Dao (2024) 23:173–189
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-024-09930-1

Confucian Rituals and Aristotelian Habits

Kevin M. DeLapp[1]

Accepted: 29 February 2024 / Published online: 16 March 2024

Abstract
This essay argues that Confucian ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and Aristotelian habit (*hexis*, ἕξις) play analogous roles within their respective ethical systems and that we can come to appreciate important dimensions of each category by juxtaposing it with the other. Despite numerous and deep dissimilarities, both *li* and *hexis* work to organize and publicize emotions and dispositions, ground true moral quality in phenomenally-present activity, and (leveraging insights from Marcel Mauss) contribute to shaping and actualizing an agent's body and behavior. The essay unpacks several semantic subtleties of *li* and *hexis*, and attempts to respond to alleged disanalogies. Finally, the success of a such a *li-hexis* analogy reveals the ways in which Aristotle's virtues are more socially contingent and Confucian morality is less particularistic than is often allowed; which in turn, I argue, lessens some of the distance between virtue-based and role-based ethical frameworks.

Keywords Ritual propriety · *Li* 禮 · Habit · *Hexis* ἕξις · Marcel Mauss · Aristotle · Confucius

1 Introduction

What can we learn about Confucian ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and Aristotelian habit (*hexis*, ἕξις) by comparing them to one another? The question is not as ad hoc as it might sound, since a now-pervasive way of reading Confucius is as a type of virtue ethicist (e.g., Chen 2010, Van Norden 2013); and in Aristotle, the prototypical virtue

✉ Kevin M. DeLapp
Kevin.DeLapp@Converse.edu

[1] Department of Humanities & Cultures, Converse University, 580 East Main Street, Spartanburg, South Carolina 29302, USA

ethicist, virtues are analyzed as habits of character.[1] Because *li* and *hexis* each plays a foundational role within its respective moral theory, if there is no plausible Confucian equivalent to Aristotelian habit, or if there is no plausible Aristotelian equivalent to Confucian ritual propriety, many other comparative projects that engage both thinkers could be threatened.[2]

In this essay, I try to defend the Aristotle-Confucius comparison by looking at ways in which Confucian ritual propriety and Aristotelian habit are structurally analogous to one another, by which I mean that each category plays a similar role in underwriting its more general ethical framework. Toward this end, I shall first devote some time to explicating my interpretations of Aristotelian *hexis* (section 2) and Confucian *li* (section 3) individually. I shall then (section 4) attempt to draw what I see as mutually-informative similarities between the two categories and the roles they play in each ethical framework. As part of this comparison, I also attend to an alleged dissimilarity between Aristotle and Confucius, notably the claim that Confucian morality lacks the universality and rationalism that is thought to characterize Aristotelian ethics, and that Aristotelian ethics lacks the social and affective emphasis found in Confucianism. It has been partially because of this alleged disanalogy that some comparativists have suggested that Confucius ought to be understood not as a proper virtue ethicist at all, but instead as a role ethicist. Thus, my defense of the analogy between Confucian ritual and Aristotelian habit is also intended to lessen some of the presumed distance between virtue-based and role-based ethical theories.

[1] When I say that Aristotle is the "prototypical virtue ethicist," I do not mean to imply that his ethical theory is in all respects the same as contemporary virtue ethics, nor do I mean to saddle contemporary virtue ethicists with all the trappings of Aristotle's particular brand. There are many different ways of being a "virtue ethicist," and not all need to be eudaimonistic in the way that Aristotle is. Moreover, there have also appeared arguments urging either caution or skepticism about the legitimacy of classifying Aristotle as a virtue ethicist in the first place, at least in the contemporary sense, for example, Simpson 1992, Santas 1993, Broadie 2006, Aufderheide 2017, and Hirji 2019. Nonetheless, Aristotle has become part of the canon of virtue ethics, accurately or not, ever since he was leveraged during the 20th-century resurgence in virtue theory. He was also taken as formative in the historical development of other classical virtue traditions such as Stoicism and the systems of Alfarabi and Avicenna, which in turn influenced the Thomistic understanding of virtue. For an explicit argument that Aristotle *is* a proper virtue ethicist, see McAleer 2007.

[2] There has been an influential argument by Alasdair MacIntyre (MacIntyre 1991) to the effect that the ethical views of Aristotle and Confucius are simply too socially and historically "thick" and particularistic to be legitimately compared with one another. MacIntyre himself actually puts the point in slightly weaker terms, concluding that incommensurability need not preclude comparison, so long as the comparer acknowledges that her comparison must always necessarily be approached from an antecedent commitment to or familiarity with one of the specific *comparanda* (MacIntyre 1991: 121). I will not in this essay be able to respond to this challenge directly, except to say that I find the stronger version, at least, of MacIntyre's position transcendentally unattractive: a view that starts from a point of incommensurability is, like other forms of skepticism, difficult to refute, but it would undermine the very idea of comparative philosophy and would, moreover, beg the question; for any evidence that two thinkers are incommensurable would have to itself come through a comparative investigation of those thinkers, by which commensurability must necessarily already be presupposed. Compare with Donald Davidson's reflections on the principle of charity and the intelligibility requirement for framing different conceptual schemes (Davidson 1974/2001). For a survey of how various comparativists have responded to MacIntyre's challenge, see Vytis 2013.

Let me stress from the start that the aim of this essay is *not* to say that Confucian rituals *are* Aristotelian habits, nor that Aristotelian habits *are* Confucian rituals. *Hexis* in no way accurately translates *li*, nor vice versa. There are a host of culturally-thick aspects of each term that make them unique within their respective framework (several of these will be considered in section 4 below). The point of the comparison, rather, is that juxtaposing *li* and *hexis* can help bring to light important and neglected dimensions of each.

2 Aristotelian Habit

Recall that Aristotle stresses that true virtue must constitutively involve not merely right action, but also right motivation, right timing, right feeling, and, crucial for our analysis, it must proceed from stable states of character.[3] That is, virtue can never be a one-off thing, but must become so deeply internalized and interwoven into a person's moral agency that it becomes essential and automatic to them. Such a "state" of character is, in other words, a form of perfect and complete *habituation*. Aristotle recurrently uses a specific term for such a habituated state—*hexis*.

It is important not to confuse *hexis* as the end-result of a process of habituation with the attitudes and behaviors that are being habituated. For the latter, Aristotle speaks not in terms of *hexis*, but *êthos* (ἦθος).[4] In the few cases where comparativists have attempted to find an analog of Confucian *li* within Aristotle, *êthos* has been the preferred choice.[5] *Êthos* encompasses the formative experiences that characterize one's early upbringing, or the facts of one's origins.[6] *Êthos* is thus merely what is descriptively given, what is customary or expected. *Êthos* does not especially emphasize or require any particular state of mind, whereas *hexis* does, as we shall see below (section 3). And, as we shall also see, *hexis* is always necessarily oriented:

[3] In *Nicomachean Ethics* II.4 (1105a35), this stability is expressed in general modal terms as "fixed and unchanging" (*bebaiôs kai ametakinêtôs*, βεβαίως καὶ ἀμετακινήτως), whereas in *Categories* VIII (8b28) it is put in more temporal terms as "lasting and stable" (*chroniôteron kai monimôteron*, χρονιώτερον καὶ μονιμώτερον).

[4] Aristotle explicitly interchanges ἦθος and ἐθος (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1103a16).

[5] See Sim 2007; Yu 2007: 96–101; Yu 2013: 132–133. Robert Neville makes a passing reference to Confucian *li* as "social habits," but the possible Aristotelian dimensions of this are not unpacked (Neville 2014: 155). Jiyuan Yu, by contrast, does indeed explicitly analyze *hexis*, but seems instead to really have *êthos* in mind, insofar as he understands *hexis* as a "way of acquiring virtue" (Yu 1998). Xiaoqun Wu offers several other Greek terms that would seem to be semantically relevant to Confucian *li*, including *nomisma* (νόμισμα), *hagisteia* (ἁγιστεία), and *threskeia* (θρησκεία) (Wu 2018). None of these is as close of an analog to *li* as *hexis*, however. *Nomisma*, like *êthos*, is purely descriptive, referring to what *is* deemed acceptable rather than what *ought* to be (it is for this reason that the term also means "money"). *Hagisteia*, unlike *nomisma* and *êthos*, has more of a sacred connotation (from ἅγιος, meaning "holy") that better jibes with Confucian *li*; yet *hagisteia* lacks the inner psychological dimension that we will see is essential to *li* (and, moreover, *hagisteia* is not really part of Aristotle's own lexicon). Likewise, *threskeia* is mainly concerned with outward ceremonial compliance.

[6] See *Nicomachean Ethics* II.1 (1103a1–b2) for Aristotle's main discussion of *êthos*.

when it aims at a teleological good, it becomes a virtue (*aretê*, ἀρετή), when it aims away, it becomes a vice (*kakê*, κάκη); *êthos* has no teleological orientation.[7]

In Aristotle, a *hexis* is a pattern or organizing principle that gives coherence, stability, and direction to a thing's reactions and propensities. I say a "thing's" reactions and propensities because Aristotle seems to think *hexeis* need not be the sole province of humans, let alone morality. Intellectual virtues just as much as moral virtues are *hexeis*, and even inanimate objects can have *hexeis* if their natures and qualities are coherently and stably directed with respect to whatever their teleological good may be. Aristotle speaks of the *hexeis* of houses, ships, and coats, for example (*Eudemian Ethics* II.1 [1219a1ff]).

Throughout both the metaphysical and ethical parts of the Aristotelian corpus, *hexis* is defined in relation to several other key terms which will be important for our analysis. Readers already familiar with (or less interested in) such Aristotelian minutiae may skip to section 3 below. The following terminology, however, will eventually help substantiate the comparison with Confucian *li* presented in section 4.

First, a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for *hexis* is *diathesis* (διάθεσις) (*Categories* VIII [8b25ff]).[8] *Diatheseis* are a thing's propensities, natural orientations, or dispositions that dictate the default reactions a thing will have to situations or stimuli. In this respect, *diathesis* differs subtly from *pathos* (πάθος, "emotion").[9] Emotions are still to some degree conative for Aristotle, insofar as everything in his universe is purposive and kinetic. But emotions alone need not express themselves in any particular disposition. That is, it is possible that someone could have all sorts of emotional responses to a given situation, but lack any connection between those emotions and how they are naturally or repeatedly disposed to react. Imagine someone who finds a pun funny on two different occasions, and thereby experiences a *pathos* of amusement, but who lacks a corresponding *diathesis* because she is provoked to counter-punning on one occasion but not the other. That is, although she would feel amusement, there is no patterned default to how she reacts to such amusement.

Diathesis is also importantly different from *dynamis* (δύναμις), a term Aristotle frequently uses to refer to a thing's power, capacity, or potential. *Diatheseis* and *dynameis* are both kinds of quality (*poion* ποιόν) a thing can have (*Categories* VIII [9a15ff]). However, a *dynamis* (capacity) is different from a *diathesis* (disposition) insofar as the former, but not the latter, is necessarily latent and un-actualized. A capacity per se would not be a capacity *for something* if that "something" was already realized; no more than we should say that a flower "could bloom" once it

[7] See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1095a6, where Aristotle explicitly discusses the possibility (indeed, from the context, the prevalence) of those who have bad or poorly-developed *êthos* (*to êthos nearos*, τὸ ἦθος νεαρός), clearly implying that *êthos* is not the fully-developed or stable state that *hexis* (and also, as we will see, Confucian *li*) must be. Likewise, at 1094b4, *êthos* is described as the sort of thing that can "be brought up" (*dio dei tois ethesin hêxthai*, διὸ δεῖ τοῖς ἔθεσιν ἦχθαι). See also 1098b4, where *ethismô* (ἐθισμῷ) is given as one among other *ways* of developing moral knowledge, not as the *finished state* that *hexis* is.

[8] All *hexeis* are *diatheseis*, but not all *diatheseis* are *hexeis*.

[9] At *Nicomachean Ethics* II.4 (1105b20–1106a14), Aristotle says explicitly that *hexeis* (and ipso facto *diatheseis*) are distinct from both *pathê* and *dynameis*.

already has. The *dynamis* for blooming necessarily obtains only prior to the actual blooming.[10]

This distinction between *dynamis* and *diathesis* gets slightly muddled when we consider Aristotle's discussion of the varying senses each word can have (*De Anima* II.5 [417a21–28]). In the case of *dynamis*, there is a difference between talking about capacities that are characteristic of all members of a species in virtue of the matter and form that defines them at the secondary substance level, and capacities that some single individual might possess. Thus, to use Aristotle's example of *grammatical knowledge*, we might say that someone who has never learned grammar has the capacity to acquire it, in the same basic way that any human qua human is able to learn something new; but we might also say that someone who already knows grammar has a different capacity for it, in the sense of being able to deploy that knowledge in future contexts. Call these two senses, respectively, the *first* and *second dynameis*. When we say that *dynameis* are always necessarily latent and unactualized, this must be understood as relative to which sense of *dynamis* we are talking about. A *first dynamis* for grammatical knowledge will be latent and unactualized for a person until that person acquires—or "realizes/completes" (*entelecheia*, ἐντελέχεια)—such knowledge. At that point, the person thereby acquires a new *second dynamis* that remains latent and unactualized any moment in which she is not actively using her grammatical knowledge.[11]

Because *dynameis* are always in some sense (relative to whether we are talking about the first or second variety) unrealized, *dynamis* is therefore to be understood as the source of change (*Metaphysics* V.12 [1019a15]).[12] Consider the example of a person physically capable of drinking copious amounts of alcohol. Merely possessing such a capacity (*dynamis*) need not have anything to do with how that person might be prone to react (*diathesis*) to a given situation involving alcohol. Her *diathesis* might be to actualize her capacity by drinking a lot, or it might be to refrain from drinking. She might not even be aware of what her *dynameis* for drinking could be, depending on what her *diatheseis* related to drinking are.

Let us now return to *hexis* itself. Although Aristotle acknowledges that common, unphilosophical discourse can frequently run all these subtle distinctions together as if they were synonyms, they actually bear very particular relationships to one

[10] When we say that the *dynamis* for blooming is "prior" to the actual blooming, Aristotle says that that is to be taken in both a temporal sense (the potential is earlier in time than the actual) and a logical sense (the actual could not be possible without the potential), even if not in an epistemic sense (we may only discover a thing's potential retroactively as a result of what is actual).

[11] See Kosman 2013: 58–62 for an excellent division of these senses of *dynamis* as well as the symmetrical senses of *entelecheia*.

[12] At least, this is the primary or root sense of *dynamis*. Aristotle lists a variety of different senses of *dynamis*—senses which may or may not be reducible to the root sense—throughout *Metaphysics* V.7 (1019b1–1020a7) and IX.1 (1046a5–19). At *Metaphysics* IX.2 (1046b5ff), Aristotle offers another division between "rational" (*logon*, λόγον) and "irrational" (*alogon*, ἄλογον) *dynameis*, corresponding to whether the *dynameis* are located in an animate or inanimate soul. Thus, the human soul will have rational *dynameis*, whereas the soul of a rock will have only irrational ones. It is a further question, not relevant to the argument pursued here, whether the soul (rational or irrational) is anything other than just its set of *dynameis*. See Wedin 1988: 12 for an affirmation of this, and see Johnston 2011 for a rejection.

another.[13] *Diatheseis* are more basic than *hexeis* in the sense that all *hexeis* are *diatheseis*, but not all *diatheseis* are *hexeis*. A *diathesis* (disposition) can become part of a *hexis* when it undergoes systematic and predictable expression in the form of dynamic activity—*energeia* (ἐνέργεια) (*Categories* VIII [8b25ff]).[14] *Energeia* is the actualization or manifestation of a disposition. Such actualization is the *telos* (τέλος) of dispositions, insofar as a disposition is always necessarily a disposition *to do something* (*Metaphysics* IX.8 [1050a10ff]). It is precisely such active expression that gives *diatheseis* the coherence, stability, and endurance to make them bona fide *hexeis*.

We can now state, with more precision, what exactly is involved in a moral virtue being a habituated state of character. A habituated state of character (*hexis*) consists of the active expression (*energeia*) of a thing's dispositions (*diatheseis*). The active expression here must involve the realization not merely of what we have called a thing's *first dynamis*, but also of its *second dynamis*. Someone is not truly habituated or virtuous merely because they have acquired a capacity, but only when they are exercising that capacity. Moreover, the active expression of the relevant dispositions may aim toward or away from a thing's good. Thus, both virtues and vices are *hexeis*. Dispositions that are not calibrated toward or away from a good thereby lack any organizing principle, and so are not true "states" at all—they would be *diatheseis* that fall short of *hexeis*.[15]

Reconsider our drinking example from earlier. A person's physical capacity for drinking is her *dynamis*, and her natural reactions to situations involving drinking are her *diatheseis*. By repeatedly enacting her *diatheseis*, she may eventually come to form a *hexis* toward drinking, which may be virtuous or vicious (namely, temperate or intemperate) depending on whether it furthers her human function as a rational and social being. Moreover, once habituated, it will be as if such a person no longer has any capacity (in neither the first nor second sense) to do otherwise. In this way, *hexis* fixes a thing's *dynamis* (*Metaphysics* V.12 [1019b5ff]). A perfectly temperate person, whose habituated dispositions are always actively expressed in rational and prosocial ways, will simply cease being able to overindulge.[16]

As we can see, *hexis* plays an absolutely central role for Aristotle's ethics. Without *hexeis*, there would be no true virtues, for our dispositions would lack the active teleological expression necessary to give them stability and coherence. What I now want to do is suggest that *li* (ritual propriety) plays a similar role within Confucian ethics.

[13] At *Metaphysics* V.20 (1022b10), for instance, Aristotle notes how it can make sense to interchange *hexis* with *diathesis* in certain contexts (because both involve *energeia*).

[14] Similarly, in *Nicomachean Ethics* II.1 (1103b22), Aristotle says that *hexeis* are formed (*ginontai*, γίνονται) through *energeiai*.

[15] Importing another Greek term, one which Aristotle rarely and unsystematically uses, we might call collections of *diatheseis* that lack teleological coherence not *hexeis* but rather *scheseis* (σχέσεις, often translated as "attitudes" or "holdings"). *Schesis* took on particular metaphysical significance in later Neo-Platonist authors, but the distinction that is relevant to us in Aristotle, at present, is simply between dispositions that are passively or incoherently collated (*schesis*) and those that are actively and teleologically oriented (*hexis*).

[16] Marjolein Oele describes the way in which *hexis*, while necessarily the actualization of *diathesis*, also determines the potential capacity (*dynamis*) of a person by talking about the "intertwinement of activity and passivity" (Oele 2012: 351n2).

3 Confucian Rituals

Throughout the texts associated with the historical Confucius, a central place is given to the ways in which certain rituals are practiced. Specifically, for our present purposes, the most relevant texts will be the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) and the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記). Although we are not to suppose that Confucius himself literally wrote either (this feature of authorship being another analogy with Aristotle), the traditional view is that, in the case of the former, it depicts his sayings and behavior faithfully and, in the case of the latter, Confucius played a central role in editing and stewarding the text. Although the corpus of classical texts associated with Confucius is larger than just these two, nevertheless the *Analects* and *Rites* are representative of the whole and are at any rate the two texts in which *li* figures most explicitly. Furthermore, in limiting the scope of my argument to these two key sources, I mean to be cognizant of the potential difference between attributing views to Confucius and characterizing the Confucian tradition more broadly. The latter spans a great many more texts and thinkers and I make no claims about the consonance of my analysis of *li*, let alone my comparison with Aristotle's *hexis*, across such breadth.

The most prominent word used in the context of ritual observance or propriety is *li* 禮.[17] The importance of *li* within Confucius' thinking cannot be overstated. We are told, for instance, that *li* constitute the very "threads" (*ji* 紀) of social and political relationships (*Book of Rites*, "Li Yun 禮運 [Ceremonial Usages; Their Origins, Development, and Intention]," section 2), and that it is primarily *li* that distinguish humans from mere beasts (*Book of Rites*, "Qu Li 曲禮 [Summary of the Rules of Propriety] I," section 9). At its most literal level, *li* refers to things that one does or in which one participates in some way. Very often this participation is prescribed in rather concrete terms, for example, how one ought to approach a prince, what manner of clothing a minister ought to wear, what specific type of wood to use for an altar, and so on. Indeed, the etymology of the character 禮 itself emphasizes praxis, depicting an individual placing an offering atop an altar. And more than being peculiar to formal environments such as court or temple, the *li* texts are explicit that such behaviors are proper in all situations, even when one is alone or otherwise at leisure (*Analects* 7.4).[18] One passage goes so far as to suggest that a truly virtuous person will observe *li* even while dreaming (*Analects* 7.5).

Despite this emphasis on praxis, the texts also make clear that action alone is insufficient for something to be an expression of *li*. One cannot merely go through the motions. In this respect, it is important not to confuse true *li* with empty sacramental procedure (*ji* 祭).[19] The character for *ji* differs in a telling way from the

[17] *Li* is included as one of the "five constants" (*wu chang* 五常) of Confucian ethics, although this codification dates to later in the Han 漢.

[18] Michael Ing notes this distinction between formal ceremonies on the one hand, and everyday behavior on the other hand as what he calls the "restrictive" and the "expansive" senses of *li*, and uses this distinction to make sense of what, he says, are otherwise competing depictions of *li* in the text of the *Rites* (Ing 2012: 21).

[19] In making the argument that genuine *li* must involve a particular inner state constituted by a love of humanity, I am thereby implying (*pace* Chen 2010) that there is no real difference between "love of ritual" (*hao li* 好禮) and the rituals themselves, that is, rituals are not truly rituals at all without such "love."

character for *li*; the former depicts an offering on an altar; the latter importantly adds to the altar a dimension of spirituality or agency.[20] Thus, the deeper meaning of *li* would also seem to be that proper ritual action must have a psychological or motivational element driving it. *Ji* can be performed with all sorts of motives or in a variety of psychological states, but *ji* will only have value when enlivened with proper "spirit."[21] Confucius remarks, for example, how *ji* for the sake of personal gain is mere flattery (*Analects* 2.24),whereas true *li* never is … even if ignorant or unvirtuous persons might occasionally mistake it for such (*Analects* 3.18). This is why "mere instruction" (*jiao xun* 教訓) is insufficient to give etiquette and manners (*su* 俗) the "determinate shape" (*zheng* 正) they require to become of true moral worth (*Book of Rites*, "Qu Li I," section 8).

Thus, more than mere outward behavior, proper *li* affects the inner state of the actor; for example, by provoking morally-constructive emotions such as shame (*chi* 恥) (*Analects* 2.3) or helping to organize otherwise anxious (*lao* 勞) and chaotic (*luan* 亂) emotions (*Analects* 8.2). Indeed, it was understood that *li* were initially established precisely as a way of harnessing and directing (*zhi* 治) people's dispositions (*qing* 情) (*Book of Rites*, "Li Yun," section 3).[22] We are all, Confucius says, similar in our basic natures (*xing* 性), but we differ in our upbringing (*xi* 習) (*Analects* 17.2).[23] It is *li* that externalizes our shared nature, thereby transcending the idiosyncrasies of our different upbringings and revealing and reinforcing our common humanity (*ren* 仁) (*Analects* 3.3), making otherwise private impulses (*yu* 欲) and dispositions accessible to normative, social evaluation (*Book of Rites*, "Li Yun," section 19). Thus, *li* "civilizes" and "refines" us (*wen* 文) in the same way, according to one passage, that yeast operates in alcohol—preserving, balancing, and strengthening us by fortifying a natural substance that would otherwise spoil or lack complexity (*Book of Rites*, "Li Yun," section 29).[24]

It is this inner psychological expression of common humanity—without which, again, *li* is mere *ji*—that gives ritual observance a fluidity and harmony (*he* 和)

[20] This radical, *shi* 礻, for instance, is also active in characters pertaining to ancestors (*zu* 祖) and spiritual entities (*shen* 神).

[21] Compare this inward-versus-outward difference between *li* and *ji* with the similar Greek distinction we uncovered above (Footnote 5) between *hexis* and *ethos*, *hagisteia*, *threskeia*, and so on.

[22] *Zhi* here is often understood to have a disciplinary or harsh connotation, but the word most literally refers to the sort of function that a dam has with respect to water: while the dam can indeed be understood as thwarting the natural course of the water, it is also through dams that the power and potential of water can be built up and leveraged. Hence my translation of *zhi* here as the more benign "harnessing and directing."

[23] *Xi* is sometimes translated as "habit," which is its more familiar contemporary usage, and which has prompted some observers to remark on apparent Aristotelian similarities (e.g., Walsh 2013: 116–117). This anticipates the central comparison I am suggesting in this essay, except I shall be focusing on Confucian *li* rather than *xi*. *Xi*, however, means more literally "to practice" or "to repeat," and its etymology suggests the fluttering of a young bird's wings as it rehearses the preparatory movements for flight. For reasons we will see, this is quite different than the patterned and phenomenologically-present coherence that characterizes *li*.

[24] *Analects* 3.8 deploys a similar metaphor, likening *li* to artful adornment that makes otherwise plain material (*su* 素) truly beautiful. Ing marks a further distinction internal to how *li* works upon our psychic raw materials, by talking about what he calls the "pressive" nature of *li*, in the sense of ritualization both *im*pressing upon our natural dispositions as well as *ex*pressing those dispositions (Ing 2012: 28).

(*Analects* 1.12). Such fluid ease may involve relaxing what could otherwise be seen as formal or officious requirements of ceremony. In the grip of genuine grief, for instance, stringent etiquette becomes inappropriate (*Analects* 3.4). Likewise, we are told in another passage that virtuous rulers will know when it is appropriate to defer or forgive (*rang* 讓) strict adherence to protocols (*Analects* 4.13). It is not that, in such conditions, *li* is relaxed, but rather that the relaxation of stringent formality is itself proper *li*. Moreover, such relaxation is facilitated by the ritual agent being phenomenologically present or grounded (*zai* 在) in the immediate concreteness of her actions and environment in relation to others.[25] If a person acts not with *zai*, then although she may still perform *ji*, she will have failed to truly express *li* (*Analects* 3.12).

To summarize, we have seen so far that the central Confucian category of *li* encompasses not only outward behavior, but also an inner sense of communal humanity. Acting as a proper ritual agent in this phenomenologically-grounded mode gives form and organization to one's dispositions and emotions. This sort of psychological organization is reserved just for *li*. There may be other formal or procedural mechanisms (*zheng* 政),[26] models or laws (*fa* 法) capable of imposing external, *de dicto* regulation on our dispositions, but they will not be virtuous because they will not enact an inner sense of communal humanity; and for that reason, they will not ultimately be very effective (*Analects* 2.3).[27]

4 Comparisons and Contrasts

With the concepts of Aristotelian habit (*hexis*) and Confucian ritual (*li*) unpacked in these ways, I think a plausible comparison between them emerges. Recall that, in our earlier explication of Aristotle, we saw that *hexis* is a necessary condition for full virtue, for without being grounded in such a habituated state, our dispositions would lack the active teleological expression necessary to give them stability and coherence.[28] *Hexis* requires the active expression of a disposition and thus, in a quite literal way for Aristotle, it is *hexis* that gives shape to our bodies and actions—indeed, *hexis* might rewire the brain itself (DeMoss 1999)—in the same way that it

[25] The character 在 contains the radical for earth/ground, and has intensions of persistence and presence; hence my translation as requiring a dimension of mindfulness and immediacy. See also *Analects* 8.8, which claims that humans "stand upon ritual" (*li yu li* 立於禮). This is not equivalent to the English idiom, in which "standing upon ceremony" has the pejorative sense of being unnecessarily fastidious or overabsorbed with minutiae or technicalities. Rather, the sense of the passage is that we use ritual as a step or foundation to support us and to reach higher.

[26] To motivate the nonstandard translation of *zheng* as "procedural mechanisms," consider its explicitly political and administrative intensions (Harbaugh 1998: 258). The radical 正 reveals an orthopraxy, and 攵 further underscores the enactive dimension of *zheng*.

[27] *Analects* 4.13 provides another statement of the efficacy of *li* as a mechanism for governing, and *Analects* 3.5 implies that it is the lack of *li* that makes people "barbarians," even if they have political rulers and governments.

[28] We must say that *hexis* is "necessary" for virtue, not that it is sufficient, for vices are also *hexeis*. This necessity is conceptual, not causal: all virtues will necessarily be *hexeis* (though not all *hexeis* will necessarily be virtues), but it is not as if something must first be a *hexis* and then, as a result or at some later time, it will become a virtue.

is only the imposition of form that gives actuality to matter. Without form, matter would remain simply undifferentiated stuff, potential and inert.

Confucian ritual functions in an analogous way. Like *hexis* in Aristotle, *li* is required for the full development of virtue. For without being phenomenologically grounded (*zai*) in the special way that, for Confucius, only ritual observance makes possible, our emotions and dispositions would lack any channel for shared, public articulation and evaluation. It is ritual propriety that "measures and shapes" (*xiu* 修) the virtuous person, giving coherence and orientation to her actions and mind (*Book of Rites*, "Qu Li I," section 7).[29] The virtuous person is literally the embodiment of *li*.[30] As David Hall and Roger Ames put the point, "Ritualized roles and practices, never separate from the physical body, shape and are shaped by the community in which they are performed, and provide the community with both its identity and its character…. And the lived body is the concrete and particular medium through which the substance of the tradition is expressed" (Hall and Ames 1998: 32).[31] Mary Bockover has also spoken of this physical, enactive dimension of ritual propriety in terms of *li* being the "body language" of humanity (Bockover 2012).

This kind of talk about "body language" and rituals "shaping the body" might be thought to be purely metaphorical. However, we can observe numerous examples of how it is instead quite literal. Marcel Mauss, in his influential essay "Techniques of the Body," for instance, documents some of the ways in which seemingly natural body movements are in fact the product of enculturation (Mauss 1935/1973). People learned to swim in the 19th century, Mauss tells us, by learning to swallow water and then spit it back out. No doubt this was considered perfectly "natural" at the time, as it fit into an apparent locomotive analogy with the then-dominant steamboat paradigm. As the steamboat receded as a cultural reference point by the early 20th century, what was considered "natural" swimming also changed. Likewise, the "simple" act of digging is culturally variable. Mauss describes how, during World War I, English troops working in France simply could not figure out how to use French shovels and had to exchange 8,000 spades every time they relieved their allies from trench duty. Even something as apparently "natural" as walking is in fact culturally enacted. "There is perhaps," observes Mauss, "no 'natural way' [to walk] for the adult," who has only acquired their habituated movement via cultural impression (Mauss 1935/1973: 74). Thus, "the positions of the arms and hands

[29] *Xiu* contains the radical for "hair," whence its connotation of adornment, with intensions of repair and revision; this echoes the *Shuowen* 說文 lexicon, in which *xiu* is linked with *shi* 飾 ("decoration"). In the *Book of Rites*, "Li Qi 禮器 (Rites in the Formation of Character)" chapter, the people of the Zhou 周 dynasty are described as applying *xiu* to diverse forms of ceremony, in a way that suggests "refashioning, integration, or a fusing together" (Ing 2012: 89).

[30] The later Confucian thinker Xunzi 荀子, who exceeds the scope I have set for myself in the main argument above, offers a relevant observation here, noting that ultimately, the virtuous coherence expressed through *li* grounds the agent in the same righteous patterns (*li* 理) of Heaven, of which ritual observances are earthly instantiations (see Sigurðsson 2015: 79–80 for a substantiation of this interpretation of Xunzi). In this way, *li* as "ritual" (禮) and *li* as "pattern" (理) are not only related as homophones, but also conceptually, even causally.

[31] To substantiate this, Hall and Ames draw attention to the fact that the character for *li* (禮), indeed, shares the glyph for "vessel" or "altar" (*li* 豊) with the character for *ti* (體), meaning "body."

while walking form a social idiosyncrasy" (Mauss 1935/1973: 72). Indeed, although Mauss himself does not talk about it, there is a quite a bit of historical evidence to suggest that most premodern peoples found it more intuitive and natural to walk toe-to-heel.[32] Even what one does absently with one's hands while resting (even in private) is largely socially impressed. This, no doubt, is why it can be so awkward to *know* what to do with one's hands if one is ever asked to attend consciously to the matter![33]

In this way, again, we can appreciate that Confucian ritual propriety literally shapes, defines, and gives meaning to the actor's body. We see this bodily effect of ritual in examples about Confucius himself. Book 10 of the *Analects*, in particular, documents Confucius' *li* and while many of the examples pertain simply to aspects of his conduct, such as the kind of clothing he donned or the countenance he adopted or the different ways he spoke as appropriate to different ritual contexts or audiences, there are also several examples that suggest a more literal bodily effect of *li*. For instance, during certain ritual performances, Confucius' body seems to undergo a striking alteration: it is not merely that he bows, or even that he bows exceptionally deeply, but that his ritually-proper bowing seems to result in his bodily frame itself contracting or bending.[34] Similarly, when observing food rituals, we are told not merely that Confucius altered his diet, but that there was a "necessity" (*bi* 必) to this alteration, as if his perfect *li* has rendered him physically unable to digest ritually-inappropriate foods (*Analects* 10.7).[35] And Confucius' ritual comportment clearly has bodily effects that manifest unintentionally since his *li* is described as extending even to his posture while asleep (*Analects* 10.24).

The ritual shaping of the body, or to use Bockover's phrase "body language," is necessarily social and shared. Maussian "techniques" of the body are impossible in the absence of cultural transmission in the same way that a "private language" would be impossible.[36] What distinguishes *li* from mere ceremony or etiquette is that *li* flows from an awareness of the interconnectedness of people. And of course, *hexis* for Aristotle expresses a dispositional state oriented with respect to the teleological good of the secondary substance *human*. For Aristotle, *hexis* consists of the active expression of internal dispositions (*diatheseis*) in a manner so deeply internalized that it has become second nature (*energeia*)—*hexeis* are what the virtuous

[32] Support for this claim comes from both ethnographic observations and historical illustrations of European martial arts. One explanation for the displacement of this toe-to-heel stride may be changes in footwear, due in turn to changes in the sorts of ground upon which people were walking, namely, walking on hard but level roads versus walking on uneven slopes or through tall grass, jagged rocks, and so on.

[33] Other examples of "techniques of the body" Mauss considers includes the enculturated expressions of childbirth, carrying medium-sized loads, and dead-lifting heavy objects.

[34] *Analects* 10.4 describes his motion while passing under a sacred gate "as if his body bent while he bowed" (*ju gong ru* 鞠躬如). *Analects* 10.5 repeats the same formula in the context of Confucius lifting a sacred item.

[35] It should not strike us as extravagant to conclude that food rituals can have such literal effects on the digestive system when we think of the long history of anthropological findings regarding the social mediation of gustatory categories (see Mintz and Du Bois 2002 for an overview of 20th-century anthropological research in this area).

[36] For his definition of "technique," see Mauss 1935/1973: 75.

person has literally become. For Confucius, *li* consists of the active expression of internal dispositions (*qing*) in a manner so deeply internalized that it has become second nature (*zai*)—*li* are what the virtuous person has literally become.

It is important to make clear at this point that I am certainly not suggesting that *hexis* and *li* play *identical* roles in their respective frameworks, for there are unquestionably many aspects of each framework that not only have no plausible analog within the other, but may indeed be deeply at odds with separate commitments of the other framework. For example, recall that *hexis* for Aristotle may point toward or away from a thing's teleological good (viz., virtues are *hexeis* that point toward the good, vices point away), and the thing in question need not even be human. Confucius, by contrast, thinks there is something quite uniquely human about rituals. Although the cosmos as a whole also has divine patterns (*li* 理), of which human rituals are echoes, nothing else is capable of the same sort of enactive ritual embodiment. And Confucian rituals always align with these righteous cosmic patterns. That is, there cannot be vicious *li* as there can be vicious *hexeis*.

But Aristotle himself notes that one of the most useful ways to inquire into the nature of a thing is to look at the similarity (*homoiotêta*, ὁμοιότητα) it has with another thing of a different genus, especially when the genera are otherwise widely separated (*malista diestôsi*, μάλιστα διεστῶσι) from one another (*Topics* I.17 [108a13–14]).[37] Following Aristotle's own understanding of analogy, we can support the foregoing comparison between *li* and *hexis* on the grounds of what I have claimed to be their core, structural similarity. For Aristotle, an analogy can be acceptable and illuminating in this singular, structural way without the majority of the other aspects of each *comparandum* also being similar; and there certainly need not be any perfect isomorphism that neatly matches up every single aspect of both theories.[38] Such an understanding of analogy may arguably be shared by Confucius. Jialong Zhang and Fenrong Liu, for instance, identify "the appeal to similarity between situations" as a fundamental contextual element shared by many of the patterns of logical reasoning evident in classical Chinese texts. And there seems to be no requirement that the legitimacy of such similarity depends on a preponderance of, let alone total, isomorphism between putative analogs (Zhang and Liu 2007).[39] Thus, although it outstrips the scope of our present discussion, I think there

[37] Aristotle does not here clarify how the "separation" of different genera is to be measured.

[38] In support of this reading of Aristotelian analogy, Matthew Wood finds in Aristotle an attention to analogy as a "middle ground" between two things being absolutely identical (univocal) and being absolutely dissimilar (equivocal) (Wood 2013). Mary Hesse offers a slightly different reading of Aristotle on analogy, going so far as to conclude that Aristotle really did not have much of a formal or systematic conception of analogy; "the elucidation of analogy was not his problem," but rather something he largely presupposed (Hesse 1965: 340). Paul Bartha, however, finds in Aristotle at least a basic conception of analogy according to which "important similarities" can be understood between different things, where such similarity need only be at the level of what "enters into … general causal principles" for each thing, rather than total isomorphism of all aspects of both things (Bartha 2013).

[39] Their analysis looks primarily to the Mohist Canons, but they note that many of the logical patterns they identify, particularly analogy based on similarity, find expression in texts such as the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Odes*) and the *Mengzi* 孟子—texts that, while strictly outside the scope of our stated reliance on the *Analects* and *Rites*, are generally taken to be closely associated with the same tradition and commitments of those two.

are resources within the logics of both Aristotle and Confucius to justify the suggested analogy between *li* and *hexis* despite the many other disanalogies between the ethical systems in which they play a role. So, what we have here is a sort of *meta*-analogy, where not only are aspects of Aristotle's and Confucius' ethics established as analogous, but the very logics of analogy employed by each thinker are also themselves analogous.

If plausible, our analogy reveals more than merely a theoretic parallelism. Appreciating the structural similarities between *hexis* and *li* helps clarify aspects of both theories that are too often overlooked. Most importantly, the *hexis-li* comparison corrects a common stereotype of each theory, which runs roughly as follows: whereas Confucius' ethics are fundamentally particularistic and socially relative, Aristotle's virtues are located as properties possessed by a rational and autonomous moral agent. This presumed difference is operative in, for example, May Sim's contrasting the "aestheticism and parochialism" she finds within Confucius with the "metaphysical theoreticism" she finds within Aristotle (Sim 2007: 2–3). On Sim's view, although Aristotle and Confucius can not only be mutually intelligible but also functionally equivalent and even complementary, there is no "explicit metaphysics" underwriting Confucianism as there is for Aristotelianism. Sim sees Aristotle, for his part, as guilty of overabstracting in his discussions of interpersonal matters such as friendship, family, and civic life. Ni Peimin agrees with this juxtaposition, asserting that, "the moral content and guidance in Aristotle's system lead one toward the ideal life of a self-sufficient contemplator more than anything else, whereas Confucian moral content and guidance lead one toward an exemplary individual who is fully immersed in social relatedness and practical life" (Ni 2009: 315). Joel Kupperman expresses a similar view, presuming that "anyone who has read Confucius will be struck by the lesser degree of attention in Aristotle to the role of nuances of style in personal connections—and in what we learn from others" and that, unlike for Confucius, "ethical decision is essentially a one-person game for Aristotle" (Kupperman 2002: 41–42).

Similar perceptions of the particularistic and metaphysically-interpersonal nature of Confucian, but not Aristotelian, ethics has been one of the driving forces behind the view, popularized by Roger Ames and Henry Rosemont, that Confucius is actually not properly a virtue ethicist at all, but rather a "role ethicist." The alleged contrast between virtue ethics and role ethics is supposed to consist partially in the fact that the former identifies moral qualities with all-purpose traits of character located in discrete and autonomous individual substances, and mediated by abstract ratiocination; whereas the latter (role ethics) locates moral qualities in particular social relationships which are affectively mediated as much as (if not more so than) cognitively mediated.[40]

[40] To be fair, Rosemont and Ames themselves reject framing role ethics as a rival normative theory set against virtue ethics, but only because they resist seeing the former as properly "theoretical" in the first place (Rosemont and Ames 2016: 13). Despite this, many proponents of role ethics recurrently contrast Confucianism with virtue-based accounts generally or Aristotelianism specifically, for example, Rosemont 2015: 119 and throughout Chang and Kalmanson 2010 and Fraser, Robins, and O'Leary 2011. Philip Ivanhoe pushes back against this school of thought and argues instead that Confucius ought to be seen as closer to an Aristotle-style virtue ethicist (Ivanhoe 2014). For more on the role ethics versus virtue ethics debate within interpretations of Confucianism, see Connolly 2016.

But Confucian *li*, as we have seen, is not nearly so parochial, nor is Aristotelian *hexis* so abstruse and autonomous. Respect for *li* is something that the virtuous person carries with her wherever she goes and which she adapts to fit local differences and customs.[41] Acting with ritual propriety elicits ritual propriety in others, bringing even the crudest (*lou* 陋) persons into ritually appropriate relationships (*Analects* 9.14).[42] Similarly, claiming that Aristotelian *hexis* is expressed in rational autonomy flies in the face of Aristotle's insistence that the essence of humans is to be social (*Politics* 1253a1ff.), that family relationships and dynamics precondition moral development (*Nicomachean Ethics* X.9 [1180b5–7]),[43] and that ethics cannot really be separated from (and indeed is subsumed under) politics (*Nicomachean Ethics* I.2 [1094b7–12], X.9 [1180b12ff]).[44] It is our essential social function that establishes the human *telos*, which in turn defines human *hexeis*. As *hexeis*, virtues necessarily implicate sociality (viz., they aim toward or away from it). We may possess dispositions (*diatheseis*) that can function in the absence of social, familial, and political relationships, but those dispositions can never be *hexeis*, and thus can never be full virtues, since they can never actualize what Aristotle sees as the defining characteristic of the human secondary substance.

Moreover, we can also reject the allegation that Aristotelian virtues are somehow hyper-rationalistic at the expense of affective mediation. *Hexeis* are teleologically-oriented dispositions not merely to act, but to *feel* in the appropriate way. These virtuous feelings are not simply feelings toward others; because they emerge from *hexeis* that are oriented in relation to our shared human sociability, they are feelings that are constituted by our relationships with others. It is a misreading of Aristotle to see him as somehow recommending that we pursue virtue *de dicto*. Yes, he does say that virtue must be "according to reason" (*kata logon*, κατὰ λόγον).[45] But again, this must be understood in the context of a conception of the human good and of human rationality as intrinsically social.[46] For "according to reason," in the case of virtue, can only mean "according to *right* reason" (*kata ton orthon logon*, κατὰ τὸν ὀρθὸν λόγον), and reason is only "right" when it aims at truth.[47] In the case of moral virtues, the peculiar

[41] *Book of Rites*, "Qu Li I," section 5 does indeed prescribe making certain "indulgences" or "concessions" (*shi* 使) to variable local custom and expectation (*su* 俗). But it is specifically the *concessions*, not the *li*, that are relative in this way. Moreover, "indulging" suggests mere tolerating or working around pragmatically (and only then in political situations), not morally capitulating to those local particularities.

[42] Compare with A. T. Nuyen, who similarly argues that it is precisely *li* that allows Confucianism to be universal and globally adaptable (Nuyen 2003: 83).

[43] This point about the developmental need for friends and family is framed as one of the ways in which (or as evidence for the fact that) we mortals differ from the gods.

[44] Indeed, Aristotle even states that the good for an individual and for society as a whole are the same, and that the attainment of the larger social good is "finer and more divine."

[45] Or, at least not *without* reason (*mê aneu logou*, μὴ ἄνευ λόγου)—*Nicomachean Ethics* I.7 (1098a7).

[46] Maria Merritt makes a similar defense of virtue, except that she thinks Aristotle was unattuned to such dimensions, and instead associates the affective and interpersonal conception of virtue with Hume (Merritt 2003).

[47] In *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.1 (1138b20–30), human virtue is said to be "as right reason dictates" (*hôs ho logos ho orthos legei*, ὡς ὁ λόγος ὁ ὀρθὸς). The connection between right reason and truth is given at *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2 (1139b12). At *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.13 (1144b26–1145a1), Aristotle comes to modify the claim that virtue is "according to right reason" and instead states that it is "involving [*meta*] right reason," in the sense that right reason—identified here with *phronesis*—encapsulates and unifies all the moral virtues.

intellectual mode by which humans aim at truth is prudence (*phronesis*, φρόνησις) (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI.3 [1139b15–19]). *Phronesis*, by way of differentiating it from scientific knowledge (*epistêmê*, ἐπιστήμη), is neither deductive nor does it abstract away from particulars. *Phronesis* is always expressed through interpersonal relationships—Aristotle gives as examples of *phronimoi* "household managers" and political actors such as Pericles—and always in a way concerned with the human good, which includes sociability (*Nicomachean Ethics* VI.5 [1140b5–11]).

Moreover, Aristotle more broadly defines reason explicitly in terms of our bodies: without being embodied, reason exists only potentially (*De Anima* III.4 [429a22–24]). It is, of course, only through our bodies that virtue is enacted, which it must be for it to truly be virtue. And human action per se is, for Aristotle, *necessarily social*.[48] An "action" is defined by its end—otherwise it is not truly an action at all, but a mere motion[49]—and the human end is fixed by our social nature. *Pace* Kupperman, ethical decision for Aristotle is assuredly *not* a "one-person game."

In conclusion, based on the above readings of *hexis* and *li*, we should resist the stereotypes of Aristotle as individualistic and rationalistic, and of Confucius as parochial and nonrationalistic. Moreover, subverting these stereotypes may go some way toward narrowing the distance between virtue ethics and role ethics.[50] But regardless of how we may want to resolve such classificatory debates, future efforts to juxtapose these thinkers can avail themselves of what we have seen to be a central and mutually-illuminating analogy between Aristotle's understanding of habit and Confucian ritual propriety.

Acknowledgments I am grateful to Yong Huang, editor of this journal, for his patience and encouragement. Two anonymous referees for this journal, and two for another journal, graciously provided extremely detailed, timely, and helpful feedback. Additionally, a preliminary version of this essay was delivered to the South Carolina Society for Philosophy and the North Carolina Philosophical Society, and I benefitted greatly from the perspectives and contributions of those who attended my presentation.

Declaration The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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[48] For more on the social nature of Aristotelian action, see Frede 2016.

[49] *Metaphysics* IX.8 (1050a21–24) claims that all activity (*energeia*) is teleological.

[50] Of course, this is not to say that there are not still real pragmatic differences between role ethics and virtue ethics. For instance, role ethics is arguably more pedagogically and casuistically effective, for, as Ames notes, "We have real intuitive insight into the role of brother or daughter from our lived experiences" (Ames 2011: 161). Vice versa, it might be more appealing to resort to a virtue ethics discourse if we are trying to cash out the metaphysical underpinnings of moral behavior; metaphysics being something on which Confucius is notoriously vague or silent.

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