprocity' or 'humaneness,'—the character of which is composed of the radicals 人 and 二, meaning 'person' and 'two,'—it thus gained its meaning as a pictorial symbolization of the ideal relationship between two people, any two people, and not only as the 'golden rule,' but as the fundamental nature of being a person, as an ontological standard represented by the character, in a very tangible yet equally profound way. Similar imbrications populate the vast majority of classical Chinese expression. For example, the "language of planting, nurturing, harvesting, and growth is often employed to speak of self-cultivation,"<sup>26</sup> not merely because of a conceptual similarity between the two processes, of self-cultivation and the nurturing or blossoming of flora, but because of a deeper ontological one, expressed in a—perhaps subconscious—linguistic recognition of teleological parallelity, different flavours of blossoming yet towards the same cosmic direction. Thus, it is feasible as a theory that the degree of a civilization's linguistic differentiation between spiritual and material expressions is a marker of the actual ontological differentiation, between the spiritual and the material, as embodied by that civilization. The linguistic differentiation of ancient China was capsized by the lovely ambiguity of classical Chinese, and the dualistic structure was thereby, and for many other sound reasons, not nearly as imposing or bifurcating as today's all-enshrouding dualism. Evidently, in the Confucian dialogue pervades this monistic depth.

## The Fruits

Ironically, for the ancient Chinese, with linguistic ambiguity came ontological clarity and philosophical accuracy. In the same formative breath of its language, its concepts and religious ideas encountered a deep mythological and cultural pluralism, out of which grew a way of life and web of symbols so integrated and co-dependent that no other system of philosophical reduction or

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<sup>25</sup> John Berthrong, "Confucian Piety and the Religious Dimension of Japanese Confucianism," *Philosophy East and West* 48, no. 1 (1998): 53.

<sup>26</sup> Tucker, "Religious Dimensions of Confucianism: Cosmology and Cultivation," 36.

cosmological investigation could even attempt to meaningfully outfox, reinterpret, or reframe it. Tu WeiMing describes this process as an avoidance of dualism, as mentioned above as well, writing,

The continuous presence in Chinese philosophy of the idea of *qi* as a way of conceptualizing the basic structure and function of the cosmos, despite the availability of symbolic resources to make an analytical distinction between spirit and matter, signifies a conscious refusal to abandon a mode of thought that synthesizes spirit and matter as an undifferentiated whole."<sup>27</sup>

*Qi* functions, by appealing to its lack of finiteness, as a metaphorical mode of understanding reality, one which would otherwise be distorted and improperly framed or limited. This is why, "The Way can never be specified in terms of objective doctrines. It is absolutely impossible to establish a fixed model by which all people can learn to become profound persons. The Way can neither be determined by a limited set of rules nor be divided into discrete states in a unilinear procedure."<sup>28</sup> It demands the same elasticity which classical Chinese provides linguistically, and Neo-Confucianism develops reactively. The metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism are thereby able to still find relativity and relevance within the human world, which was a strongpoint of the classical Confucian system. Tu WeiMing continues,

The Confucian quest for a vision of the whole from a humanist point of view is by no means incongruous with the scientific spirit of acquiring empirical knowledge, although it is certainly in conflict with the dogmatic positivistic assertion that only verifiable knowledge is philosophically sound... [As] The Confucian 'six arts,' prerequisites for the educated person, involve arithmetic, as well as ritual, music, archery, charioteering and calligraphy. Furthermore, it is not difficult to see that the Five Classics are rich sources for the study of astronomy, geography, government, history, poetry, and art.<sup>29</sup>

For Confucius, such things differ from each other only by the conceptual space used to envision them. This is true both in terms of Confucianism as well as Neo-Confucianism. Centrality is the fundamental ground of reality from which harmony unfolds upon the world. The process of self-cultivation is "intended to realize the centrality of the universe in concrete human affairs so that the state of harmony among the myriad things can be attained[;] the highest ideal is the synchronicity of 'Heaven' and earth and the symbiosis between different modes of existence."<sup>30</sup> Great masters of martial arts and musical talents, for this reason, see the instrument or the sword not as a separate entity, but as an extension of

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<sup>27</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, 31.

<sup>29</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 76.

<sup>30</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, 21.

their being, of the creative, flawless energy of Heaven. This is the tangibility and activity of Heaven that is so different from the Western Heaven, and from now on I will reference *tian* as Heaven. It is at the locus of Heaven that one fractures into everything else and harmonic convergence is witnessed pointblank. One is poised perfectly at the subterranean juncture which collapses the personal, familial, social, political, and cosmic distinctions between human experience, rendering each of these layers as pseudomorphic parts of a fundamentally inseparable experience. It is from this position of singularity that Confucius speaks of the mundane, the social and the political, which is why the modern novelty of secularity is simply not compatible with the lack of explicit religiosity in classical Confucianism. In his book, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, Herbert Fingarette illustrates this point, as "although occasion for use of such [religious] language is ever present in the *Analects*, its absence is (from our standpoint) glaring... For Confucius, the spiritual is the public, 'outer'—but not in the sense that it is embodied in gods or other nonhuman beings or nonhuman powers."<sup>31</sup> The general lack of gods or supernatural beings in the Confucian tradition is thereby hardly an adequate reason to strip it of its religiosity. Each and every aspect of life had religious relevance, which makes basic sense, especially in light of the defining motif of ultimacy.

## The Paradox of Li

Capturing this ultimacy in finite religious concepts or ideas is naturally limited and logically paradoxical, which explains the responsive ambiguity of ancient Chinese thought. Tu WeiMing writes,

The conscious refusal or, if you will, the inability of East Asian thought to submit itself to the academic compartmentalization characteristic of modern universities is not simply a sign of its lack of differentiation but also an indication of its wholeness with all of its fruitful ambiguities. Indeed, common experiences, such as eating and walking, are respected as having great symbolic significance for moral and spiritual self-development.<sup>32</sup>

Fingarette illuminates a similar notion of ultimacy and singularity through his exploration of the intricate concept of *li*. Regardless of the outlet, of the medium of expression, a kind of metaphysical consistency exists, as a ceremonial bedrock of human interaction and human life, "a life in which," as he depicts in the Confucian context, "the practical, the intellectual, and the spiritual are equally revered and harmonized in the one act—the act of *li*."<sup>33</sup> The versatility of *li*, often translated as 'The Rites,' 'propriety,' or 'ceremonial ritual,' is hardly secured in these dull, single-dimensional English translations. 'Ritual' instills

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<sup>31</sup> Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 46.

<sup>32</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 36.

an incorrect sense of sanctity and separateness, 'The Rites' merely speak to a set of quantitative measures, and 'propriety' posits a half-blind, finite dimensionality upon the acts of *li*. Rather, *li* consists of both this finite representation of behavioral guidelines as well as, and more importantly, an ineffable modular core which effectively translates the metaphysical order of Heaven into specific human actions in specific contexts and moments. In this way, *li* is actually quite similar to *qi*, in that their paradoxical nature effortlessly includes both the flexibility of human thought, concepts, and behavior, as well as the rigidity of Heaven's singularity and ultimacy. *Li* functions as a behavioral membrane between the spiritual and the material, the transcendent and the immanent, and the religious and the secular. The development of structure and conceptual patterns around this membrane is, as with *qi*, inevitable; nevertheless, *li* exists with an emphasis on behavioral performance, which necessitates a certain degree of concreteness that the metaphorical epistemology of *qi* does not. These 'ceremonial rites' prescribe rules as the basic means of conduct by which we must interact with the world in order to not sidestep Heaven. As such, every relationship and every mode of interaction must be directly guided by *li*, and *li* only, of course which is not something other than Heaven at that point. As Tu WeiMing mentioned earlier, all of these relationships by default include the mundane, secularized components of life, such as eating and walking. Fingarette describes this proper embodiment of *li* as a transformative process, such that, for example, "To serve and eat in the proper way, with the proper respect and appreciation, in the proper setting... is to transform the act of mere nourishment into the human ceremony of dining."<sup>34</sup> Although respect, appreciation, and proper setting may be different depending on the specific situation, they are, like *li*, initially based off a certain foundational regularity, that of Heaven. Thus, Fingarette continues, "Acts that are *li* are not mere rote, formula-conforming performances; they are subtle and intelligent acts exhibiting more or less sensitivity to context, more or less integrity in performance."<sup>35</sup> What Fingarette describes here is proper *li*, proper propriety, not merely its skeletal ideation. In book nine of the *Analects*, Confucius himself recapitulates this sensitivity to context and organic intelligence, saying, "The linen cap is that prescribed by the rules of ceremony, but now a silk one is worn. It is economical, and I follow the common practice."<sup>36</sup> Likewise, he contrasts, "The rules of ceremony prescribe the bowing below *the hall*, but now the practice is to bow *only* after ascending it. That is arrogant. I *continue* to bow below the hall, though I oppose the common practice."<sup>37</sup> What arises from *li*'s conceptual interpretations are the social and cultural standards of general civilized discourse, and what arises from its intimate embodiment is an infinitely unique, immovable and irreducible moment of authentic human experience that becomes permanently embedded in the fabric of the universe as an explicit movement away from chaos and to order, the order of Heaven. Such occasions are, in the end, the only things which truly matter. Their

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>36</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 217.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

true impact and substance is gauged through their participants' degree of seriousness, determination, and competence.

## A Comparable Western Model

Although every day, by default, *li* exists in nearly everything we do, and in every relationship or interaction we have with everyone and everything, unless it is consciously acknowledged with a fundamentally religious, or even spiritual, kind of existential gravity, it remains as a bleak, dull memory of our most treasured values and most important human qualities. Fingarette explains just how vast the area of human existence is "in which the substance of that existence is the ceremony. Promises, commitments, excuses, pleas, compliments, pacts—these and so much more are ceremonies or they are nothing. It is thus in the medium of ceremony that the peculiarly human part of our life is lived."<sup>38</sup> Likewise, "Looking at these 'ceremonies' through the image of *li*, we realize that explicitly sacred ritual can be seen as an emphatic, intensified and sharply elaborated extension of everyday *civilized* discourse."<sup>39</sup> It is with this exact respect that Robert Bellah coins the term 'civil religion,' which indicates an analogous pattern specifically in the context of the West, writing, "The civil religion has been a point of articulation between the profoundest commitments of Western religious and philosophical tradition and the common beliefs of ordinary Americans."<sup>40</sup> Like *li*, civil religion manifests more clearly and more potently at certain historical or social moments, in points of concentration which occur as political and social rituals sometimes even charged with explicit religious language. Émile Durkheim, however, depicts these religious rituals as being merely functions of the social process, a methodological reduction with which Confucianism necessarily conflicts. Émile may be right in terms of some purely 'civil religions,' that is, in terms of the often times spiritless social reenactment of tradition without serious appreciation or existential weight—but the social here, for Confucius, is a function of the religious, not the other way around. Nonetheless, as these rituals are more influential, and more designated than others, Durkheim is not misled in depicting their phenomenology, and we can know exactly when and how they occur: "It happens on those awe-inspiring ceremonial occasions when the whole community assembles for its general rites of the clan or tribe... It is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born."<sup>41</sup> At the largest scale, events like state of the union addresses, presidential inaugurations, landmark court cases, and other sociopolitical rituals function as this point of concentration, and are often are infused with specific ritualized gestures and actions, such as swearing oaths, formal dress attire, and traditional phraseology. Now, whether or not such events are, as Confucius would inquire,

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<sup>38</sup> Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 134, no. 4 (2005): 51.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 101.

authentic representations and behavioral manifestations of the mandate of Heaven, is an entirely different question, and will have to be answered momentarily, outside of the Western context, to avoid implicitly questioning the impeccable moral integrity of our government, justice system, and social institutions. Accordingly, although the relationship between the microcosm of our individual lives and the macrocosm of our societal selves is constantly reinforced and reaffirmed by *li*, whether or not these reinforcing social pulses are the symbolic reflections of our cosmic pulses, our true moral progress, of true acts of *li*, and of the relationship between ourselves and the Cosmic Law, is a question of authenticity and sincerity, and of individuals who must compromise with the unavoidable flaws of their society. However, it may be more serious than a compromise of comfort, as Confucius writes, "When a country is well-governed, poverty and a mean condition are things to be ashamed of. When a country is ill-governed riches and honour are things to be ashamed of."<sup>42</sup> Tu WeiMing provides a less absolutist, less pejorative rendition of this idea, for those of us in comfortable nations, writing,

For the self to be ultimately transformed, it must travel the concrete path defined in terms of its primordial ties such as parentage, ethnicity, locale, historical moment, and so forth. Strictly speaking, if the self fails to transform the primordial ties into 'instruments' for moral cultivation, it can only be contextualized and structured to assume a predetermined social role. Yet, its creativity as a moral agent cannot be manifested merely by transcending the context and the structure that determines its center of relationships. The authentic approach is neither a passive submission to structural limitation nor a Faustian activation of procedural freedom but a conscientious effort to make the dynamic interaction between them a fruitful dialectic for self-cultivation.<sup>43</sup>

American civil religion is essentially a collectivity of many of these dialectics, manifested contextually and with respect to ideas and principles of constitutional weight—literally!—which forge individual and societal identity, and are, at their heart, not unlike the values of Confucianism. Although this brutal and short-lived summary of civil religion hardly encapsulates the detail and complexity of Bellah's essay, yet alone the implications of its extension into our views and definitions of religion, it is included in this discussion of *li* to better frame the same paradoxical religiosity and ceremonial foundation of secular Confucianism by linking them to culturally and historically similar—but more importantly relatable—ideas. Nonetheless, in addition to butchering Bellah's civil religion, the exterior identification and adequation of these meager ritual samples is also equally as insulting to *li*.

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<sup>42</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 212.

<sup>43</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 145.

## The Sacrality and Social Ripples of *Li*

Not only does the unending scope of *li*, whose applicability is naturally and logically inexhaustible due to its intimacy with the ultimacy and singularity of Heaven, include much more than political rituals, ranging from modest social gatherings to the most minute interactions with insects and even internal processes of thought, but it also engenders, once again by necessity, the intuitive, ineffable, and infallible mode of interaction, as informed by Heaven, from which our conduct in such matters—and really, all matters—is and ought to be conducted, which inevitably becomes reduced from its singularity to a multiplicity, as a set of finite rules, under the conceptual glare of political or religious institutions, and amidst less than adequate regurgitations of tradition. The social, political, and moral usefulness of *li* is thus both its greatest strength and its greatest weakness. On one hand, it can be rightfully revered as and therefore enacted as the most important pattern of authentic human expression, as a tangible mobilization of the intangible creativity and immovable harmony of Heaven, resulting in the manifestation of the sacred, what Mircea Eliade would call a *hierophany*.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, its truths and prospects for human civilization can be recognized as, and therefore enforced as, these merely, which inexorably strips them of the potential to impact humanity at a deep, lasting level, the kind of supreme level that is both far beyond the praxis of finite justice and crafted empathy yet also ironically cozy with the original sweetness of their societal fruits. It is by this same token that Tu WeiMing informs us, "Social usefulness does not determine the worth of morality. Rather, it is morality that circumscribes the ultimate efficacy of social values."<sup>45</sup> The intellectually and socially involuntary tendencies towards the domestication, institutionalization, conceptual reduction, and sterilization of *li* are what mistakenly reverse this worth, always end with some form of discord, and enable improper enactments of *li*. To better understand this process, we will look at Victor Turner's work of *The Ritual Process* in which he conveys, specifically with respect to human interaction, the basic essence in moments of ritual, their aftermath and their importance to society. Turner expounds with his explanation of *communitas*, the Latin word of 'community' which he prefers in order to emphasize the deep modalities of social relationship over the general connotations of 'community,' exactly how ritual, among its many other functions, informs and carves the structure of a society. From its initially pure and qualitative enactment to its subsequently embellished and quantitative assessment, ritual, and in this case *li*, is not "a matter of giving a general stamp of legitimacy to a society's structural positions. It is rather a matter of giving recognition to an essential and generic

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<sup>44</sup> Mircea Eliade uses the term *hierophany* to depict the manifestation of the sacred, not solely as the sacred revealing itself or solely as the ritual performer invoking its presence, but as an ineffable and contextually dependent conflation between these two contrasting aspects of *hierophanic* phenomenology. For more information see *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 11-17.

<sup>45</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, 68.

human bond, without which there could be *no* society."<sup>46</sup> It forms the creative and empyreal substance of what Turner calls *existential or spontaneous communitas*, which are fleeting ritual moments that embody a recognition of true humanity, ultimate reciprocity, innate union, and equanimity without uniformity. The fundamental human essence of these moments is characterized in the Confucian vernacular as *ren* (which has a intricate relationship to *li* and will be elaborated upon later). As expressed earlier, however, this experience becomes objectified and "soon develops a structure, in which free relationships between individuals become converted into norm-governed relationships between social personae."<sup>47</sup> The result of such evolutions, or if you will, devolutions, is *normative communitas*, Turner continues, "where, under the influence of time, the need to mobilize and organize resources, and the necessity for social control among the members of the group in pursuance of these goals, the *existential communitas* is organized into a perduring social system."<sup>48</sup> Finally, created from the recognition of moral force and idealism integral to the original ritual are "*ideological communitas*, which is a label one can apply to a variety of utopian models of societies based on *existential communitas*."<sup>49</sup> With respect to Confucianism, no doubt the proper enactment of *li* in a social setting enables its participants to experience the beauty and truth of *existential communitas*, which then become *normative communitas* with finite relational customs such as filial piety, and then become *ideological communitas* such as Confucianism itself. Over time, as the social structures and ideas become less effective at embodying or even merely symbolizing the original principle of Heaven, which constitutes the initial *existential communitas*, they become corrupted, susceptible to exploitation, and poor representatives of the divine, which is why, "In practice, of course, the impetus soon becomes exhausted, and the 'movement' becomes itself an institution among other institutions—often one more fanatical and militant than the rest, for the reason that it feels itself to be the unique bearer of universal-human truths."<sup>50</sup> In essence, this original religious phenomenology, or *hierophany* so to speak, is followed by efforts of preservation, and then of aggressive attachment to their conceptual fossils which are remembered with an ultimacy and absolute weight they no longer truly carry.

## The Development of Social Rigidity and Its Modern Criticisms

As discussed earlier in the brief analysis of the dualism between transcendence and immanence, and between the many other analogous pairs of ontological binaries, it is the temporary experience of nondual reality, what could be depicted as of *existential communitas*, which breathes life and metaphor

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<sup>46</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure* (Chicago: Aldine Pub., 1969), 97.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

into dualistic structure, that of *normative* *communitas*. This monistic yoke of the sacred which fuses duality into one is as well the source of the authoritarian estimations of Confucian social structure, and is how, to reiterate Tu WeiMing, "Filial piety and loyalty became absolutes."<sup>51</sup> Social modalities become metaphors for divine modality and are charged with the same fortitude as attempts to invoke in society, or at least symbolize in social relationships, the sacred. For example, just as we are to transmit the creative and rectifying forces of Heaven, a son must transmit the work of his father. It is by the same flow and nature of movement that other social relationships are established. Ideally the relational stamina and reciprocity is *powered*, not *forced*. The Confucian idea of mutual respect is perhaps the most fruitful in this regard, in the activation of true social relationships, as Tu WeiMing describes them, "The father-son relationship, not unlike the student-teacher relationship, or for that matter the husband-wife relationship, is... a 'covenant' based upon a fiduciary commitment to a joint venture. Through the significant other, one deepens and broadens one's selfhood. This is the meaning of the Confucian self not only as center of relationships, but also as a dynamic process of spiritual development."<sup>52</sup> The intricate canopy of relational characterizations stems from the basic sub-principle of *ren*, reciprocity, which is felt in the moment of sacrality, as an absolute and unconditional mutuality, as of Heaven, and is then manifested varyingly in different relationships: Tu WeiMing continues, "The five relationships are governed by five carefully selected moral principles, each representing an important dimension of human community."<sup>53</sup> While it is true that Confucius differentiates between these and moral principles, he does so only in order to highlight specific ideas about behavior that are more relatable and meaningful in certain contexts. Ultimately, however, they are inseparable aspects of the single foundational metaphysic from which they form their utmost and prime definition. Outside of the monistic intensity, their differences are still finitely relevant and thus important for the extraction of sacrality into social meaning. This is perhaps the job of the *junzi*, the noble person, which is both a social position and a moral position, ideally at the same time. If not, the modern criticisms of Confucianism become somewhat valid. It is not the spiritual ideals or the fundamental principles which are the true subjects of critique, but rather the ideological crust they amass over time. This is what Tu WeiMing means when he says, "If we take Neo-Confucian religiosity seriously as a viable persuasion rather than merely as a historical phenomenon, we must criticize the outmoded Neo-Confucian ideology in order to retrieve the deep meaning of its universal humanistic teachings."<sup>54</sup> The generalizations and sweeping absolutism in rendering true Confucian principles into fixated social patterns are based off a certain biological rationality as well, as Tu WeiMing continues, "The rational for filial piety, however, is not obedience for its own sake but a natural response to the biological, social and cultural gift that constitutes the irreducible reality of

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<sup>51</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, 136.

<sup>52</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 128.

<sup>53</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, 55

<sup>54</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 145.

our existence."<sup>55</sup> One of the most criticized aspects of Confucian ideology, which should be mentally separated from Confucian religiosity or spirituality for this reason, is the lack of equality for women. It should be noted though that the roles and duties for certain genders and classes, prescribed by Confucian social mores, are defined with respect to the understanding that certain genders and classes develop different skills and crafts, abilities which are in turn products of the status quo and would likewise take a much different form if 're-rendered' today. Certain aspects would change, but certain aspects would likely stay the same, for example the reverence and superiority of elders over children, or masters over students, would all stay the same. There is, indeed, a basal body of logic and equality, a simple physics, which such mores approximate. And so, although the Confucian stance here is fundamentally the idea of 'equality without uniformity,' detestable misogyny was still prevalent for the same reason that the *junzi* was often times not representative of that title or position. In the same way, the ideas and the conceptual principles of *ren*, and probably of *li* and *xiao*, were not fully representative of the sacred unity, the infallible physics of sacred social relativity upon which they were initially based. This is depicted as Tu Weiming states, "Each dyadic relationship is situated in the context that will assure its significance as an integral part of the total network. When Confucianism is attacked because of its perceived authoritarianism... a different issue is being addressed: the politicized Confucian ideology as a mechanism of symbolic control in traditional China."<sup>56</sup> In the same degeneration explained by Turner as the 'fall and decline into structure and law,' the principle of *ren* and its conceptual derivatives became reified and thus inevitably squandered and mishandled. Nonetheless, the Confucian tradition and the noble person are when viewed from a religious bearing truly inclusive, not exclusive. In fact, the frequently cruel demeanor of China's modern ethicality with respect to such things as mental retardation, sexuality, poverty, weakness, blindness or other physical disabilities, and to the female gender is a product entirely of its own, and if it has had any historical interactions with true Confucian ideals then it would be as moments of seriously harsh friction and awkwardness. In this inclusive manner, Confucius says, "In archery it is *not going through* the leather which is the principle thing—because people's strength is not equal. This was the old way."<sup>57</sup> The aim itself was critical, just as virtue is, but to flaunt it and become powerful and recognized is to ruin it and fester inequality. Of course, the cultivation of one's talents and development of skills is highly important, but it must be done with humility. Perhaps while in the company of those who are of equal or close skill in archery, piercing the leather would be acceptable, and even doing so as best as possible, but also perhaps not. These are the sorts of intricacies that cannot be properly assessed purely through language or concept, and require the intuitive moral soundness and contextually sympathetic responsivity of *ren*. Such is also the case in terms of social modality, in that it must be seen as part of a larger, perfect whole. The metaphysical unity of Heaven

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<sup>55</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, 111.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 160.

is definitionally humanitarian, gentle, empathetic, unselfish, and righteous, which is why, in Neo-Confucianism, the cosmological image is, as Tu WeiMing writes,

not wedded to a male-dominated symbolism. A natural consequence of the lack of a fully institutionalized mediated structure (such as the priesthood) between the mundane and the transcendent in the Confucian tradition is the absence of any theological justification for the creation of an exclusively male spiritual leadership. While women were long excluded from state examinations and from higher education, these practices are not prescribed by Confucian moral metaphysics."<sup>58</sup>

After all, the position on the role of women is "predicated on a vision of society in which women, like men, actively shape its moral character."<sup>59</sup> The idea of 'equality without uniformity' reflects the importance of diversity—of each and every person's uniqueness of character and ability—to the greater spiritual goal of maximizing creative moral progress and reflecting the infinitely diverse aspects of the divine. 'Equality without uniformity' is how, for example, in the words of Mencius, "The noble person loves creatures but is not humane toward them. With the people he is human but not affectionate. He is affectionate towards his parents, humane toward the people, and loving toward creatures."<sup>60</sup> This attribution of different qualities of behavior towards different types of situations is Mencius' attempt to articulate explicitly what he knew implicitly. One's knowledge and relationship to Heaven dictates the specificity of proper interaction, as it naturally changes with the object and the moment, with each and every one of our world's differently natured objects and moments. Moreover, this is why, as explained in the *Doctrine of the Mean*, "In a position of wealth and honour, he does what is proper to a position of wealth and honour. In a poor and low position, he does what is proper to a poor and low position. Situated among barbarous tribes, he does what is proper to a situation among barbarous tribes... [there is] no situation in which he is not himself."<sup>61</sup> There is, at the core, *ren*, which is the subtle and intelligent hypersensitivity to everything as an ontological feature of unfathomable monism, yet a structure of ethics can be aggregated around it to get at the gist. The gist so conceived is an inadequate conceptual fossil of the experience of sacred union and is responsible for ethical failures such as war, slavery, and misogyny. Of course, it's also better than nothing, which is the idea that fuels a pragmatic motivation of Confucianism.

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<sup>58</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 144.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> de Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 156.

<sup>61</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 395.

## The Confucian Pragmatism

Confucius did not follow the Daoist imperative of speechlessness, of perfection, because although it was the only principally ultimate, flawless Way of Heaven, the second best option was still fundamentally the same, and still somehow second to none. Confucius chose embodiment over full absorption, and thus was a *junzi* instead of a sage. Sagehood is essentially the abstract perfection, eternally and entirely immune and above everything else, whereas the noble person, the *junzi*, is almost like an avatar of the sage, or of Heaven, as the bridge between the spiritual and the material. As the ordinary man clings to conceptual fossils blindly, the *junzi* rejuvenates and preserves these fossils' inner wisdom for society, and the sage actualizes totally the absolution and perfection of sacrality, untouched by the profane world. While the sage, by definition, lives wholly in the rapture of *existential communitas*, and is effectively dead—absorbed into *The Force*<sup>62</sup> like posthumous Obi-Wan—the *junzi* is not eternally exiled to that sacrality but rather returns to society with its goodies. His intimacy with virtue and the sacred, with seriousness and sincerity, however, is still comparable to that of the sage, both of whom are self-cultivated and much more virtuous than the ordinary man. Confucius highlights this contrast when he says, "Such was Hui that for three months there would be nothing in his mind contrary to perfect virtue. The others may attain to this on some days or in some months, but nothing more."<sup>63</sup> Experiencing such ultimacy, such perfection, threatens our existence as we know it, and thus is too potent to live in 'full, real time' for all but the Son of Heaven, who exists as the political image of the sage. Logically, each and every Confucian can't be the perfect Son of Heaven. Each can't realistically have the same degree of virtue as Confucius. The tradition simply outlines these ideals as the maxim of development, of teleological fruition, for which the majority of us are utterly unprepared though ultimately capable. John Berthrong explains this further,

We as finite human beings have the tendency to be limited by our finitude, to be inordinately interested in what is near and dear to us; we have a limited vision of our full humanity. It is only Heaven that can lure us forward from this state of finitude. There is, of course, nothing wrong with being finite, for that is our state. The only problem is that we become stuck with needlessly limited concerns. A sympathy for Heaven as humaneness and empathy opens us up to other opportunities and to a larger view of what it means to be a person, the responsibilities of community, and the ultimate transformation of a larger vision of humanity, community, and cosmos.

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<sup>62</sup> George Lucas uses *The Force* in his cinematic films series *Star Wars* as a deep metaphysical presence not quite as an anthropomorphic divinity but certainly as an immortal substance or even being, with a defined moral direction, from which all life arises and to which all life returns. When the character Obi-Wan knows he must die, he willingly diffuses into pure Force; he can no longer interact with the material world except as Force itself. For more information see Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers' *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

<sup>63</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 186.

In this sense, Tu no doubt agrees with Mou Tsung-san that the mark of real humanity is to be ceaselessly creative amid the mundane details of human life. No single perfection, no one achievement lessens the obligation to try again to do so with as broad vision and sympathy as possible.<sup>64</sup>

Here, Berthrong speaks with the same Confucian utilitarianism which recognizes the need to unpack the ultimacy of Heaven as a pragmatic, tangible, and less romantic 'plan-b' option that could be reasonably followed and understood as a means of preparing oneself materially to eventually encounter the sacred, or as a means of only occasionally interacting with the sacred. In this form, the most influential and pragmatic advice of Confucius was likely in the realm of politics and society. When asked how he would fix the problems of the state if he were to become its ruler, Confucius thought about how the largest source of corruption and misused power was from the appointment of individuals who were morally unfit to fulfill properly the actual roles and duties of the position to which they were appointed. Such roles and duties had been prescribed by Heaven as an external reflection of its own order, which created certain position titles, yet their inner meaning and implications had over time been stripped or forgotten. This resulted with what Confucius saw as the most problematic aspect of the state, a cascading political mesh of high governmental positions each of which had to name power alarmingly disproportionate to the moral development of those who held them. Fundamentally, this is the idea behind all political corruption. It festers in a complex governing system that still enjoys both the hierarchical skeleton and recognized authority of that from which its directing individuals have been disjointed, Heaven. This is precisely the issue explained by Mencius as well: the nobility of man replaces the nobility of Heaven, instead of reflecting it. In response to this problem, Confucius answered with merely two words: *zhengming* 正名, meaning the Rectification of Names. He says, "If the names not be correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success."<sup>65</sup> Therefore, with the same purifying force that one rectifies one's own heart, by making thoughts sincere and words truthful, such governmental positions must be rectified. With this, Confucius intimates not the replacement of the positions or titles themselves, but of those who unduly held them, such that the basic synchronicity between power and ethical responsibility could be restored. Of course, this entire conversation takes place at a dimension below the ultimate, in the eclipse of theory projecting what the finite world and finite government systems might look like if they were more archetypal and redesigned upon the hallowed ground from which they first originated. Such a system would be better than others, but ultimately is another mode of 'tame dystopia.' On the other hand, what Fingarette describes as humanity's ceremonial harmony of complete, spontaneous community—a *spontaneous or existential communitas* as Turner would elicit—is indeed a utopia. For Turner, however, participants in this moment

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<sup>64</sup> Berthrong, "Confucian Piety and the Religious Dimension of Japanese Confucianism," 63.

<sup>65</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 263-264.

of utopian eternity still return to the dystopian world and attempt to preserve, reconcile, and apply their experience of the sacred to the profane, much like a *junzi*. This rectifying process, as it were, is exceptionally similar to what Confucius means by *zhengming*, which isn't quite at the state of ultimacy or eternity, as with sagehood, but is somewhere, somehow, a refinement in structural attention to the divine. Turner writes, "structural action swiftly becomes arid and mechanical if those involved in it are not periodically immersed in the regenerative abyss of *communitas*."<sup>66</sup> The closeness between this spiritual reality and the political order is generative of the world's most successful revolutions and the world's greatest civilizations. In the *Doctrine of The Mean*, this closeness is expressed no less rewardingly; as with the occasional benevolent king or queen who is remembered radiantly throughout history, it reads, "His presenting himself *with his institutions* before spiritual beings, without any doubts arising about them, shows that he knows Heaven...Such being the case, the movements of such a ruler, *illustrating his institutions*, constitute an example to the world for ages. His acts are for ages a law to the kingdom. His words are for ages a lesson to the kingdom..."<sup>67</sup> It's safe to say that Confucius would thoroughly agree with this. Nevertheless, what Fingarette describes is perhaps the final rendition of this process, the ultimate rectification of humanity such that its utopian teleology could finally be made manifest in the flesh; he suggests,

Instead of being diversion of attention from the human realm to another transcendent realm, the overtly holy ceremony is to be seen as the central symbol, both expressive of and participating in the holy as a dimension of all truly human existence. Explicitly Holy Rite is thus a luminous point of concentration in the great and ideally all-inclusive ceremonial harmony of the perfectly humane civilization of the *Dao*, or the ideal way. Human life in its entirety finally appears as one vast, spontaneous and holy Rite: the community of man.<sup>68</sup>

Such a civilization is indeed a utopia, one in which, and as a fundamental requisite to any utopia, the tense dualism between the spiritual and the material has finally and permanently crumbled apart. This *communitas* as all-inclusive, meaning inclusive of every human being and probably more, is perhaps what separates this final utopia from the swift flash of sacred experience of *spontaneous communitas* in which only a select group of properly attuned individuals participate—or in which only those who have concert tickets and free spirits participate. While the implications of *zhengming* are aligned closer with the processes described by Turner, as a voyage to the sacred to return to the world, and not as the ultimate harmonic convergence of Heaven and earth described as the final ideal by Fingarette, they are reflective of the same utopian values. Such values are the values of *communitas*, of the divine social, and in the same way that they are not limited to political ideas or to fixing the

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<sup>66</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, 139.

<sup>67</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 426.

<sup>68</sup> Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 17.

government, neither is the root principle of *zhengming*, which could indeed be applied to popular culture or to a mesh of generic ethics. A prime example of this is how the essential "values of *communitas*[,] [which were] strikingly present in the literature and behavior of what came to be known as the 'beat generation,' who were succeeded by the 'hippies,'"<sup>69</sup> became woven into the Western world, as what was seen by many to be a culturally corrective, rejuvenating, and musically inspired rectification of the Western value system. Indeed, this period and its effects could be recognized as a kind of *zhengming*, but in the sphere of music, art, and culture.

### The Ontological Requisite of Ultimacy

Moreover, if such a process of rectification were truly rectifying, it couldn't possibly be limited merely to the sphere of politics, as *zhengming* was defined, but actually would extend into personal relationships, social workings, ethics, rituals, and most importantly the exhaustively connective divine. It is an effort in harmonization; this means an effort to unearth the true unity between such realms of experience, as an interrelational paradigm most palpable at the human, social, and political scale, yet whose affinity with the subtle, less palpable Cosmic Law both establishes and reveals these other relationships. It is thus from the singularity and ultimacy of Heaven, and the cultivation of such in what may be called an experience of *hierophany* or of an *existential communitas*, that the rectification entailed by *zhengming* is authentic; accordingly, Tu WeiMing writes, "If human relations are superficially harmonized without the necessary ingredients of self-cultivation, it is practically unworkable and teleologically misdirected... Confucians recognize that human beings are social beings, but they maintain that all forms of social interaction are laden with moral implications and that self-cultivation is required to harmonize each one of them."<sup>70</sup> This self-cultivation is, once again, representative of the absolute and ultimate nature of Heaven, as a guiding force for the ethical orientation and integrity of the individual, as a sacral requisite for the ethical charge of *zhengming* and by extension of general political counseling and social activity. For example, in the later Zhou dynasty, Confucius and Mencius often found themselves coaching political leaders, a process which for them was necessarily religious, yet in order to be truly effective needed to also be received as such. Unsurprisingly, they were frequently disappointed as their advice was understood far too often as only being applicable to politics, or to just one or a few aspects of life, and not to its totality. Because of this, as Rodney Taylor explains, "as political advice, the teachings of Confucius and Mencius have often been regarded as rather naive. When seen as religious counsel, however, the risk the Confucian teacher demands becomes a profound reflection of religious

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<sup>69</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, 112.

<sup>70</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 56.

commitment."<sup>71</sup> Such a religious commitment is reflected not merely as correct political action, but as individual rectification, familial regularity, social alignment, and *then* as political governance, all of which are in accordance to the Mandate of Heaven. This is obviously much more to ask for than political decency. Confucius was merely explaining that, if it is the singular nature of Heaven which saturates one's inner determinations and thoughts, then that is what will become manifest in the world. And if this is the case, then one's interactions with everything else are proper. So, in order to properly interact with the world and to have proper politics, one must *follow* Heaven. From one's relationship to Heaven unfolds this intuitive relationship to everything else. The pureness of one's thoughts whilst alone and free from the watch of others is, when all the folds of causal existence align at the end of time, just as important as the integrity of one's speech at a public event or the authenticity of one's explicit actions towards others. It is the ultimacy and singularity of Heaven which by ontological necessity is uninterrupted in both the private quarters and the public eye. This is how the truly virtuous and sincere man lives exhaustively, and therefore "even when he is not moving, he has a *feeling of* reverence, and while he speaks not, he has *the feeling of* truthfulness."<sup>72</sup> In the philosophical commentary on the *Greater Learning*, this idea is articulated as well: "What truly is within will be manifested without. Therefore, the superior man must be watchful over himself when he is alone."<sup>73</sup> Confucius himself even states, "In the Book of Poetry are three hundred pieces, but the design of them all may be embraced in one sentence—'Having no depraved thoughts.'"<sup>74</sup> In a political sense, the state's social and economic welfare are thereby indicative of the severity of corruption within the body of the government, just as each individuals' behaviors are indicative of their own inner nature and thoughts. For this reason, "When right principles prevail in the kingdom, there will be no discussions among the common people."<sup>75</sup> It is not a matter of concealment, but a matter of elimination. The leader thereby must, Tu WeiMing writes, "realize that what he does in private is not only symbolically significant but has a direct bearing on his ability to lead, for the kind of people he can attract to take responsible positions in the government depends, in large measure, upon his personal character."<sup>76</sup> The cultivation of Heaven, as explained to be the root of everything else, is by its own nature singular; but, although inwardly, and fundamentally, the Mandate of Heaven is embodied as a singularity, as the sole object of one's mind and focus, it is diffused into every breath, thought, word and action, diffracting outwards into individual, social, political, and explicit ritual behaviors. It is the perfectibility of ourselves, the reorganization of our outer life to reflect this singularity, and the restoration of the unobserved cosmic wholeness as our being. It is principally, in religious terms, salvation. And in the light of this basic

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<sup>71</sup> Rodney Taylor, *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 4.

<sup>72</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 432.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>76</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*, 50.

soteriological underpinning, the other less explicitly religious elements of Confucianism assume their necessary religious depth: the creation and preservation of social and economic justice aren't merely pursued as cases of civic duty, but are actually products of the outward extension of one's individual relationship with Heaven; the basic order and occurrences of daily life aren't merely the expressions of individual nature and intention, but are unavoidably grounded in the natural rhythm of this Cosmic Law; the structural fabric of society isn't just the sandbox of political agenda or the playful language of feudal power, but is fundamentally anchored as an emulation of the divine order itself; and, the calibration of one's moral compass isn't merely through an institutionally sanctioned common conception of the good, or through an arbitrary concentration upon cultivating talents and character, but is quintessentially guided by the Mandate of Heaven and expressed behaviorally through the proper understanding of *ren* and its embodiment in *li*. The experience of this monistic singularity is by nature ineffable. There is just one rule, one fundamental reality, of Heaven, which designates for us one principle, of *ren*, from which all other rules and concepts radiate outwards. The degree of connectivity between *ren* itself and the conceptual derivations of *ren*, such as *li*, is, at the relative scale, proportional to the measurable quality and faithfulness of its manifestation, and is, at the ultimate scale, arbitrary unless fully connected. Correspondently, Tu WeiMing writes, "Since the Way is not shown as a norm that establishes a fixed pattern of behavior, a person cannot measure the success or failure of his conduct in terms of the degree of approximation to an external ideal."<sup>77</sup> It's rather known intuitively, in the deep formless algorithm of Heaven.

## Singularity to Multiplicity, Mastery to Mediocrity

And so it was from Heaven that Confucius drew solutions to the problems of the state, not from his own logic. But, more precisely, it wasn't just the prospect of solving political issues that motivated Confucius to answer them, but rather his political advise inevitably stemmed outward, as one tiny aspect of reflection, from what he knew to be a much larger, more meaningful, grand mechanism working behind the scenes, the Mandate of Heaven. Therefore, by default, all facets of life, from our thoughts and words to our beliefs and actions, no matter the context, must ensue directly in concord with Heaven's orchestra, lest the pleasing music of humanity's collective symphony devolve into, as it historically tends to, the moans of starvation and the shrieks of war, or perhaps into, more modernly, the quarrels of human rights and the slime of ideological gridlock. We must play the notes not merely correctly, as various governments and states have done before, but for the right reason, at just the right time, with the proper rhythm, with the right instruments, and of course, for the right audience. Certain aspects of generalization can be extracted and expressed with words, but ultimately the reliance on merely the conceptual framework is riddled with flaws, and is

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<sup>77</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 83.

intended for the masses, whereas the actual, deep understanding and affinity with Heaven is by nature exhaustively correct, in all situations. Likewise, it is reiterated innumerable times that when the finite, purely political or logical manifestations of these ideals, of humaneness, rightness, loyalty, and truthfulness, in the form of social hierarchies, laws, and values for example, are stripped of their connection to the divine, they lose that initial potential to enable harmony within the society. They become finite, imperfect, and misrepresented instruments, commonly exploited to gain power. With respect to a similar idea, Confucius writes, "The virtuous will be sure to speak *correctly*, but those whose speech is good may not always be virtuous. Men of principle are sure to be bold, but those who are bold may not always be men of principle."<sup>78</sup> This can be applied to the phenomenology of *Li* as well, in that the virtuous will always be acting out *Li*, but those who act out *Li* may not always be virtuous. If such actions are driven by the mere idea or prescriptions of *Li*, without sincerity or true propriety, then they are improper. In adhering to such rules conceptually, we may blindly follow an imperfect estimation of Heaven's desires as expressed systematically, as half-truths which, while perhaps suitable for the lay people, are ultimately inadequate. This is what Confucius means when he says, "The filial piety of nowadays means the support of one's parents. But dogs and horses likewise are able to do something in the way of support—without reverence, what is there to distinguish the one support given from the other?"<sup>79</sup> This reverence must not be feigned or crafted, as that will inevitably manifest itself in a form, perhaps even in an overlooked or unrecognized form, of disrespect. If a symphony cannot intimately feel their music, it would be comical to observe them as they attempted to mechanically analyze and reproduce the invisible flows of rhythm and cadence which make music more than math. Their religious dimensions are forgotten while their conceptual vessels are stumbled over. As explained by Mencius,

There is the nobility of Heaven and the nobility of man. Humaneness, rightness, loyalty, and truthfulness—and taking pleasure in doing good, without ever wearying of it—this is the nobility of Heaven. The ranks of duke, minister, or high official—this is the nobility of man. Men of antiquity cultivated the nobility of Heaven and the nobility of man followed after it. Men of the present day cultivate Heavenly nobility out of a desire for the nobility of man, and, once having obtained the nobility of man, they cast away the nobility of Heaven. Their delusion is extreme, and, in the end, they must lose everything.<sup>80</sup>

The nobility of man is a weak, feeble reproduction of the nobility of Heaven. A corrupted government is one which only maintains the nobility of man, whereas a proper government is one which maintains the nobility of man as the embodiment of the nobility of Heaven. Each high official, minister, and duke must properly

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<sup>78</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 276.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>80</sup> de Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 153.

fulfill the roles of the positions that they claim to hold, as the positions themselves were derived from the order of Heaven, and so the behaviors of those who hold them must also derive from Heaven. These finite representations of power ideally symbolize each individuals' self-cultivation and embodiment of the divine personality, with the finite amount of power somehow proportional to one's success and commitment towards this infinite humaneness. The Son of Heaven is the mobilization of the climax of this embodiment. Of course over time, however, as the nobility of man separates from the nobility of Heaven, and as the integrity of the government slowly decays, even this finite imposition of order and equality is ruined. No longer is it an imperfect, mediocre representation of the divine, but an even lower state of degeneration. Fingarette displays these two possibilities of finitude, writing, "there are two contrasting kinds of failure in carrying out *Li*: the ceremony may be awkwardly performed for lack of learning and skill,"<sup>81</sup> which is analogous to a tyrannical or utterly incompetent governmental instrumentation that also lacks any sanctity, "or the ceremony may have a surface slickness but yet be dull and mechanical for lack of serious purpose and commitment,"<sup>82</sup> which is analogous to an adequate or viable governmental orchestration but which suffers from spiritual rigormortis. The solution to both of these similar issues remains the same, as constant as Heaven itself, because the proper embodiment of Heaven is the solution. This is why, Fingarette continues, "Participation and training are essential, but it is the ceremony that is central..."<sup>83</sup> which at its maximal enactment not only rectifies the state, but the entire cosmos, in the collision of the microcosm and the macrocosm. As written in the *Greater Learning*,

[with] their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their States were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy. From the Son of Heaven down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything else.<sup>84</sup>

In this idealism, the power of such titles, Confucius argues, is paired with their moral responsibility, which is the result of the unifying and thus rectifying process—between the cosmic order and the political order—of *zhengming*. This is why, in Zhou Dunyi's account of the metaphysical, Robin Wang explains that "unity of all things is primary; their differentiation into a multiplicity of things is secondary. Within this assumption of primordial unity, the task of metaphysics is to give a coherent account of the patterned interrelationships of all things."<sup>85</sup> Out of these patterned interrelationships is derived a system of ethics, which is the compass of *zhengming*, but that system of ethics cannot be properly recognized if the metaphysical grounding is ignored. Zi Gong explains this problem in

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<sup>81</sup> Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 8.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>84</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 359.

<sup>85</sup> Wang, "Zhou Dunyi's Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained," 318.

speaking of Confucius, saying, "The Master's *personal* displays of his principles and ordinary *descriptions* of them may be heard. His discourses about *man's* nature, and the way of *Heaven*, cannot be heard."<sup>86</sup> Political advice becomes political instead of religious, social advice becomes social instead of religious, and personal advice becomes personal instead of religious. Thus, they become profane, desacralized, isolated, and finite.

## The Pinnacle of Heaven

One could certainly speculate about the great many causes, at the human scale, of why and how such devolution occurs: the inability of language to fully capture the perfect divine, the inevitable forces of greed and ignorance which plague the prospects of power, and the shifting sands of time and cultural paradigms which naturally outmode each other. However, at its root, the fault is one of ontological proportions, of the phantasmagoric drama between the spiritual and the material, the perfect and the imperfect, and the sacred and the profane. What is not entirely and eternally perfect can be contaminated with the smallest flaw, and thus becomes wholly flawed. However, within the realm of the imperfect, we may measure finite success and morality, define efficient societal and political schemes, and estimate the meaning of compassion, as metaphorical approaches towards perfection, as conceptually assessed from ritual glimpses of the spiritual or the profound. It is from their origination at the sacred that such finite laws and ethics are bestowed with their efficacy and sound logic. They are then used by civilization to make the world, as it were, 'better off.' Nonetheless, while the world may be perceived as 'better off' or 'worse off,' there exists a point of existential change which fundamentally separates the asymptote of finite progress from the eternity of utopia. As previously discussed, the collapse of this dualism, between the spiritual and the material, the macrocosm and the microcosm, and Heaven and earth, is what renders moments of true teleological incarnation, and is therefore what eventuates the finale of human existence. However, as long as there is abstract space between subject and object, or one person and another, there remains a tragically inactivated modality of relationship between them, one which when activated becomes, paradoxically, characterized by a superlative mutuality so fathomless and direct that *relationship itself*—as between two separate entities—is no longer an ontological possibility. At the human scale, such mutuality is known as *ren*, and its distinguished behavioral manifestations, those which we can fruitlessly identify and categorize as acts indicative of the possibility of its presence, by default can assume unlimited forms and are infinite in their underlying complexity. Accordingly, terms and ideas borrowed from the finite, secular, material world are notoriously inadequate to represent that which makes *ren ren*, its sacredness. This reservoir of conceptual prescriptions and guidelines to emulate the personalities of *ren* is none other than *li*. Originally and ideally, however, *li*

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<sup>86</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 177.

properly captures the vastness of *ren*, and isn't merely the curriculum for fifth grade cotillion etiquette or the dress code for business casual. Fingarette argues for this crucial deviation between *ren* and *li* as well, writing, "*Li* refers to the act as overt and distinguishable patterns of sequential behavior; *ren* refers to the act as a single gesture of an actor, as his, and as particular and individual by reference to the unique individual who performs the act and to the unique context of the particular action."<sup>87</sup> Acts of *ren*, or if you will, the undifferentiated *act of ren*, is a wholly inclusive, empathetic response hypersensitive to the irreducibility of each unique moment and whatever uniqueness may constitute that moment, as if moments themselves could be so jaggedly dialyzed. Similarly, and in conjunct with the aforementioned profound mutuality of *ren*, it is feasible to make the argument that *ren* so embodied is precisely the same relational actuality, or more accurately, singularity, between subject and object, or I and You, as depicted in Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, such that, "No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance. Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur."<sup>88</sup> The logical paradox which exists between what Buber has said here, in that every means is an obstacle, and Streng's idea that religion is a means of ultimate transformation, emblemizes the unavoidable linguistic migraine in accounting for the radical ontological nature of the point of singularity at which the means and the ends must converge—the same singularity by which the profane becomes the sacred, at which cause finally becomes effect, through which the past becomes the future, and in which ineffable religious encounters occur. This is the pinnacle of Heaven.

## An Abstruse Utopia and The Eradication of Means

Confucius spoke from this point of singularity directly, which is why the most accurate and fruitful interpretation of Confucianism simultaneously acknowledges that, unless otherwise stated such as with ideas of Heaven or as with Neo-Confucian quasi-dualism, there is no distinction between the secular or the religious, and the microcosm or the macrocosm. One must consider the arbitrariness of space between the means and the ends. For Streng, little transformations, moderate transformations, or even profound transformations are all equally—infinately—far away from an ultimate transformation. The ultimacy of an ultimate transformation must finalize, at some point, the means as the ends. Buber articulates along these same lines, explaining how if a means permeates the 'relationship' between I and You, if something other than just this sacredness conceivably exists, then what is sacred

becomes an object among objects, possibly the noblest one and yet one of them, assigned its measure and boundary. The actualization of the

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<sup>87</sup> Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 42.

<sup>88</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner, 1970), 63.

work involves a loss of actuality. Genuine contemplation never lasts long; the natural being that only now revealed itself to me in the mystery of reciprocity has again become describable, analyzable, classifiable—the point at which manifold systems of laws intersect.<sup>89</sup>

For Confucius and for much of his language, everything is sacred in this way, and thus even a nanometer of distance between the means and the ends is a nanometer too much. Of course however, for societies at large, the prospect of gaining a couple kilometers for next year would be just wonderful, since, as civilized, decently behaved animals at the top of the evolutionary chain, we're probably somewhere in the homestretch, right? Conceptually we don't have that much further to go, but ontologically we have yet to begin. The impossible point at which finite means would reach ultimate ends is the mirage which guides society onwards to its utopian dream, a mirage crafted from the fading memories of, as Turner would put it, *existential communitas* and their fleeting moments of eternity. These memories take form as *normative* and *ideological communitas* which, Turner writes, "are already within the domain of structure, and it is the fate of a *spontaneous communitas* in history to undergo what most people see as a 'decline and fall' into structure and law,"<sup>90</sup> not unlike the fall from reciprocity's mystery to dualism's conceptuality, as depicted by Buber. As soon as the means is separated from the ends, it becomes an estimation of the ends, just as *ideological communitas* are estimations of *existential communitas*, and just as *li* is an estimation of *ren*. Nonetheless, if acts of *li* are, as they ideally should be, true manifestations of *ren*, as they were for Confucius and for anyone who understood the infinite depth behind their finite ideas, then the dualism and the separation dissolves. *Li* is no longer an estimation of *ren*, but is exactly *ren*, which is exactly Heaven, just as the means is no longer an estimation of the ends, but is exactly the ends. With different phraseology, Fingarette explains that, "We, therefore, cannot help seeing a problem that Confucius never once entertains. Confucius seems to take for granted, without having questioned or even become aware of his assumptions as such, that there is one *li* and that it is in harmony with a greater, cosmic *Dao*."<sup>91</sup> Confucius was serious, and whatever he saw as reality compelled him to be so. Logically, the purpose of religious vows and solemn oaths is to keep them, to unify the means and the ends right there and right then, with *all* of one's being, no funny business, which is what Confucius did. He did not constantly make exceptions to his moral conduct, compartmentalize between religious life and secular life, or philosophize himself into oblivion. This is why he was so versatile and poignant with his discourse, as he didn't exile himself to the sterilized wisdom of the ivory tower, and was able to talk about every kind of problem from the perspective of having already seen their resolutions. For him, everything was connected and sacred, and therefore each and every word had profound religious resonance, even and *especially* his seemingly mundane dialogues on society, politics, eating, and art. By extension, the dualistic

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>90</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-structure*, 132.

<sup>91</sup> Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 57.

structure between the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the profane, and the macrocosm and the microcosm, for him, ceased to exist outside of conceptual theory. Nothing exists without having relation to something and thus everything else. Nothing exists which is just material, isolated, and profane. This is what Mircea Eliade conveys when he writes, "The man of the archaic societies tends to live as much as possible *in* the sacred.... [because] for primitives as for the man of all pre-modern societies, the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and... *to reality*. The sacred is saturated with *being*. Sacred power means reality and at the same time enduringness and efficacy." He continues, "The polarity sacred-profane is often expressed as an opposition between *real* and *unreal* or pseudoreal... Thus it is easy to understand that religious man deeply desires *to be*, to participate in *reality*, to be saturated with power."<sup>92</sup> A distinction between the sacred and the profane is made possible only in the world of the profane. For the profane is merely obliviousness to the sacred, and is not a real existential condition but the lack of one, a lack which can only be seen as such from an existential condition which is actually real, true, and self-evidently so, the sacred.

### The Dualistic Penumbra

Even the dualism between 'right' and 'wrong,' which is at the surface an incontrovertible theme in Confucianism, is merely a metaphor for sacred interactions and profane (or perhaps 'meaningless' would suffice too) interactions, respectively, such that what is ultimately and wholly right is sacred and anything else at all is profane, including what is probably right, conceptually right, almost right, and of course everything less than these. This is what is meant when Confucius says, "The superior man, in the world, does not set his mind either for anything, or against anything; what is Right he will follow."<sup>93</sup> What is truly Right is beyond the dualism of 'right' and 'wrong,' as the noble person does not prejudice himself for or against anything, for things he deems as 'right' or against things he deems as 'wrong.' Rather, he *follows* what is Right, as if prescribed to him, as if ordered of him, and not as his own intention, will, or conception of good. In the realm of the sacred, there is no real choice but the illusion of choice which, if humored, shatters the sacred. *Wuwei*, meaning inaction in the Daoist context, is just this, and it appeals wholly to the sacred by expressing it apophatically, because not even a superlative cataphasis is truly capable of encompassing the sacred breadth. It is likewise what is meant as Buber writes, "decisions he must continue to make in the depths of spontaneity unto death—calmly deciding ever again in favor of right action. Thus action is not null: it is intended, it is commanded, it is needed, it belongs to the creation; but this action no longer imposes itself upon the world, it grows upon it as if it were non-action."<sup>94</sup> Our intentions and wills when vapid and isolated suffocate

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<sup>92</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959), 13.

<sup>93</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 168.

<sup>94</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 157.

the free play of the cosmos, scattering into the twisting nether as entropic chaos and wasting whatever meager moral charge they had; but, if we align our will to that of Heaven, merely *following* what is Right, starting nothing from our local intellect, and instead surrender our own creativity to Heaven as both its apparatus and emanation, then *what was previously forced becomes powered*. It is likely because of the recognition of this nature that Zhou Dunyi, Robin Wang writes, "[introduced] Laozi's concept of 'wu' (void, empty) into Confucianism and [treated] it as emblematic of the ultimate source of universe."<sup>95</sup> These expressions, however, also existed long before Neo-Confucian developments. As stated in the *Doctrine of The Mean*, "Such being is its nature, without any display, it comes manifested; without any movement, it produces changes; and without any effort, it accomplishes its ends."<sup>96</sup> For this reason, Confucius famously said, "I am a transmitter, not a creator." He was not creating new ideas, and wasn't expressing anything about himself or his opinions on the problems of the world and the state, but was merely channeling the creative will of Heaven, and fitting it with new words, words which were perhaps more suited for his time than ours. They became crystallized and outmoded in institutions and social configurations, and required reworking every so often. Not everyone who heard the wisdom of Confucius listened closely enough, but the logic still worked out. The function of his political, social, and personal advice carried with its conceptual form, from its sacred origins, both the residue of correctness as well as an unstable mass of authoritarian prose. Confucius spoke with a degree of certainty in his voice, an unwavering sense of morality and righteousness derived from the singular, absolute Heaven, which naturally took form in conceptually absolute patterns, as articulations of *everyone's* innate capacity to become perfect, *without exception*, as *wholly unbreakable* rules of filial piety and social structure, and as *definitive, unchangeable* declarations about *li*, *junzi*, and *ren*. Of course, as we've learned, declarations so natured entail the motif of ultimacy, not necessarily as directly true and infallible conceptual articulations, because obviously that's not true, but rather as a set of collaborative ideas and value judgments which, when contextualized and resolved as attempted renderings of the absolute, of the ultimate, of Heaven, can be taken with a grain of salt. This isn't to say that Confucian moral behavior expressed as such is somehow actually finite, imperfect, or only applicable to some parts of our lives, but instead explains that the immovable, unflinching, and apparent absoluteness of religious ethics is difficult, or rather impossible, to express linguistically and conceptually without at least some degree of error or some controversy. This is what is meant as the *Doctrine of The Mean* states, "Were the superior man to speak of his way in all its greatness, nothing in the world would be found able to embrace it, and were he to speak of it in its minuteness, nothing in the world would be found able to split it."<sup>97</sup> As such, we should neither limit the depth of meaning in such expressions of morality by seeing them as imperfect and finite, nor should we, as religions and societies tend to do, accept them as infallible and wholly true based merely

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<sup>95</sup> Wang, "Zhou Dunyi's Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate Explained," 320.

<sup>96</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 420.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 392.

on the conceptual interpretation of them. Rather, we should understand that their resolute, unwavering nature is simply an attempt of Confucius and others to reflect the much deeper, truly infallible absolute about which such ideas awkwardly orbit, Heaven. They are indicative of the singularity and ultimacy of *tian*, as that from which *de* is born, which, with respect to human relations informs the nature of *ren*, which is translated as the conduct of a *junzi* in the tangible language of *li*, *xiao*, *yi*, and of course many, many more. A true experience of Heaven eradicates the usefulness of distinguishing between any of these, that is, at least until singularity is no longer experienced. *Li* and *ren*, *de* and *xiao*, ethics and politics, are One or they are ultimately nothing. Because each and every moment is infinitely complex, and although generalizations about mode, demeanor, and ethical perspective may be pragmatically fabricated as best they can for the purpose of conceptual entertainment or perhaps to materially prepare for the spiritual, the proper response to the world is intuitively channeled through one's relationship to Heaven. When the *Doctrine of the Mean* states, "All complete in its greatness! It embraces the three hundred rules of ceremony, and the three thousand rules of demeanour,"<sup>98</sup> it is a recognition of the originitive sacrality from which these rules and concepts were born and which they attempt to approximate. While Heaven embraces them, if it still does, it also embraces much more. Such finite rules capitulate and reanimate there original meaning at the *hierophany* of Heaven, and then recoil down into the world. Experiences of the divine enable a normally hidden vector of human power to co-create with and by Heaven. From this, humanity has discovered ethics.

## The Confucian Ethic

The artifice of law and ethic is the product of dissolving such experiential intangibilities into the raw and emotionless logic of utilitarian politic. Though it echoes with the same efficacy and authority of the *hierophanies* from which it conceptually matured, it is lacking its original sacrality and experiential essence. In this same way, the Confucian ethic is something which at its core cannot be fixed in the legal archives of city hall. This is because it is quintessentially the embodiment of *ren*, which is nondual. Therefore, in the context of ethics, which, contrary to how we think, cannot just be sloppily separated from its religious ground as a modality of behavior applicable only to certain situations, we are susceptible to ruinously mislocate the Confucian position. This is because our idea of ethics is, as Joel Kupperman puts it, a 'big-moment' ethics. Joel's reframing of Confucian ethics is vital, and speaks to a dire reframing of the tradition and the nature of *the superlative* as a whole. He writes, "A 'big-moment' ethics almost inevitably will place the highest virtue in dependably making the right moral decision, and almost inevitably will treat life apart from moments of moral choice as what I have called a 'free-play'

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<sup>98</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 422.

zone,"<sup>99</sup> which, for the Confucians—often described as walking, eating, sleeping, and thinking—is explicitly depicted *not* as 'free-play,' but as of equal cosmic weight as 'big-moments.' Joel continues,

This zone usually will be very large, since most people are not incessantly in the process of making moral decisions. Thus 'big-moment' ethics is both comfortable and dramatic. It is comfortable because it enables us not to worry too much about most of our life, and, indeed, usually does not demand too much thoughtfulness. It is dramatic because it typically highlights convulsive, visible, and brief efforts of the will."<sup>100</sup>

The truly virtuous person, however, engages in moments of climactic moral decision and moments of pedestrian banality as if they were of equal seriousness, as if driven by a deeper singularity and ultimacy of experience, which of course, they are. This is why, as Joel writes,

It follows also that the thought of someone like Confucius will be easily misunderstood. It is possible to present Confucius merely as the proponent of a moral code quaintly different from our own, in such respects as its stress on filial piety. This, however, is to miss what is most distinctive and interesting in Confucius' philosophy and especially to miss what makes his ethics religious.<sup>101</sup>

What makes his ethics religious, and what really makes any ethics ethical at all, is the ontological requisite of unconditional universality and exhaustivity, in presence, posture, and applicability. This ontological nature of ethics dovetails with that of Heaven, naturally, which is the religious acknowledgement of Confucianism. Our moral navigation is therefore the purpose of our human navigation, and what Confucius defines as ethics is first, the development of navigational techniques which have moderate room for error, then, which progress to having much less room for error, then, are further refined to having room for maybe one small mistake in a lifetime, and finally, which are replaced by the one ultimate technique, which is perfect, wholly and truly perfect, and is the moral navigation which needs no navigation. It is this kind of perfection which is embodied in the virtuous person, because really there's only one kind of perfection, the perfect kind. The possibility of one small mistake in a lifetime is like a sinkhole which asphyxiates the whole ethic. The possibility itself must be removed, and can be, if one merely *follows* the way of Heaven. It will do the calculations if we write down the numbers. Its ultimacy is all-consuming. At all moments and in all places, in order to be valid, ethics must saturate every last fiber of the cosmos, not as an imposed external ideal, but as an innate textural uniformity recognized and expressed as such, lest there be an inconsistency which

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<sup>99</sup> Joel Kupperman, "Confucius and the Nature of Religious Ethics," *Philosophy East and West* 21, no. 2 (1971): 194.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

compromises the integrity of the entire matrix. How Occidental man has managed to strip such a system from both its religious approximation *and* its ontological reality is truly impressive. He has inside of him the gene-deep wiring and dormant wisdom to become the apex of utopian life, yet he cannot see beyond the mediocrity he himself has plastered upon the world.

## A Justified Seriousness

It is perhaps the case that this unconscious retraction, as a global and historical phenomenon and not as a point of criticism, into what Confucius calls 'pettiness,' which is certainly a point of criticism for him and for Buber, is not merely a pedagogic misfortune, but the result of desacralized society. The ultimacy and singularity of Heaven, of *ethics* so to speak, is shortchanged by lukewarm commitments and causal conduct, which are lesser modes of interaction that can only exist if there is no greater meaning attributed to them. What constitutes principle and ethic is immovability, not flexibility. The human conditions of indecisive cowardice, buckling willpower, undue skepticism and hesitant conviction are the nihilistic backwash of living a desacralized life and are the behavioral errors which Confucius attempts to resolve by placing utmost emphasis on seriousness. The seriousness of Confucianism is a byproduct of the realization that perfectibility is indeed a reality. Such a real soteriological prospect certainly couldn't be entertained casually. Rather, it would be the meaning of life. This idea interpenetrates all of Confucianism. For example, in terms of *Li*, it is said that one must be wholly sincere and serious in their performance. This attitude is the peculiar human grit which reanimates the prosaic, mechanical prescriptions of *Li* into meaningful experiences of ceremonial synergy. Fingarette explains that if this attitude is not present, "as Confucius repeatedly indicates, the ceremony is dead, sterile, empty: there is no *spirit* in it. The true ceremonial 'takes place'; there is a kind of spontaneity. It happens 'of itself.' There is life in it because the individuals involved do it with seriousness and sincerity..."<sup>102</sup> The spontaneity and energy of properly enacted ceremonies is precisely that of Turner's *existential communitas*. From their participants' seriousness and sincerity they occur because that is the only audience for whom the sacred is useful. If an entire society is serious, writes Fingarette, "at least insofar as regulated by human convention and moral obligations, [it] becomes in the Confucian vision one great ceremonial performance, a ceremony with all the holy beauty of an elaborate religious ritual carried out with that combination of solemnity and lightness of heart that graces the inspired ritual performance."<sup>103</sup> Sincerity breathes both orientation and determination into human life because, according to Vincent Shih, "it indicates a rare insight which discloses the close connection between the metaphysical reality

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<sup>102</sup> Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 8.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

of human nature and its expression in the concrete affairs of the human world."<sup>104</sup> Without seriousness or sincerity in practice, the metaphysical reality of human nature, the sacred, becomes antiquated and peripheral. Without this reality in the foreground, the profane ways of life resume and social discord relapses. For example, marriage soon eventuates in divorce, which is an utter disgrace to its symbolism; agreements and principles may not be kept and become hollow, as their meaning exists only if they are preserved as serious, as real. What embroiders humanity above the animal kingdom is this capacity for commitment. And in reality, there is only one type of commitment, one type of promise: that which is kept, that which is uttered from genuine reciprocity. Tu WeiMing writes, "Failure to establish genuine reciprocity between husband and wife destroys domestic harmony and indeed social stability... Like all other forms of dyadic relationships, the idea of mutual respect between husband and wife conveys a profound ethicoreligious import,"<sup>105</sup> one which simultaneously dictates the ideals of sincerity and seriousness. Without these, commitments are no longer ceremonial or true, but can be broken at a whim, which validates the acceptability of social castration and isolation as feasible alternatives to social confluence, not to mention the decay of meaningful symbolism. Of course there are innumerable factors and modern complications native to our way of life because of which such entities as marriage, the business world, and religion take the less than perfect shapes that they do, but each and every one of these collective problems speaks to the deeper existential rupture that Confucius vitally identifies at the individual level. It is articulated as the fear of sacrifice, and as relaxing in the comfort of ignoring others, ignoring reality, and ignoring one's true self. It is an avoidance of the cosmic deed, which is an all-consuming choice in which the stakes are so high that even the best of us stop and watch the world from its rapturous juncture while keeping in our pocket a means of returning to blissful ignorance. Buber writes, "The deed involves a sacrifice and a risk. The sacrifice: infinite possibility is surrendered on the altar of the form; all that but a moment ago floated playfully through one's perspective has to be exterminated; none of it may penetrate into *the work*...whoever commits himself may not hold back part of himself...it is imperious: if I do not serve it properly, it breaks, or it breaks me."<sup>106</sup> The *Doctrine of The Mean* mentions this proper servitude for *the work* as well, which reads, "The superior man examines his heart, that there may be nothing wrong there, and that he may have no cause for dissatisfaction with himself. That wherein the superior man cannot be equaled is simply this—his *work* which other men cannot see."<sup>107</sup> It is the experience of Heaven, of the sacred, of the real, of what Mircea Eliade calls the *mysterium tremendum*,<sup>108</sup> the awe-inspiring mystery. Confucius captures the unparalleled weight of its meaning

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<sup>104</sup> Vincent Shih, "Metaphysical Tendencies in Mencius," *Philosophy East and West* 12, no. 4 (1963): 338.

<sup>105</sup> Tu WeiMing, *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*, 142.

<sup>106</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 60.

<sup>107</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 431-432.

<sup>108</sup> Mircea Eliade depicts the awe-inspiring mystery, the *mysterium tremendum*, in reference to Rudolf Otto who finds the *feeling of terror* before the sacred, before the *mysterium tremendum*. For more information see Eliade's *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, 9.

when he says, "If a man in the morning hears the right Way, he may die in the evening without regret."<sup>109</sup> Thus, if one were just willing to take the first step, it might as well be the last.

## Hardcore Metaphysics

Heaven is singular. The basis of singularity is metaphysical. It's nature is superlative, ultimate, and monopolizing. The critical point of Heaven's ultimacy is what makes the Confucian ethic and the Confucian sincerity so different from the generic ethic and sincerity. The monistic depth and metaphysical implication of such simple language as, "The superior man does not, *even for the space of a single meal*, act contrary to virtue,"<sup>110</sup> is rich and boundless, gravely underestimated and lost. They are sacred. They allude to modes of being which enable sacred expressions of humanity and which demand complete humility, sincerity, seriousness and authenticity—all of which must be mutually dependent and co-arising behaviors for any of them, and thus all of them, to be truly complete. When Mary Tucker writes, "It is through this authenticity that human beings participate in the cosmological order of reality,"<sup>111</sup> it is also equally and jointly through humility, sincerity, and seriousness. While it is true that Confucius and others differentiate between these various traits, and in reality between many, many others which haven't been mentioned, in order to emphasize certain points about behavior which are more relevant and meaningful in certain contexts than others, they are ultimately indistinguishable and inseparable quanta of the singular substrate from which they garner superlative definition. In order for one to be wholly true, they must all be true and perfect. The Confucian focus on perfection as an abstract and as a pervasive, sometimes implicit qualifier in anything virtuous or true is not only indicative of the singular, ultimate, and absolute nature of these different traits, as being of Heaven, but also and especially of the ubiquitous fractal nature of all Confucian ideals, practices, and concepts. That is, each specific quality of character, ritual mode, and functionality is more or less the same, appearing as different only to those by whom they cannot be fully grasped, and known as One to those for whom It is. This is how the diversity of a society is as important as its equality. This is how the virtuous person treats animals and humans, stones and the stars all the same, yet one can see him affectionate within the family, humane with other members of society, and loving with animals. It is by this same token that the he is able to foresee events in their true form, and not as mere predictions or estimations based off the past. In the context of the *Doctrine of the Mean*, this divinity of the sage is cataphatically illustrated as the quality of entire sincerity: "It is characteristic of the most entire sincerity to be able to foreknow. When a nation or family is about to flourish, there are sure to be

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<sup>109</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 168.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>111</sup> Tucker, "Religious Dimensions of Confucianism: Cosmology and Cultivation," 15.

happy omens; and when it is about to perish, there are sure to be unlucky omens. Such events are seen in the milfoil and tortoise, and affect the movements of the four limbs....Therefore the individual possessed of the most complete sincerity is like a spirit."<sup>112</sup> Of course, while this idea is often explained as an insight into the subtle threads of causality which connect seemingly unrelated chains of events, the imbroglia of this statement lies in the presumption of the 'chain of events.' Because he has become one with all things, by fully realizing his own constitutional affinity with Heaven, there actually is no such 'chain,' in a similar manner that there is no real 'relationship' connecting the pseudo-dualistic hemispheres in the activity of true reciprocity. The bottom line is, this monism is the ontological implication of singularity and ultimacy. From the *Doctrine of The Mean*, the punch line of Confucian metaphysics is: "The way of Heaven and Earth may be completely declared in one sentence—They are without any doubleness and so they produce things in a manner that is unfathomable."<sup>113</sup>

### Sagehood as Both The Spiritual and Secular Ideal

Nonetheless, this is the kind of language with which religion can become entirely abstracted, meaningless for society and for the ordinary people, or even cancerous. Mozi, an Chinese philosopher around the time of Confucius, who was quite livid with the perpetual failure of blind obedience in ritual protocol to properly render ideal social and political configurations, argued fiercely against the spiritual claims of Confucianism, as rare as they were. Mozi was compelled to speak antagonistically towards the cataphatic spiritual and ritual ideas of Confucianism, not in order to lessen their importance or deny their existence per say, as he frequently mentions their reality, but in order to rescue them from the obsolete specificity of quasi-arbitrary rules and definitions that had built up around them over time. Naturally, Mozi spoke with even more religious ambiguity than Confucius, and emphasis tends to be placed upon his utilitarian voice. Mozi attempts to revamp the basic values and principles of Confucianism with a new pragmatic and utilitarian flavour. Despite the fluctuation in emphasis, however, the most basic and fundamental principle of Heaven still resonates through Mozi's amendments of *Li*, and is what fuels his utilitarian logic, his potent influence, and his moral authenticity. Rodney Taylor writes that these "utilitarian goals, regardless of the dominance they appear to possess, in fact, need to be set within the context of the authority of Heaven acting through its criterion of righteousness. To assess properly the role of the utilitarian goals it is first necessary to recognize the priority of the authority of Heaven."<sup>114</sup> Utilitarianism is a social and political obligation, and therefore by default a religious obligation. The rediscovery of religious dimensionality to ethics and thus to utilitarianism does not diminish or contradict these seemingly

<sup>112</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 417-418.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>114</sup> Rodney Taylor, "Religion and Utilitarianism: Mo Tzu on Spirits and Funerals," *Philosophy East and West* 29, no. 3 (1979): 341.

secular concerns, but actually locates their origin and rectifies their meaning. Similarly, Taylor continues, Mozi's "utilitarian concerns are not lost, but become the content of his religious world-view and to that degree the utilitarian can be said to assume the nature of religious activity."<sup>15</sup> It is in this manner that sagehood is both the spiritual and secular ideal, both the metaphysical and physical equilibrium. Vincent Shih, citing a political conversation between Mencius and King Xiang, further explains the nature of this singular principle and how it guides both religious and secular behavior. He writes,

The people of Qi "attacked Yen and conquered it. King Xiang asked, saying: 'Some tell me not to take possession of it, and others tell me to take possession of it. For a kingdom of ten thousand chariots, attacking another of ten thousand chariots, to complete the conquest of it in fifty days is an achievement beyond mere human strength. If I do not take possession of it, calamities from [Heaven] will surely descend upon me. What do you say to my taking possession of it?' Mencius replied: 'If the people of Yen will be pleased with your taking possession of it, then take possession of it... If the people of Yen will not be pleased with your taking possession of it, then do not do so.'" By ignoring King Xiang's mention of the will of [Heaven] and by keeping close to what the people desire, Mencius kept close to the human plane. From this conception of the will of [Heaven] in terms of human will to the belief in the people's right of revolution is indeed but a short and natural step.<sup>16</sup>

Confucius himself was, however, also not nearly as fond of flowery, vibrant religious language either, and surely for the same good reason. As mentioned earlier, in classical Confucianism, moral and social justification is grounded in metaphor, as immanent and mundane ideas which serve as the evanescent reflection of a higher metaphysical, spiritual reality. Confucius avoided fanatically dissecting the controversial metaphysic of ontological interaction between the material and the spiritual. He reports, "I have been the whole day without eating, and the whole night without sleeping—occupied with thinking. It was of no use. The better plan is to learn."<sup>17</sup> He was a pragmatic, clairvoyant raconteur, who while acknowledging the spiritual reality of Heaven depicted it in the flesh, such to bypass the explicit disclosure of what would inevitably be misunderstood. Placing emphasis on a spiritual reality as extraordinary, supernatural, and soteriological inadvertently creates a false degree of separateness and impalpability that obscures its truly connective and interpenetrating nature. Confucius agrees, "The study of strange doctrines is injurious indeed!"<sup>18</sup> It is with this spirit that John Berthrong writes, "One could be a fine Confucian gentleman and not be spiritual at all,"<sup>19</sup> as the Confucian canon "happily

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>16</sup> Shih, "Metaphysical Tendencies in Mencius," 322.

<sup>17</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 303.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>19</sup> Berthrong, "Confucian Piety and the Religious Dimension of Japanese Confucianism," 52.

incorporates a vast range of human feeling, knowing, and doing."<sup>120</sup> Heaven does not speak but through our own words and actions. Therefore, when speaking about life and death, Mencius sometimes only subtly references the underlying metaphysical foundation of Heaven, by expressing its value to us as something which is beyond our basic carnal and material concerns: "Thus there are things that we desire more than life, and things that we detest more than death. It is not only exemplary persons who have this mind; all human beings have it. It is only that the exemplary ones are able to avoid losing it, that is all."<sup>121</sup> Another way of secular allusion to this profoundly religious idea is through the notion of sacrifice: "One who has fully developed his mind knows his nature. Knowing his nature, he knows Heaven. By preserving one's mind and nourishing one's nature one has the means to serve Heaven... To die in the course of fulfilling the Way is a proper destiny, while dying in manacles and fetters is not a proper destiny."<sup>122</sup> Fingarette clarifies, "Man's dignity, as does the dignity of things, lies in the ceremony rather than in individual biological existence, and this is evident in the fact that we understand a man who sacrifices his biological existence, his 'life' in the biological but not the spiritual sense, if the 'rite' demands it."<sup>123</sup> He is preserved in the eternal ceremony. Such moments procure cultural hope, as a vision of something greater, as a truth of transpersonal psychology, and as, according to Buber, "The bright edifice of the community, [which] is the work of the same force that is alive in the relation between man and God. But this is not one relation among others; it is the universal relation into which all rivers pour without drying up for that reason."<sup>124</sup> It is the intensity of community as divine catholicity, and of the secular as religious, yet still, Confucius treaded lightly around the conceptions of spirits and of traditionally religious concepts, especially around certain audiences and at certain times, as it was understood that such concepts became far too easily exploited, reified, or obscured. One should therefore be "cautious and slow in his speech."<sup>125</sup> He did not want to arouse emotionally and conceptually distractive forces with the promise of the Heavenly ecstasy of divine unity or the sweetness of spiritual beings: "The subjects on which the Master did not talk, were—extraordinary things, feats of strength, disorder, and spiritual beings."<sup>126</sup> Rather, the perfectly virtuous and sincere person, Confucius says, "sacrificed to the dead *as if* they were present. He sacrificed to the spirits, *as if* the spirits were present."<sup>127</sup> Using the phraseology, *as if*, is a critical translation success by James Legge for two major reasons: 1) it indicates how Confucius nullified the degenerative possibility of conceptual zealotry and finite religiosity which frequent positivist religious language, and 2) it indicates how Confucius underscored the importance of seriousness and sincerity as requites to the activation of the utmost propriety and humility

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> de Bary, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, 152.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>123</sup> Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*, 77.

<sup>124</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 155.

<sup>125</sup> Legge, *Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of The Mean*, 251-252.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 159.

which *would indeed* be indispensable in the real existential presence of everything and everyone that has ever died. If such a sacrifice was enacted *truly as if* the dead were present, then they might as well be there, and thus *they attend*. This expressive mode, right here, exemplifies the subtle yet profound religious adumbration of Confucianism.

## Communal Atrophy

Paul Tillich understood that, "religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern, ...manifest in the moral sphere as the unconditional seriousness of moral demand," not unlike the requisite existential and ethical ultimacy of Confucianism, "... in the realm of knowledge as the passionate longing for ultimate reality," characterized in Confucianism as what Mou ZongSan terms 'intellectual intuition,' and, "... in the aesthetic function of the human spirit as the infinite desire to express ultimate meaning," the Confucian rendition of which entails the 'six arts.' Therefore, Paul continues, "[Religion is not a] special function of man's spiritual life, but the dimension of depth in all its functions."<sup>128</sup> In other words, religion properly understood is not just a single aspect of human existence, but is a dimension of depth found and expressed in all aspects of human existence. After all, how could anything ever be immune to the exhaustive ontological parameters of a religion? This is why archaic man, "The man of the traditional societies[,] is admittedly a *homo religiosus*,"<sup>129</sup> as Eliade would say.

It was the viscerality of life itself that was religious, that was alive. Maps were still uncharted and the sky was still the Heavens. The mysteriousness, enchantment, and danger of the pre-industrial world was rapturous in and of itself. Ground zero was everywhere. Moments of human collaboration seemed novel and profound. The feelings of lassitude and boredom were not yet achievable. So much was still to be done. The unique patterns of nature had been recorded innumerable ways but couldn't yet be seen as inconsistent. The different kinds of flora and berries needed to be cataloged in case this information was important. The societal fabric was held together by the prospect of utopia, by the commitment of individuals to not be individuals, by the mutual need to guarantee basic resources and establish a system of logic and order, to ensure its survival as a whole. The difficulty, fear, awe, and fantasticality of this quest was accessible at a moment's notice.

But now, the world map is finally complete, without a single square meter of land or cubic meter of airspace left uncharted or unclaimed. The Heavens is now the atmosphere. All of its divine mysteries are scientifically diffused and regurgitated hourly to inform us of its inconveniences. The reliability of our

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<sup>128</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert Kimball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7-8.

<sup>129</sup> Eliade, *The Sacred and The Profane*, 15.

society has pacified our collective spirit. The sterile certainty of science has tranquilized our humble sense of audience with the universe. And the localization of our thoughts and actions has obscured their true phenomenological connectivity to *the totality of everything else*.

What's right and wrong is often impersonally vented on a liquid-crystal display, through popularized culture, as the hollow values veiled in witless advertisements, or as implicitly affirmed by homicide reports on the news, as if we don't need anything else, as if our modern Cartesian arrogance and security of resources is somehow capable of sustaining our humanity in a meaningful, lasting way. Our generic ethics rest on the laurels of this ambiguous homespun mesh, and fail to guide us from the ideal position of acknowledgment that they are, unless truly sound, ultimately trivial. Walter Kaufmann, in his prologue to Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, is undoubtedly well seasoned in addressing these faults. He encapsulates the pith of Buber's timeless, formless religion:

The recurrent '*Thou*' in the first translation mesmerizes people to the point where it was widely assumed that Buber was a theologian. In fact, the book deals centrally with man's relationship to other men, and the theme of alienation (*Verfremdung*) is prominent in the second part.

The aim of the book is not to disseminate knowledge about God but, at least in large measure, to diagnose certain tendencies in modern society—Buber speaks of a 'sick ages' more than forty years before it became fashionable in the West to refer to our 'sick' society—and to indicate how the quality of life might be changed radically by the development of a new sense of community.

The book will survive the death of theology, for it appeals to that religiousness which finds no home in organized religion, and it speaks to those whose primary concerns is not at all with religion but rather with social change.

But there is much more to the book than this.<sup>130</sup>

The Confucian societal vision is the exact same as Buber's. And there is indeed much more to it than social change. Religion cannot be studied in a vacuum, as if nothing but social glue. It cannot be felt as something which it is not, as without the existential gravity it ontologically demands. This is because it has already suffocated at that point. All that's left are the relics of anthropology and sociology, incapable of anything but conceptual allusion. Religion is much bigger than that.

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<sup>130</sup> Buber, *I and Thou*, 38.

## The Drapery of Religion

Here, I use the term 'religion' to indicate not the explicit ideas of particular religions, the emphatic religiosity often criticized (and rightly so, more often than not) by intellectuals such as Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins, or the recognizable doctrines and practices of religion. But rather, I use it to indicate the symbiotic nexus of art, music, culture, society, politics, logic, poetry, education, ethics, science, philosophy, and literature—and probably more—as the foundational expressive channels of humanity and as the transpersonal and transgenerational nucleus of civilized architecture which has implicitly voiced and preserved throughout all of human history the exact same ultimate purpose. It is something which is welded to the very core of our being. It is an existential imperative to *bear witness*. It is a dire rendezvous between the uninspired predicament of modern life and the thundering creative energy of our genius. It is what fuels the lyrical agility of rap and poetry. It is how each week society has pumping outwards enough wonderful and eloquent literature to last a thousand years. It is what constitutes the principles of vapid economics textbooks and aeronautical engineering manuals. It is at once the most supreme pragmatism and the most irrational emotion, the soundness of Newtonian physics and the playful eccentricity of quantum mechanics. Its sacredness is neither a distraction from the material properties and truths of the natural world nor a blindness to conceptual thought and physical tethers. It is precisely the opposite of this, as each and every one of the chaotic and finite aspects of life is appropriately and perfectly accounted for in seamless relativity to everything else. In experiencing the sacred, Martin Buber writes, "This does not require me to forego any of the modes of contemplation. There is nothing that I must not see in order to see, and there is no knowledge that I must forget. Rather is everything, picture and movement, species and instance, law and number included and inseparably fused."<sup>131</sup> The finite measures and dimensions which make the material world material become sown together and presented as a meaningful sacred geometry which, while still flawlessly preserving material integrity and accuracy renders these aspects from a deeper unity and not an isolated science. Buber continues, "Whatever belongs to the tree is included: its form and its mechanics, its colors and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars—all this in its entirety."<sup>132</sup> It is exhaustive. It finds law and justice. It is the design of denouement behind our orchestrated artistic masterpieces of meaningful and inspiring stories, with impeccable actresses and actors, brilliant scriptwriters and directors, and the perfect human audiences to appreciate the poignant, gripping, and breathless moments of cathartic drama. It activates our closeness to displays of human courage, eternal moral directives, and deep, emotionally resonating themes. These secular expressions are perhaps the last vestiges of religious energy. Yet there is still something lacking from the equation.

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

## The Monism of Death

This romantic and naive analysis of cultural expression accounts only for the greatest successes of our society, which, to return to Buber's realism, are likely mere fractions of the kinds of societal collaboration and ceremonial magnificence of which we are truly capable. What is missing is simple. It is the unmediated quintessence of religion. We have wedged media in between each other and the sacred. From this ontological kink is enabled the localization of our thoughts and actions. Perhaps the most forthright way to dispel this is, as Confucius employs, an introduction to the most tangible of ultimates, death, a proper exposure to which would certainly collapse the remaining illusion of duality.

We have misappropriated the source of our success, as human beings, to the isolated progress of our own era. We have forgotten about the expansive depth of history, and the utter vastness of both told and untold lives, who have collectively authored the peculiarity of this very moment. Anyone who has ever died and everything which has ever happened has done so in this same nomadic sliver of time, and thus exists always, in some form or another, at this moment. Our duty is to respect that it is through us that they live on. This will one day be the duty of our grandchildren's grandchildren. The sobriety and weight of this human responsibility is the one and only truly ultimate concern, which definitionally embraces everything else. It is depicted in Confucianism as what warrants the *utmost* propriety to ancestors. It feels the true oldness of this moment. We have somehow lost this sensitivity to reality in the wake of our intellectual overplay. And it is this sensitivity which Confucianism seeks to restore in its articulations of ancestral sacrifice. It is this connection to our past and future that all truly human efforts seek to rediscover, preserve, and embody in our each and every living moment and action as the expressions of humanity's perennial image. This is to recognize in our own ordinary and desacralized world the subtle vibrations of greater purpose and the empathetic presence between all things. This is what breathes real, lasting significance into our lives and empowers the meaning of death with both seriousness and teleology. This enables the vital animus of life. It cannot be ignored. It must monopolize our reality and therefore carry with us the spirit of the ancients who are now us. It must be consulted to remember the meaning of the very first stories so we can enact them as our own and teach them to our children, because someone somewhere needs to, or the dead may truly die after all.

## Sacrality of Grammar

But religion is not some philosophical panacea for contemporary society. It is simply an insight into the seriousness of life. This seriousness is what animates the courage, tenacity, and exactitude of the religious ethic. Yet it has been tragically overcharged with the turbulence of fanaticism. It has been

superficially attributed to merely the failures or ignorance of societies. And it has been unduly located at the buckling edge of war and violence. But it is greed, selfishness, and ignorance which spawn these calamities. It is ignorance that is responsible for ignorance, not religion.

*Nonetheless*, what has led to this contemporary bias against religion is indeed religion, the very same religion of which Confucius and Mozi were cautiously aware and around which they thus crafted their language very meticulously. Perceiving Confucianism as an entity, as some abstract religious theory or some anthropological tomb that's separable from *what's right in front of our eyes*, is what introduces the exact same foundational error that Confucius attempts to mitigate by speaking with secular language and by rarely characterizing Heaven explicitly, emphatically, or disjointedly. Confucianism as an entity differentiable from life is only a new development for the Chinese perspective, but for the West it has never been anything else. Because of this, as Anna Sun writes, "The question 'Is Confucianism a religion' is indeed a question 'the West has never been able to answer, and China never able to ask.'"<sup>133</sup> This is why the nature of Confucian ethics and seriousness needs such a probative analysis. Firstly, because it is accustomed to taking its extreme existential magnitude for granted and is therefore often read inadequately. And secondly, our linguistic and cultural desensitization to *the superlative form and its implications* has marginalized our range of interpretation. We have been limited to a field of vision which is just one step shy of what this form intimates, and therefore one step too far.

The superlative form echoes as well with the same ultimacy and singularity of perfection, of death, and of transformation. While the sheer intricacy and historical stamina of religious thought are reason enough to persuade us of its human essentiality, it is perhaps the sound mathematics and logic of perfection which present for a contemporary audience the authentic Confucian ethicality. And even if not as explicitly religious, we must see to the ideas of sincerity and seriousness at their suggested superlative degree, because that is at last what it means to be human, because that is what we would want to remember our lives as. That is what Confucius focused on, not religious drivel.

What has been incidentally extracted into the workings of our own government and society are the aspects of religion which we could simply not do without. These are such aspects as 'civil religion,' the extensive social and ceremonial behavior of 'modern *li*,' and the debris of religious ethic. These experiences are so familiar and natural to us that we do not recognize them as religious, for the same reason that Confucianism is not always recognized as religious. But failing to recognize the historically religious dimensionality of our society and our ethicality displaces the seriousness of our existence as intelligent beings on this earth. It is this sense of true authenticity, of seriousness, and sincerity that is crystallized in the permafrost of true

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<sup>133</sup> Anna Sun, *Confucianism as a World Religion: Contested Histories and Contemporary Realities* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 183.

religious commitment, and of which our modern world is parched. This does not require religion, but does require seriousness. It is what Heraclitus means when he says, as paraphrased by Matthew Meyer, "If we merely accept the familiar we are wrongfully concurring too easily about the most important matters."<sup>134</sup> And of course, we cannot possibly concur seriously if our words have slipped by us. When there is, as Confucius claims, an inconsistency between our words and our actions, language loses its most indispensable function, of transmitting real meaning. If we made every word truly meaningful, being fully aware of its measures and uttering it from the lucidity of truth and incipience, then every word would be religious, as bursts of dynamism through the ambiance of ceremonial sincerity.

### The Sacred Gossamer

As we've seen in tracing and expounding the religious energies and expressions of Confucianism, its locale, and its metaphysics, religious traditions pulsate, flex, and splinter under the burden of the ultimate message they must carry. As a co-arising moiety with society, religion must perpetually find the sweet spot between preservation and adaptation, but too much of either and it becomes void of substance. From too much preservation and too much conservatism it calcifies, cracks and then shatters into revolution. From too much adaptation and liberalism it softens, rots and is lost in monotony until its ancient meaning is rediscovered and revitalized. The plasticity of religion, and thus of the religious ethicality, is not indicative of its finitude, irregularity, or frailty, but is rather a gauge of just how vital the joint expression of moral integrity and singularity of human purpose truly is. The extent to which it bends and morphs throughout the tremendously different paradigms and contexts of history is, as it, boundless. It does not break at its core because it is Holy.

The true ethic is a talisman of monism. When measured in eternity, it is only the actions of this ethic which carve true moral shape to the cosmos. This is because it recognizes, both physically and metaphysically, that every cause is always the first cause—the unabridged history of which is the cynosure of all religions and the panoply of humanity. What does not manifest directly from and as a deep intimacy with this cause is our conceptually dualistic approximation of it. By welding the religious to the secular, Confucius refused to humor the unnatural thrust into this dualism from the original monistic depth. By rendering the society as a collectivity of sacred relativity he presented for history the blueprints of utopia. This utopia is preserved by the singularity and ultimacy of its ethic, *ren*. It is neither enforced under the stone hardness of cemented justice, nor unforced above the gritless give of watery gentleness, but *empowered* from the divine wellspring of reciprocity. It is not immovable as a

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<sup>134</sup> Matthew Meyer, *Heraclitus on Meaning and Knowledge Legitimation*, Thesis Dissertation (Stony Brook University, 2008), 7.

mountain but unflinching and equipoising. It is not ungrounded as a river but porous and equalizing. It is wholly real because it is wholly sacred. Each of its aspects and those aspects' aspects are all fully cohesive and integrated. This utopia is the finalized Confucian society in which sagehood defines its finalized members.

For the sage, seeing and feeling the subtle connections between the political, social, individual, artistic, and musical spheres of life is child's play. He basks rather in the warmth of true infinity with which each and every raveled existence lives and breathes together. Time is no longer rigidly propelled forward in increments of seconds but flows with the beats of the heart. He sees, at once, both the incalculable uniqueness of every quantum as the flawless windows into every history—and—the timeworn ricochets of causality as the inexorable singularity of the one immortal narrative. He is a cosmic witness suspended in the sacred gossamer imbued through and beyond all moments and things.

Sacred experiences are the local excerpts of this cosmic story. They are *hierophanies* of its unfathomable, exhaustive and eternal nature, yet are momentary and restricted by our habituated finitude. Those who have encountered this sacrality will be reminded of it in moments of intensity and upon death. They can more readily enjoy the beautiful comedy of life and death, while those in isolation are bound to carnal tethers and quietly despair under the nihilistic weight of what's feared as the absurd tragedy of life and death.

This is why desacralized renderings of this cosmic story are always pyrrhic. Finite efforts are lost in the mist of time, like stray energy that can never find the laws of physics. Perhaps at some level they will be accounted for, but their teleology couldn't ripen. They were acted out as if separated from the single cause and its single ethic. This monistic acumen is what drives the metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism, and what pervades the superlative qualification of classical Confucianism.

The activity of an outwardly secular Confucius is the result of what could be called the *arch-religious* attitude: a cognizance of the existential marrow and behavioral implications of religion at its fullest and most rapturous temper, as the archetype of humanity itself, yet without the paraphernalia of religion. The phenomenology of the *arch-religious* attitude is its natural, spontaneous, perpetual, and automatic conduction of ceremonial ritual moments that embody a recognition of true humanity, ultimate reciprocity, innate union, and equanimity without uniformity.

How infinitely deep the narrow chasm which separates this apex of perfection from our finitude is, and yet how arbitrary that depth is if one could merely leap across. Regardless whether or not this archetypal leap is religious, it is, indeed, *imperative*.

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