5

Confucian Rituals and the Workplace: Fostering Self-Refinement and Making Our Shared World More Habitable in Unsettled Times

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My approach is analytical. I seek to identify various ways in which rituals (understood from a Confucian perspective) undergird and support ethical behavior and a meaningful life. While I provide some real-world examples of the operation of these various modes of support, I make no attempt here to formulate and then test these hypothesized causal relationships. Instead, I focus on explicating what the causal (a term which I use loosely) relations between rituals and ethics might be and how they might work in practice inside and outside of corporations.

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Part One: A Typology of Rituals

Rituals are extremely complex and include festivals, initiations, confirmations, exchanges, and so forth. As one would expect, scholars disagree about the definition of the term "ritual," a term historically connected with the equally controversial notion of "religion" (Goody, 1961). While many behaviors or actions could be ritualized, scholars of almost every ilk agree that not every repeated or habitual action is a ritual. Rituals appear to be special forms of behavior that are set apart from other quotidian behaviors. They tend to be at least somewhat formalized and have some basis or grounding in tradition. That is not to say, though, that rituals cannot or do not alter over time. Indeed, they seem to have a situation-specific dimension in many cases (Smith, 1982), so as our situation changes, our rituals do so as well.

From the beginning of human industry, rituals have had some connection with the sacred, although the sacred need not be understood as involving a transcendental god. Rituals also function as attempts to find meaning in life and death and to secure protection or happiness in a human life prone to contingency and accidents. Bell (1997) usefully groups rituals into six genres. While some rituals may fall into more than one genre, her categorization is helpful for getting a handle on the wide range of ritual action. The six categories are "life cycle" rites; calendrical and commemorative rites; rites of affliction or suffering; political rites; rites of exchange and communication; and feasting, fasting and festival rituals (Bell, 1997). Life cycle rites are rites of passage connected with birth, coming of age or initiation in adulthood, marriage, and death. Examples of such rites would include church confirmation ceremonies, bar and bat mitzvahs, funerals, and baptisms. In general, "life-cycle rituals seem to proclaim that the biological order is less determinative than the social" (Bell, 1997, p. 94).

Typical calendrical rites include periodic, regularly occurring events connected with agricultural sowings and harvesting, seasonal changes in the light and weather, and key events in the history of specific religions (e.g., the Jewish Passover seder; Islam's commemoration of Mohammed's emigration from Mecca to Medina) (Bell, 1997). Many of these rites aim

at controlling nature or harmonizing the human community with the larger cosmos.

The genre rites of affliction includes practices designed to appease malign spirits responsible for bringing misfortune to some person or group and to return conditions to a state of normalcy (Bell, 1997). Such rites may seek to sway the gods to ease suffering by bringing rain or to restore social relations among human beings or between humans and the spirit world with a view to ending disease or pestilence. Exorcisms performed at the individual or collective level fall into this category.

A fourth category—rites of exchange—involves humans giving gifts with the hope and expectation that others, in particular the divine, will reciprocate by bestowing favors (Bell, 1997). These hoped-for favors run the gamut from doing well on exams to preserving a person's good fortune lest it become depleted. The exchange may be largely devotional—for example, the Hindu puja where the supplicant tries to foster a generally beneficent relation with the divine—or more transactional, such as the Taiwanese repayment of debt ritual. In the latter, the gift-giver burns special spirit money in the expectation that the gods will re-deposit life-giving symbolic "funds" in the gift-giver's destiny account. Sacrificial practices typically fall within this category of rites of exchange as well.

The fifth ritual type centers on feasting, fasting, and festivals. As the name suggests, these rites involve the conspicuous consumption of food (deferred in the case of fasting) with an emphasis on the "public display of religion-cultural sentiments" (Bell, 1997, p. 120). Dancing and music frequently figure in these rituals. Native American potlatch ceremonies, Muslim Ramadan and Advent communal fasting, carnival and Mardi Gras can be placed into this category. These rituals embody a variety of purposes. Ramadan is sometimes interpreted as a disciplining of desire, while carnival and Mardi Gras both maintain social distinctions while playing with them (Bell, 1997).

A final category is that of political rites. These are public ceremonies that display and, in some cases, construct power (Bell, 1997). These include coronations, inaugurations, pledges of allegiance, political conventions, parades displaying military might, and regime- or ruler-sanctioned public punishments (e.g., beheadings, placing criminals in the stocks). This type of rite can serve to signify the transfer of power after

an election or the ascension of a particular candidate or to establish the ruler's divine right of rule (e.g., the ceremonies in which historically the Japanese emperor became divine). Political rites both symbolically depict or construct a group of people as a discrete and coherent community with shared goals and values and manifest the legitimacy of these values by showing that they accord with an underlying source of value (the will of the people; the order of the cosmos) (Bell, 1997).

Part Two: Ethical Dimensions of Confucian Rituals and Their Relevance in Our De-symbolized World

I turn now to the ethical dimensions of Confucian rituals. That Confucius cared deeply about rituals is incontrovertible. The Confucian *Analects* depict the Master as praising the *Classic of Odes* and encouraging his students to study classical texts on the arts and music (Confucius, 1998, 1.15; 2.2; 8.3; 16.3; 17.9).[1] To give but a few examples: Confucius reflects on proper versus improper forms of music for shaping our character (15.11; 17.18); carries out sacrifices in what he takes to be the proper way (10.8; 15.1); discusses the best way to dress for certain occasions (15.9) and to speak in various contexts (10.1); and demonstrates the correct way to receive guests (14.39) and to enter a sacred space (9.3).

Furthermore, Confucius famously reports that at age thirty, he took his stance (2.4). "Stance" (*li*) refers to a general posture or rank that one realizes as part of becoming genuinely human, of attaining personhood. We determine and exhibit our stance through ritual action (*li*), a term often translated as rites, ceremony, or manners (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 85). The Master tells his own son to study the *Book of Songs* and *Book of Ritual*. If the son does not learn what they have to offer, he will not be able to understand what it means to take a stance (16.13) or to refine himself (8.8).

Examples of most of the types of rites discussed in Part One occur in the ethical writings of Confucius. In general, Confucius refuses to speculate on spirits or the will of the gods (Confucius, 1998, 3.12; 11.12), so

he tends not to endorse appeasement rites or to connect rituals with a transcendental personal or father god. However, as I will show, he does link rituals to the order of the cosmos or heaven and earth. It is precisely this linkage that establishes a tight connection between rituals and ethics and makes rituals relevant to a meaningful, satisfying life within workplaces, institutions, and communities. For Confucius, rituals have several key ethical aspects. First, ancient Chinese rulers evolved formalized actions or practices to imitate sensible cosmic rhythms and processes. Rituals were an attempt to harmonize human existence with the larger cosmos. Over time these rituals expanded beyond the ruler to include the larger court and community and home, increasing the social dimension of rituals and assigning individuals their distinctive parts or roles. Those who failed to learn and to understand rituals literally did not know how to take their stance (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 86). For rituals encourage and require people to pay attention to what they are doing in relation to what others are doing in the context of the whole. They thus embody a kind of proto-justice insofar as we cannot render other people their due if we do not recognize their existence and purposes.

Second, the character for *li* includes a component often used to evoke a sacred or sacrificial context. Ritual actions which "had originally constituted a code of rites and ceremonies governing specific religious observances came to embody the total spectrum of social norms, customs, and mores, covering increasingly complicated relationships and institutions. The focus of ritual actions shifted from man's relationship with the supernatural to the relationship obtaining among members of human society, and their application was extended from the court to all levels of civilized society" (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 86). In essence, the entire realm of human relations was sacralized by the spreading of rituals designed to bring the human realm into alignment with ordered patterns objectively present in the cosmos and nature. By the time Confucius is writing, spiritual development occurs not through transactions with the gods. As noted above, he was notoriously reluctant to speak about gods, spirits, and so forth. Instead, achieving social harmony and self-refinement occurs through mindful, carefully structured social intercourse. The *li* "came to be regarded less as modes of hieratic action than as paradigms of human relations" (Gimello, 1972, p. 204).

No doubt the enacting of self-refining ritual practices can degenerate into a kind of virtue-signaling or moral-preening. However, Confucius himself stresses that he is not a sage. The process of refining the self and of acquiring virtue is lifelong. Furthermore, the truly correct rite is to ask questions (3.15), to probe for meaning, to admit mistakes (9.25), and to investigate with others the significance of human relations and activity. Confucius insists upon the need to think about and inquire into rituals because we cannot become more humane individuals merely by mechanically going through the motions of bowing, displaying correct manners, wearing correct clothing, adopting proper forms of address, and so on (17.11). Performing rituals requires a sincere heart (8.2; 17.11). In other words, a ritual isn't a ritual unless the individual performing it is seeking a deeper meaning that will enable them to recognize others, to engage with objective dimensions of nature, and to be at home in the world (Han, 2020).

A third aspect of Confucian rituals is the connection between taking a stand and the body of tradition. The Chinese words *li* (ritual) and *t'i* (body) share a common character—the *li* phonetic referring to a "ritual vase" (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 87). Both ritual and body have a form, although this form is less geometric and more dynamically organic. For Confucius, a ritual organically embodying the past recognizes that our predecessors have invested in a formal practice. At the same time, such a ritual invites us to find our own meanings, which, in turn, become part of that body of tradition. The simplified Chinese character for body consists of the character for man and root, implying that our ritual actions, institutions, and traditions are the root of our embodied humanity and community. While rituals stabilize our communities because their forms are repetitive, they also provide a necessary flexibility. They are not written in stone but are part of a living tradition. As we face new challenges and conditions, our traditions and rituals can and should evolve accordingly. This flexibility enhances communal stability during times of upheaval by allowing our traditions to bend, not to break.

There is a fourth key dimension of Confucian rituals. Confucius consistently emphasizes that a satisfying life filled with meaningful activity and work involves a turn away from materialism and toward self-refinement (4.9). Of course, we all need a modicum of wealth to buy

food, to pay for insurance and rent, and so on (12.7). However, Confucius insists that only the small-minded or mean-spirited person obsesses about wealth acquisition, while those who are on the road to virtue focus on self-perfection (7.37; 12.16; 15.2). In that respect, Confucian ethics can be said to organize itself around a particular good or end—self-refinement. While realizing this good is a matter of development or process, the process is not infinitely open-ended in the way in which material acquisition or wealth-getting is. Confucius envisages us concentrating not on making money but on ritually making a life for ourselves, a life embodying an order and coherence reflective of the larger objective order of the natural cosmos and of a harmonious human community.

At one point, Confucius compares this realization of our personhood or selfhood to carving a piece of jade (1.15). The metaphor is telling in four ways. First, since carving jade requires working with the stone's given colors and veins or fault lines, each person's realization of self—the virtue known as *ren*—will be unique. Second, in every case, other people on the road to virtue will be able to perceive the beauty of the other's character or "carved jade." The skill and commitment that has been invested in making that life will be visible to others. In that sense, the carving is objectively beautiful. Third, our past choices are like cuts in the jade. They become a permanent part of our character or form. Fourth, rituals are an inherent part of the carving process, for they enable us to find the meaning and significance necessary to guide us on our journey to selfhood. When making a life for ourselves is our focus, our energy is directed and necessarily limited. Some options will not even appear on our radar because they lack meaning for us and thus exercise no attraction.

It also needs to be stressed that Confucian ethics envisions the possibility of ritualizing many aspects of our lives. Rituals are not limited to an annual festival or even weekly religious services. Rituals include many informally institutionalized activities. For example, our modes of addressing each other can be ritualized. We speak to our ninety-year-old Aunt Betty or the corporate CEO differently than we talk to our three-year-old nephew, and we do so for what we take to be significant reasons. Throughout Asia, great emphasis is placed on children learning appropriate kinship terms and social forms of address. While rituals include festivals and all of the other activities specified in Part One, they can equally

include informal activities such as Saturday house-cleaning or morning trips to the gym if these are performed in a mindful, symbolic fashion—that is, in a manner that promotes recognition of our fundamental humanity and honors the beauty of persons and durable things.

Confucian rituals are perhaps even more relevant now than in the past, given two distinctively modern developments—rampant consumerism and what Han (2020) terms the "compulsion of production" in the West. Han (who grew up in Korea, a country where Confucianism is still very much alive) attributes both of these trends to the disappearance of ritual (Han, 2020). Han's analysis qualifies as very Confucian insofar as he understands rituals as a form of symbolic perception. Genuine symbols always involve recognition. The ancient Greek word *symbol* refers to a clay tablet that a guest-friend would break in half, keeping one section for himself and giving the other to a friend as a token of respect. When the two would meet, they would produce their tokens and fit them together, thereby recognizing each other as friends. Confucius similarly construes rituals as symbolic for he talks about the process of self-refinement as one of developing an ever-deeper recognition of one's real self that requires rituals. We meet our true self, so to speak, through a ritual-enhanced process of coming to grasp how we objectively fit into the cosmos and our family and community.

For Confucius, recognition is not to be understood merely as a repeated encounter with something but rather as a deeper knowing of a person or thing. We move from an initial and contingent perception of something to a knowing that elevates the transient into permanence. This is why by age seventy, Confucius can act rightly with assurance (which is not the same as arrogance). He knows exactly where he stands in the world (2.4). Rituals can thus be characterized as "symbolic techniques of making oneself at home in the world" (Han, 2020, p. 2). By facilitating recognition—the grasping of that which is permanent and enduring—these techniques help us create a world that is durable rather than fleeting. Modern life and our workplaces revolve around data and information processing, both of which lack "symbolic force" (Han, 2020, p. 2). Increasingly our workplaces have become transient sites of production. Many companies are downsizing office space, a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pontrefact, 2021). Many employees no longer

have an office or even a permanent cubicle to which they can relate in a durable way. Instead, they are expected to reserve a temporary cubicle on those days when they work at the office instead of from home.

Rituals of the sort Confucius promotes take transience and seek to make it habitable. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have complained that they have lost track of time and can no longer remember when events occurred (Stenson, 2021). This lack of memory is likely due, at least in part, to our loss of rituals. Quarantine procedures have meant that we have not been able to go to church, use Sunday matinee concert tickets, or celebrate holidays with friends and family. Workplace rituals such as the 10 am informal gathering in the break room, the Friday weekly meeting, or the after-work drink at a nearby pub have disappeared entirely or have become far less regular, emptying these events of their ritual essence. Insofar as formal and informal ritual engagements structure human time, their loss has made it difficult to situate ourselves in the flow of existence. We feel as if we are floating unmoored in the ethernet. Consequently, it is not surprising that recent mental health studies of the general population (which includes employees) have documented increased levels of depression, irritation, confusion, and feelings of isolation (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020)

We are increasingly data-rich and ritual-poor (Han, 2020). As a result, lasting things—which acquire meaning through repetitive use in rituals and which stabilize our lives because they remain the same, allowing us to relate to these things repeatedly—are vanishing. Genuine or worldly things grow old as we age. In rituals, we use things—for example, a ceremonial tea cup or the silk temple cap favored by Confucius. But when we rampantly consume, we literally use things up. A cellphone is not a thing like the antique table we inherited from our grandparents, a chalice used at communion, or a special cap for visits to the temple. Phones are disposable items, to be updated and then discarded. Our current compulsion to produce new, disposal items destroys the enduring quality of things (Han, 2020). Companies produce ever more stuff, intentionally undermining the endurance of things with a view to encouraging greater consumption. Even before the pandemic struck, companies' desire to become ever more efficient had created a workplace of continual churn. Planned obsolescence has meant that employees' computers are replaced

every couple of years; employers continually roll out new software that employees are expected to master in short order. Software functions as just another bit of stuff to be used up and then discarded. There are very few durable goods—what Han (2020) describes as real or genuine things—in the twenty-first-century workplace.

Unlike ramped up production and consumption, ritual practice encourages us to treat both other people and material things with respect. In this era, though, we commoditize everything including our emotions and values, reducing these to items for consumption. Companies proclaim that we can change the world through consuming their products. Values become merely ways to signal that we are virtuous. Such virtue-signaling does little to build lasting community or to engender respect for the world. It merely puffs up our egos. We are even encouraged to commoditize ourselves, with some universities urging students to develop themselves as "brands" before they go on the job market (Kansas State University, n.d.)

Our de-symbolizing and de-ritualizing of the world feed each other and lead to communication without any real community. Han (2020, p. 6) approvingly quotes Mary Douglas:

> One of the gravest problems of our day is the lack of commitment to common symbols … If it were merely a matter of our fragmentation into small groups, each committed to its proper symbolic forms, the case would be simple to understand. But more mysterious is a widespread, explicit rejection of rituals as such. Ritual has become a bad word signifying empty conformity. We are witnessing a revolt against formalism, even against form.

Unconstrained, narcissistic subjective creativity takes the place of shared symbolic actions. Insofar as true rituals of the sort Confucius promotes are symbols involving recognition of a shared, communal world, rituals distance us from our individual selves. Creativity and innovation, by contrast, feed individual egoism (Han, 2020). We have become obsessed with novelty, rushing from one thing to another, changing jobs frequently, and binge-watching shows in a superficial fashion (Starosta & Izydorczyk, 2020). Shallowness has replaced slow, restful, and deep perceptions. Such shallowness supplants religion with its shared rituals.

Religion is derived from *relegere*, which means to take note or to pay attention (Han, 2020). Rites are a way of cementing, through recognition, that to which we should be attending in a still way. The compulsion of production throws up image after image, to be consumed, liked or disliked, and never to be viewed again. It is not surprising, then, that a significant number of employees suffer from attention deficit disorder (de Graaf et al., 2008). As rituals disappear, so, too, does our ability to pay attention in a sustained way.

A final point about the ethical value of rituals: Confucius is consistently skeptical about relying upon the law alone to foster and maintain community. While one can govern through fear of punishment, it is far better if people strive for self-refinement, a process of ritualized self-correction. By connecting virtue with regularly practiced differentiating rituals, Confucian ethics aims at engendering a robust sense of shame within the body politic (Wong, 2011). The repetitiveness of rituals can serve to remind people of their duties and roles and in that manner keep a sense of shame alive. In addition, by "providing conventionally established, symbolic ways to express respect for others, ritual forms give participants ways to act on and therefore to strengthen their dispositions to have respect for others" (Wong, 2011, p. 772). Rituals give actions precise form, thereby making it possible for individuals to conform their practice in an ever more perfect way. In Confucian ethics, perfect practice makes perfect, fostering excellence or *de.*

From what I have written thus far, it should be clear that Confucianism does not ground ethics in abstract principles of justice or equality but in a given community's highly specific customs and practices (Wong, 2011). It might be objected that rituals are tied to a specific past and location and, for precisely this reason, Confucian ethics have little to contribute to the resolution of our ethical issues in this era of rapid change. This criticism is longstanding. The ancient Chinese philosopher Mozi contended that traditions as such have no normative power, for they arise and disappear. However, while it is true that Confucius looks to early Zhou rituals, he does so with an eye to his community's present and future. Confucius willingly alters rituals in the process of making them his own and in order to address current concerns. For example, he endorses the substitution of a less expensive skull cap for ritual performances. What matters is

wearing some special dress to show respect; such clothing should not be so costly that the poor cannot afford to engage in rituals (9.3). Furthermore, we never take on a tradition lock, stock, and barrel (Chan, 2000). Every generation is somewhat selective in what it opts to retain from its predecessors. In building on earlier instantiations of inherited rituals, successive generations inevitably alter them over time in the process of preserving them. Such change need not imply that traditions have no normative power, given that we preserve some traditions precisely because they embody virtues that we continue to find attractive.

Part Three: Implications of Confucian Rituals for the Workplace in Unsettled Times

This admittedly schematic overview of rituals within Confucian ethics enables us to understand why Confucianism's emphasis on rituals is not merely a conservative gesture of traditionalism but rather a serious attempt to identify a key mechanism for cultivating and preserving virtue within a stable, respectful, and harmonious community—be that the family, the workplace, or the body politic. Managers and employees could readily introduce rituals into the workplace. For example, a manager could introduce a Thursday morning social hour with donuts where people could talk informally about what challenges they were facing at work or perhaps at home. Such a ritual could even be incorporated as a regular hybrid Zoom meeting aimed at developing an esprit de corps among all employees, including those who are working remotely. As long as such social hours were conducted respectfully and did not result in any kind of employee retaliation, they could encourage participants to find meaning in their shared business activity, thereby supporting self-refinement. More formal rituals could be adopted as well. Medtronic's founding CEO Earl Bakken required every new employee to make a virtual trip back to the garage where Bakken and his brother-in-law Palmer Hermundslie began the business that eventually became Medtronic. After ritually traveling back in time to where the business began, recent hires would receive (at a formal company-wide meeting) a bronze medallion engraved with

the words "toward full life." This welcoming ritual with its durable medal served to remind employees to embody the company's mission of improving patients' lives. In addition, Medtronic would hold an end of year meeting at which a few patients would tell their stories of how their lives were transformed for the better by Medtronic inventions (Yeh & Yeh, 2004). Variants of these Medtronic rituals have endured for around fifty years.

Our life, including workplace activities, can have a shape and coherence in part because so much of it can be ritualized. Of course, there is a potential danger here. As we have seen during the current COVID-19 pandemic, some individuals have gone overboard in adopting safety rituals—obsessively cleaning their hands, wearing three masks, refusing to go outside, and so on. What keeps Confucian rituals from degenerating into a form of obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)? OCD repetition is not truly a ritual in the Confucian sense. Certainly, there is repetition. However, there is no symbolic recognition or integration with tradition. Instead of connecting the behavior with a search to understand how nature and communities operate, the obsessive's thinking veers toward a quasi-magical way of coping with anxiety—as long as I adhere to this particular form of behavior, I will be safe, my world won't crumble, and so on.

Confucian ethics, by contrast, would have us develop new, meaning-rich rituals for managing anxiety and risk in the workplace. During a pandemic, employees could learn to greet amenable customers or coworkers with a friendly elbow bump rather with a handshake. Perhaps Company X could internally call the bump "The Somewhat Safer Greeting," an acknowledgment of the objective, cosmic reality that no amount of elbow bumping will ever guarantee 100% safety. Leaders might encourage employees to think of employer mask mandates in Confucian terms—that is, each time we put on a mask, we should think about how this small gesture helps protect both coworkers' lives and our own. As we contemplate the deep connections between mask-wearing, respect for persons, and community health, the daily donning of the mask begins to evolve into a true Confucian ritual and ceases to be an annoying hassle. Workplace elbow bumps and mask-wearing enable us to

maintain harmonious relations with fellow employees and other stake-holders while curtailing paralyzing fear about social encounters.

Another valuable workplace ritual is going into a physical office every day or at least several times a week. Confucian ritualism depends upon what Han (2020) designates as "real sites." A real site—be it a workplace or temple—is a specific local place for community gathering and reflection.[2] In the old villages, people would come together regularly to sing under the wild pear tree (Nádas, 2006) and to share stories, concerns, joys, and sorrows. Rituals enable individuals to learn collectively to perceive things *as a community*, not just as single free agents. When real places disappear, we lose a sense of community and some of our ability to empathize with others. It is striking in this regard that an increasing number of corporations (e.g., Microsoft; BNY Mellon; American Express; Adobe; Amazon; Netflix; Apple) have publicly committed to requiring workers to return to the office for at least several days a week because they have found that in-person meetings allow for culture building and foster more creatively productive discussions (Vasel, 2021; The Hubble Team, 2022; Taylor, 2022). Companies are desiring these face-to-face interactions, even if they lose some productivity. Some employees also desire such a return because, working remotely, they have felt disconnected from the company culture and from what is going on in the business and marketplace. The office exposes them to informal learning opportunities, which they do not get when they work exclusively from home. In addition, face-to-face regular interaction lessens employees' sense that they are invisible to leadership and lacking any mentors or even basic guidance from leaders (Lencore, n.d.).

A Confucian might even see the return to the office as especially important now, given that COVID-19 has shifted so many of our daily human activities online. The pandemic has accelerated the move away from real sites and toward impersonal globalized markets and events. Internet-based grocery stores and bookstores mean we no longer have to shop at our city market, replete with local craft items and produce, or our neighborhood bookstores featuring local authors. Instead of going to the neighborhood grocery or bookstore, many of us have been shopping exclusively online. As the virus spread, religious services, plays, operas, and art openings began to be beamed around the world so that

individuals could attend virtually. While I would not say categorically that the space of the internet is not and never could be a real site supported by and supportive of meaning-rich rituals, I do think that there are impediments to it becoming such. In a real site, meaning (which includes the correct perception of character) is collectively uncovered in a physical, geographical location. Employees enact (or fail to enact) their virtue, and others get to know who they truly are. It takes time, though, for people to reveal themselves and their concerns. Self-refinement requires lingering. From a Confucian perspective, informal chats at the elevator are not a waste of time but rather an opportunity to become more humane. Prior to the pandemic, coworkers would often stay to talk for a bit after in-person meetings. But now when the Zoom meeting ends, employees quickly exit to attend to other business or to rush off to their next online meeting. Although online meetings may produce efficiency gains, Confucius would worry, I think, about a diminution of our ability to jointly come to an appreciation of what is going on in our business and in the marketplace at large.

The presence or absence of Confucian rituals in individuals' working lives has another, rather more subtle effect. Han (2020) posits that the disappearance of rituals has gone hand in hand with the rise of a bourgeois fixation on working. Some aspects of working are very repetitive, which is why many tasks are now being performed by robots or artificial intelligence systems. This form of working relies upon calculation, a linear mode of reasoning that can be captured in algorithms. Thinking, by contrast, always involves an element of non-linearity, of play, of indeterminacy. Thinking opens itself up to possibilities, creating a space for new concepts or perspectives. Given that the future always has the ability to surprise us—recall some of the unexpected events accompanying climate change, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or the emergence of COVID-19—thinking is essential. It lets us engage with the future in a way that simple repetition and calculation never can (Baehr, 2002). Confucian rituals support thinking because they, too, involve play. Symbols never admit of only one interpretation. For that reason, rituals of all sorts, including workplace rituals, are a natural home—a real site—for playful thinking. When we embrace rituals, we experience the pleasure of recognition. That pleasure, in turn, encourages greater engagement

with and respect for ritual. The result is a virtuous circle of ever-deepening understanding of ourselves and the world.

In addition to promoting communal harmony, shared learning, and thinking, rituals' deep connection with playful thinking opens the door to humor as well. While it might be thought that rituals suppress humor by squashing spontaneity, stipulating adherence to particular forms, and reinforcing authority (Yao, 2000), the wiggle room introduced by rituals' symbolic character lets humor flourish. Indeed, many of Confucius' allusive sayings and interpretations of ritual are written in informal and lively Chinese and reflect the Master's very wry sense of humor (Harbsmeier, 1990). Confucius' ethical attentiveness to ritual did not make him an unremittingly sober prig. When told that a certain minor citizen Lin Fang was complaining about a supposedly ritually inappropriate sacrifice to be offered to Mount Tai, Confucius exclaimed, "Alack and alas…! Who would ever have imagined that Mount Tai was inferior to Lin Fang?" (3.6, quoted in Harbsmeier, 1990, p. 142). Confucius here gently pokes fun at Lin Fang's presumptuous judgment that the sacrifices that the grand and ancient Mount Tai has been receiving for centuries are in some way inferior. Although rituals can and should be criticized, Confucius thinks we should first try to grasp what a particular ritual seeks to convey before presuming, like Lin Fang, to condemn it wholesale.

To the extent that Confucian workplace rituals promote a mode of playful and allusive thinking, they can be seen as an ethically valuable aspect of the workplace. Humor can challenge unhelpful or fossilized thinking patterns (Minsky, 1980) and can inject novel perspectives into analyses and conversations. Moreover, disparate individuals may discover they have more in common than they initially realized when they find themselves laughing at the same jokes or situations (Brown & Levinson, 1978). In this respect, laughter can foster social bonding. True, humor is sometimes wielded as a savage weapon to reinforce authority or to ostracize individuals or groups. So it should not be treated as inherently ethically good (Kim & Plester, 2019). Still, in some cases, humor is not only a powerful reinforcer of communal harmony but also a way to look at workplace and business issues in new and unexpectedly insightful ways.

Conclusion

It is telling how bereft people felt when COVID-19 forced the cancellation of scheduled weddings, pushed graduation ceremonies online, made funerals difficult, and led companies to issue orders to work remotely. As shared cultural rituals disappeared, many responded by creating their own group or personal rituals—the virtual Christmas morning brunch; the socially distanced Super Bowl or World Cup party; urban Italians' nightly singing of songs from their balconies. It is not naive, therefore, to stress the importance of rituals in the workplace as well at this time of massive upheaval. Distinctive, local rituals help combat the flattening of the world, the hell of sameness in which every moment seems but a repetition of earlier moments.

Introducing Confucian rituals supports the thinking we need in chaotic and turbulent times. These rituals make for flexible stability and further respect for persons, and provide employees with specific forms of behavior that can be practiced as part of a process of self-refinement. Some repeated activities (e.g., regularly going into a physical office) enable rituals to evolve while simultaneously creating a real space for employees and stakeholders collectively to discover meaning. Rituals' symbolic quality can support an element of humor, which can be welcome when turbulence leads people to feel anxious.

It is no accident that Confucius himself evolved his thinking about rituals during a period of civil war. He believed that the Zhou dynasty was justified in overthrowing the Shang dynasty because the Zhou possessed "the mandate of heaven" (*tianming*) (Wong, 2011). From early on in Chinese culture, rulers could legitimately retain their power only if they were able to preserve peace and harmony through governing in an exemplary and harmonious fashion. Confucius believed that the Zhou dynasty governed in such a fashion. Consequently, he looked to what he took to be the best of the Zhou rulers' rituals and sought to reinterpret and reinvigorate them with a view to overcoming the chaos of his time (Csikszentmihalyi, 2020). His insights can help us learn to take our stance in the world as well.

Notes

1. When referring to Confucius, I provide specific *Analect* numbers to enable readers to find relevant passages in this dense work.

2. Confucian rituals presuppose highly particular sites. Various rites of respecting one's ancestors occur in the local temple, typically located in the middle of the city in which these ancestors were born and died. The annual Ming Qing festival requires families to sweep and clean the graves of their dead relatives. Again, these graves are what Han terms genuine "sites." Moreover, the cleaning requires that descendants physically visit and sweep the graves. Confucian ethics organizes itself around difference, and one central difference is geographic location. For Confucius, location was, in a sense, everything. Those who were born in areas far beyond the *guojia* or central ruling court were deemed to be ungovernable and wild because they had not been exposed to civilizing rituals. In our neoliberal world, however, a person's location does not matter. Or, more precisely, what tends to matter are only factors such as a country's access to harbors or natural resources. Neoliberalism does not differentiate states or corporate workplaces by their rituals or, equivalently, their levels of ethical self-refinement. Modern economic and work life ushers in a certain flattening out of the ethical world. To put the point alternatively: rituals are differentiating in a way that economic processes are not. Market dynamics build upon things already given—a deep harbor or the presence of rare earth minerals. Confucian ethics, by contrast, itself differentiates the world through processes of self-refinement.

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