

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA GRADUATE COLLEGE

CONFUCIAN MORAL IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT: A FRAMEWORK FOR
NAVIGATING POLARIZATION AND INCIVILITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Norman, Oklahoma

2025

CONFUCIAN MORAL IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT: A FRAMEWORK FOR
NAVIGATING POLARIZATION AND INCIVILITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE SHYAM DEV PATWARDHAN
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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For my family (especially my wife) who suffered my mood swings through the years, my friends who helped me stay sane along the way, and my teachers who never gave up on me.

And for my daughter who consistently annoys me but has helped make me a (slightly) better person for it.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	vii
Abstract	x
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Constructing a Normative Model of Impression Management from Early Confucian Philosophy	7
Language of Impressions.....	7
Dramaturgical Discipline and Normative Impression Management	10
Normative Impression Management: Confucian Moral Impression Management (CMIM) ..	14
<i>Li</i> 禮	21
Objective Standards?.....	25
Pro-Social Goals	27
Flexibility and Adaptivity	29
<i>Shu</i> 恕.....	31
Confucian Impression Management Redux	34
Empathy.....	40
The Power of Impressions	42
Chapter Two: Addressing the Authenticity Problem	46
Authenticity and its Problems.....	48
Identity and the Style of One's Self-Presentation.....	55
The Allure of Authenticity	58
Naturalness, Self-Positivity Bias, and Validation: A Recipe for Social Disaster.....	60
Autonomy and Shame	65
Confucian Shame and Pro-Social Dispositions	71
Living with Shame but Maintaining Autonomy Through the Social Power of <i>Li</i>	75
Prioritizing Internal States: The Problem of Downplaying Social Convention and Concern for Civility	78
Xunzi's Approval: Balancing the Internal and External	81

Chapter Three: <i>Zhong</i> 忠, <i>Shu</i> 恕, and Exemplarism: A Guide to Practicing Confucian Moral Impression Management	87
Defining <i>Shu</i> Starts and Ends with the “One-Thread” Problem.....	89
<i>Zhong</i> 忠.....	92
The Relationship Between <i>Zhong</i> and <i>Shu</i> : A Silver and Gold Problem	96
Analogical Reasoning Needs Empathy, and Empathy Needs <i>Zhong</i>	103
Moderating <i>Shu</i> with <i>Zhong</i>	107
Moderating <i>Zhong</i> with <i>Shu</i>	112
Impressions of <i>Zhong</i> and <i>Shu</i>	116
The Heart (<i>xin</i> 心) Affects Style.....	120
<i>De</i> 德 and Moral Impression Management Exemplars.....	124
Conclusion	135
Final Remarks.....	144
Bibliography	149

Acknowledgments

I have struggled for hours trying to write these acknowledgments because there is no way I can fully convey how grateful I am to so many people for their love and support. I would start with some philosophical quote or reflection, but I believe my work speaks for itself in how it has shaped and improved who I am as a person. I began this project right when the Covid pandemic picked up steam, and right before my daughter was born, so the fact I have finished it is proof of the immeasurable support I have received from so many amazing people.

Since the beginning of my academic life, I always felt behind and slightly out of place, so I must acknowledge those individuals from way back that got me started and kept me going. The first was Dr. Scott Olsen, with whom I took my first philosophy course ever at what was then Central Florida Community College (CFCC). I did not even know the word “philosophy” until I signed up for his intro course, and it was through his classes that I learned that studying philosophy is the path I wanted to take in life. And he made sure that I knew that in doing so, I would practically be taking a vow of poverty. A few years later I became a little disillusioned with my life choice until the late Dr. Alan Petigny (R.I.P) randomly called me into his office one day after a history lecture on social issues in the U.S. to tell me that he believed I should switch to majoring in history, and that if I took my studies more seriously I could be a great scholar. Of course, as an immature and stupid twenty-year-old, I ignored both of his suggestions, but he did succeed in helping me believe in myself and my abilities more. This was significant because I was not at that time planning to apply to grad school, and my coordinator told me not to even bother applying anyway because no one would take me. I trusted Dr. Petigny more and applied anyway out of spite, and did get into a program. Dr. Petigny was an incredible philosopher himself, even though he considered himself a historian, and I have continually thought about his words throughout grad school when I needed a motivation boost. Because of him, I met Dr. Sarah Mattice at the University of North Florida, and for that I am eternally grateful. I had never studied any Chinese philosophy until I randomly enrolled in her comparative, philosophy East and West course, and it was then that I fell in love with philosophy again and made the decision to focus on Chinese philosophy. Dr. Mattice taught me so much and helped me realize I needed to improve my writing skills dramatically, which she did as much as she could to help me do so. I was still an immature and un-focused student at the time, but she encouraged me and kept on supporting me anyway. She lit a spark in me intellectually and academically that eventually lit a fire under me that has continued to burn to this day. I wish I could go back and be a better student to her, but her influence on me has pushed me to strive to do better and better to make up for it.

Now to more contemporary times, I acknowledge everyone at the University of Oklahoma that taught me, accommodated me and my family, and just simply supported me. Gabe and Shelley were the best support staff one could ask for. They were beyond helpful, made the department feel stable and healthy, and were just great friends to talk to when I felt stressed. Dr. Riggs and Dr. Ellis made my adjustment to life in Oklahoma and OU seamless and always provided assistance whenever I needed it. I must especially thank Dr. Riggs for making accommodations for so many of us during Covid and being so caring. Dr. Burkhart was always a breath of fresh air and made me know that whatever stress I was feeling would eventually go away, I just needed to try to relax. He always has the best stories to tell that made me feel that I was never alone in the world and reminded me that it is only through our relationships with others that we will overcome any obstacle and thrive.

Dr. Liu Nian (劉老師) I cannot thank enough for everything she has done for me. From tutoring to doing research with me, and simply being a friend and mentor, Dr. Liu encouraged me to never give up and influenced me to not be afraid to try new things like studying Classical Chinese, doing interdisciplinary work, and applying for things that I might otherwise not because I'm not confident enough. Her belief in me and support was often the only thing keeping me going and reminding me that I can accomplish my goals if I just keep trying.

At the risk of sounding like a suck up, I will try to keep this short and just say that Dr. Amy Olberding was the best teacher and advisor one could ask for. Her teachings and influence on me are apparent in this dissertation, and honestly that is the strongest compliment I can give her. Her support, accommodation, and patience with me are obvious in the fact that I am here writing these acknowledgments before submitting my final manuscript to OU. Because of Dr. Olberding, I have learned to write better (at least according to my standards), learned to research better, and learned how to try to be a better Confucian in scholarship and life. I feel that I am a much different person than when I started this program in 2017 because I went from being selfish person writing about being more pro-social but not necessarily doing so, to being a person who understands and cares more about social ritual and etiquette than I ever did before. Obviously, I still have much to learn and improve on, but under Dr. Olberding's guidance and mentorship I have come to understand Kongzi's teachings in a new light and actually strive to practice them in my daily life. If that doesn't make her an incredible teacher, then I don't know what else would. What is most impressive is that Dr. Olberding always found a way to treat me like her student by pushing me to research and write better, yet she also made me feel like a scholarly equal when we talked philosophy. This combination was potent and is the reason why I completed this dissertation and will strive to be like her as an academic, teacher, and person for the rest of my life.

I have saved my friends and family for last because I talk to them daily, so they already know how I feel and how grateful I am for their existence and support. My dearest friend Wenhui Xie I thank almost daily for everything he does for me, but I must also acknowledge his intellectual influence and my appreciation for his help on everything from department forms to applications and for letting me vent my frustrations and anxiety. Randy, I must thank for giving me a place of refuge to clear my mind working on old VW Beetles and farming. My mother and father know how much I love them and how appreciative I am of their influence and support my entire life.

Lastly, I acknowledge the love and support of my wife 朱倩 and daughter DaiDai. My wife is the reason I was physically and financially able to continue attending grad school and finish my PhD, and my daughter is the reason I knew I could never quit. Hopefully one day she will read this manuscript and realize how much she changed my life for the better and that my accomplishment is just as much hers as it is mine. I love 朱倩 and DaiDai with all my heart.

Abstract

This dissertation introduces and explores the concept of Confucian Moral Impression Management (CMIM) as a normative framework to address the challenges of social polarization and incivility in contemporary U.S. culture. It examines the detrimental effects of over-valuing and over-prioritizing “authenticity” in social interactions, which often leads to rigidity, rudeness, and hostility in discourse. Drawing from the philosophical insights of early Confucian philosophers, primarily Kongzi (Confucius) and Xunzi, and the sociological theories of Erving Goffman, this work argues for the development and cultivation of a “mindful” disposition that prioritizes pro-social behavior such as respect for social etiquette and trying to be empathetic and civil. A “mindful” individual is attentive to the moral implications of their self-presentations and strives to impress on others in a manner that is conducive to positive and harmonious social discourse.

The first chapter introduces the concept of impression management and establishes its moral dimensions by integrating Confucian notions of *li* 禮 (social ritual and etiquette), *shu* 恕 (the “silver-rule” and empathy), and *de* 德 (a kind of influential moral “power”). The second chapter critiques the cultural emphasis on “authenticity” and its contribution to incivility, particularly in online interactions, advocating instead for the flexibility and adaptability central to CMIM. The final chapter presents a detailed guide to cultivating a mindful disposition and practicing CMIM through the Confucian virtues of *zhong* 忠 (loyalty to *li* and honest self-reflection) and *shu*, emphasizing the role of *li* in achieving harmonious interactions.

By bridging classical Confucian philosophy with modern social challenges, this dissertation demonstrates how CMIM can help individuals navigate polarized environments, reduce hostility, and foster constructive, respectful discourse. It argues that self-cultivation and the intentional practice of moral impression management are essential for achieving social harmony and positive relationships in an increasingly divided world.

Introduction

In contemporary U.S. culture, being flexible in one's values and beliefs and willing to adapt them for the sake of others is generally not perceived positively. Our social and political discourses are dominated by dichotomies of "liberal" vs. "conservative," "left" vs. "right," and "woke" vs. "anti-woke." Those with a more "moderate" disposition are ridiculed for being weak "fence sitters" whose lack of conviction on important issues makes them incompetent cowards unwilling to "stand" for anything. Ironically, people also like to label and insult individuals as "radical" or "extreme" when they are perceived as inflexible and unwilling to be adaptive. This contradictory state of affairs is a symptom of a socially and politically polarized nation that struggles to balance individualistic values and tendencies with the values and behaviors required to have a properly functioning society, particularly online. The United States may not ultimately be as polarized and disjointed as it appears as we cooperate on a lot more than we give credit to ourselves for, but when it comes to social discourse, appearances matter greatly, and that is where we are struggling—we are failing to morally manage impressions.

I will define and detail the notion of impression management in the first chapter, but briefly put, impression management refers to the practice of curating one's self-presentations to try to produce a desired impression of ourselves in others. That is, everything we say and do affects how others think of us, and we consciously and purposefully try to "manage" this, sometimes successfully and sometimes not because often the impressions we produce in others do not match up with what we intended. The values, beliefs, and attitudes one holds influence one's behavior in how one responds to others and how one impresses on others. For example,

one can be perceived as holding an extreme social or political position, but if in discourse one impresses on others as being attentive and receptive, a positive interaction is more likely to occur, and the perceived “extreme” of one’s position may be mitigated.

I argue that because of individualistic cultural values, namely “authenticity,” individuals are vulnerable to impressing on others as “careless”—i.e., not likely to be a good listener or willing to agree to disagree, prone to aggressive and hostile behavior, and tending to lack a sense of shame. I will argue in defense of the need for individuals to work towards the development of what I call a “mindful” disposition that combats individualism through trying to be flexible, adaptive, and prioritizing concern for how others feel and how one makes others feel. The kind of people we should be striving to be is epitomized in the model of leadership Kongzi condones:

If you listen broadly, set aside what you are unsure of, and speak cautiously on the rest, you will make few errors; if you look broadly, set aside what is perilous, and act cautiously on the rest, you will have few regrets. To speak with few errors and to act with few regrets is the substance of taking office.¹

The goal of trying to be “mindful” is to impress on others as a good listener (attentive and receptive) who cares how others feel and has the goal in mind to achieve social harmony, whether that means reaching some kind of consensus on an issue, agreeing to disagree, or simply holding a discourse that does not lead to aggression and hostilities.

An individual who prioritizes “being authentic” is likely to hold a rigid self-conception such that they become “extreme” in disposition and less likely to be open and flexible to change

¹ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 2.18. Although Kongzi’s teachings were frequently addressing individuals with political goals, the lessons behind them generally apply to all individuals striving to improve themselves. The more explicit argument in this passage is to not worry about external goods like official position and material wealth and just focus on trying to be a good person and then those good was naturally follow. But implicitly Kongzi presents a generally moderate kind of disposition a “good” person should have and that is what I am emphasizing. And while he is talking about what makes a good political leader or ruler, the meaning and relevance applies to everyone. As Edward Slingerland explains in his commentary on this passage, “the sole proper attitude of the gentleman (*junzi*) is to focus on what is within his control: becoming a good person.” Slingerland, *Analects of Confucius: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (GVI Publishers, 2022): 14, Kindle.

influenced by the words and actions of others. Such an individual may say, “I am who I am, and no one can change the way I think.” This may appear unrealistic and untenable, yet such a disposition has become so prevalent and socially accepted that its extremity is hardly perceived as such anymore. This is the central problem I target in this dissertation because the normalization of this disposition has resulted in individuals eschewing social norms and etiquettes that help stabilize and guide our society towards pro-social behaviors and has influenced and perpetuated behavior that is not conducive to positive and harmonious social interaction. What is needed is a manner of self-presentation that results in one impressing on others as civil so that even if one holds “extreme” social or political views, others will feel that they can have a genuine discourse. As we increasingly impress on one another as extreme in views, positions, and, most importantly, disposition, the more polarized we become. This is quite sad because differences alone should not divide us, yet we allow them to when we fail to moderate how we impress on others.

The thesis of this dissertation is that social interactions and one’s relations with others can dramatically improve if one tries to cultivate a “mindful,” disposition and practices Confucian moral impression management (CMIM). CMIM is a normative practice wherein one consciously and purposefully tries to manage one’s impressions such that one impresses on others as pro-social—e.g., attentive and receptive to others, civil, polite, caring, empathetic. These are all traits that “mindful” people have that affect how they impress on others and how others respond to them. I argue that our current culture largely over-values and over-prioritizes “being authentic,” which makes one less likely to be “mindful” and impress on others in a manner that is conducive to civil and positive social discourse. I will now outline the chapters of this dissertation to better explain my thesis.

The first chapter simply lays the groundwork by discussing what impression management (IM) is and entails and how a normative model of IM can greatly benefit our social interactions. I present the basic framework of my normative model, Confucian moral impression management, by introducing the core features and showing how it relies on a renewed respect and concern for social ritual and etiquette encapsulated in the Confucian notion of *li*. CMIM can only work if social etiquette is taken seriously and practiced. Therefore, I argue in its defense by both showing how we already have many norms of etiquette we practice and uphold, and how our concern for etiquette must be enlarged. The strategy here is that if we acknowledge that our society is increasingly polarized and hostile, yet we are aware of shared practices in the etiquettes of our social spheres, why not embrace them and use them to help guide how we behave such that we impress on each other in ways that are conducive to positive social interaction? Confucian moral philosophy provides resources for understanding and implementing this strategy, which I incorporate into my model of CMIM. This chapter notably has a more conversational and generalized tone as it sets the framework for the more intense philosophical analysis of remainder of the dissertation.

In the second chapter I delve further into why our social interactions, particularly online, are so frequently uncivil, and how the “problem of authenticity” contributes to this and to the lack of normative impression management. That is, IM itself as seen with skepticism, as a “fake” practice that encourages us to be merely “actors” wearing “masks” that hide our “true” identity, our authentic selves. I argue that there is a cultural preoccupation with “authenticity” that contributes to various social issues because it encourages and reinforces individualistic values and behaviors—e.g., feeling shame is perceived as damaging to the self, etiquette is perceived as stifling and restricting of one’s ability to “be oneself,” and lacking self-restraint or a filter and

saying whatever one feels like is not only condoned, but praised. The values and behaviors entailed in “being authentic” deeply conflict with CMIM, but I argue that if individuals can come to realize how individualistic values like authenticity contribute to various social interaction issues, and see how etiquette and the behaviors entailed in CMIM can improve our social situation, then there is hope that the over-valuing and over-prioritization of authenticity can be moderated or eliminated socially.

The third and final chapter more extensively articulates CMIM and presents it as a kind of guide, explaining the process of self-cultivation to try to be a “better” social being. I articulate how one can develop a “mindful” disposition through the practice of etiquette and the Confucian virtues of *zhong* and *shu*, and, in doing so, one learns how to practice CMIM. I show how the development of a mindful disposition and the related practice of CMIM can be conceived in stages, from beginner to advanced. Advanced practitioners of CMIM become moral exemplars that others can look to for guidance and as role models.

What I am ultimately defending is the practice of trying to develop a disposition that is adaptive, responsive, and caring to others—a disposition that does not neglect concern for oneself but prioritizes concern for others and for having fruitful and harmonious social interactions. It is important and socially beneficial to *show* this in one’s behavior through the kinds of impressions one gives off, which can be achieved through practicing CMIM. As David L. Miller paraphrases George Herbert Mead:

Because the individual can take the role of others and thereby judge and understand that his own role-performance is a phase of a more inclusive social act, he can be conscious of himself and he can, also, by reflective thinking and choice, help determine the direction of a group action as well as that phase of it which is affected by his own role-performance.²

² David L. Miller, *George Herbert Mead: Self, Language, and the World* (University of Texas Press, 1973): 7.

As Kongzi explains this social process of moral development:

Restraining yourself and returning to the rites (*keiji fuli* [proper etiquette]) constitutes Goodness. If for one day you managed to restrain yourself and return to the rites, in this way you could lead the entire world back to Goodness. The key to achieving Goodness lies within yourself-how could it come from others?³

Kongzi is not denying the social process in which morality develops but is emphasizing how it is through one's own devotion and dedication to self-improvement that positive change to societal norms of behavior is made possible. We influence others to be better by being better ourselves, which is why managing how we impress on others as pro-social as possible is essential. One cannot make an exemption for oneself and think it permissible to act however one wishes and expect others to magically become better and do all the work to improve society; we must all work together, starting with oneself in trying to be mindful and practicing CMIM.

³ Slingerland, *Analects* 12.1. Brackets my own.

Chapter One: Constructing a Normative Model of Impression Management from Early Confucian Philosophy

“No one can escape them if he wants to. He cannot escape the problem of how to engage in life, since in any case he must engage in it in some way or other—or else quit and get out. In short, the choice is not between a moral authority outside custom and one within it. It is between adopting more or less intelligent and significant customs.”

— John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*

Language of Impressions

It is uncontroversial to claim that U.S. society is increasingly polarized.⁴ Social discord occurs even in everyday, mundane social interaction. Think of the comment sections of various social media outlets, for instance, where conflict, hostility, rudeness, and just plain harassment are rampant.⁵ Inspired by the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman, I want to draw attention specifically to *everyday* interactions, and how frequently these interactions are plagued by rudeness. I define “rudeness” as behaviors and expressions of self that violate rules of etiquette where “etiquette” refers to particular, culturally contingent rules for demonstrating a pro-social

⁴ See Jamil Zaki, *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World* (New York: Crown, 2019), for a fascinating psychology study on empathy that starts from the premises that empathy is “in short supply”, “isolation and tribalism are rampant,” and that studies “show that we are less caring than we were even thirty years ago.” Zaki makes many similar claims to mine but through a more scientific methodology, so this book could serve as a sort of defense of many of the claims I make in this dissertation.

⁵ According to 2021 poll by the Pew Research Center, roughly 41% of U.S. adults have “personally experienced some form of online harassment” and 25% of this group experienced more severe forms of harassment, both increases from polls done in 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/01/13/the-state-of-online-harassment/> According to newer 2023 data by the Anti-Defamation League, 52% of U.S. adults reported “being harassed online in their lifetime, the highest number we have seen in four years, up from 40% in 2022. Overall, reports of each type of hate and harassment increased by nearly every measure and within almost every demographic group.” <https://www.adl.org/resources/report/online-hate-and-harassment-american-experience-2023>. Some research suggests that people are no more hostile or nasty online than offline but that such behavior is more visible online than offline. While this may be true, the focus of this research is specifically on political discourse not any random topic. Alexander Bor and Micheal Bang Peterson, “The Psychology of Online Political Hostility: A Comprehensive, Cross-National Test of the Mismatch Hypothesis,” *American Political Science Review* 116, no. 1 (2022): 1-18, doi:10.1017/S0003055421000885. But anyone who has spent time reading YouTube comments can attest that people will argue and be nasty about literally *anything* e.g., carpentry videos, which surprisingly have a fairly civil audience overall, are not even exempt: <https://youtu.be/Q0EaPhWdy0Y?si=t5TyRDIVJp53MjTZ>. Dominick DeMarisco et al., argue: “Cyber-aggression, or the dissemination of information or material via online or electronic platforms with the intention to inflict harm on the victim, is a rapidly emerging phenomenon of online social interactions.” DeMarisco et al., “Aggression in the Digital Era: Assessing the Validity of the Cyber Motivations for Aggression and Deviance Scale,” *Assessment* 29, no. 4 (2022): 764, doi:10.1177/1073191121990088.

orientation.⁶ Goffman calls these rules “ceremonial”: “A ceremonial rule is one which guides conduct in matters felt to have secondary or even no significance in their own right, having their primary importance - officially anyway - as a conventionalized means of communication by which the individual expresses his character or conveys his appreciation of the other participants in the situation.”⁷ Whenever I invoke “etiquette” I am stressing the “appreciation of the other participants,” and the aesthetic quality of abiding by rules of etiquette. Like Goffman and the early Confucians, I understand etiquette as a form of social aesthetics. Rudeness involves failing to appreciate the other participants in a social situation and “coming off” as “ugly” in doing so. By violating, ignoring, or purposefully disregarding etiquette, one sends off signals to others that are likely to be interpreted as anti-social and make one appear repulsive, such as “coming off” as inconsiderate, arrogant, pompous, mean, cruel, and so forth. One is being rude when one does not follow the social ceremonial rules of etiquette, thereby giving off impressions that make one appear as anti-social and resistant to having positive social interactions. Simply put, following etiquette is a central mechanism of a *normative* model of impression management.⁸

“Impressions” refer to the way we “come off” to others, or how others perceive us. In expressing ourselves through our words, body language, clothing, or any other form of self-presentation, we inevitably create impressions of ourselves in others’ minds. Impressions are fundamentally interpretations based on emotional and psychological responses an interpreter has to someone’s expressions of self. Upon later reflection, impressions can take on new meaning

⁶ While not all cases of rudeness are harassment, all cases of harassment are certainly rude in the technical sense of ignoring and violating social norms and etiquette. I note this point because what the above polls I listed highlight is that if outright harassment is that common and frequent online then rudeness must be even more pervasive. And even if one does not face recurring rudeness from just one individual but from multiple within a short period of time, psychologically this can register as feeling like harassment.

⁷ Erving Goffman, “The Nature of Deference and Demeanor,” *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 3 (June 1956): 476.

⁸ The distinction between impression management and a normative or moral conception of impression management is discussed below.

and be interpreted differently, but at the time of the interaction, the interpretive process is done so quickly and instinctively that our control over how we are impressed, and how we respond, is limited. The dictates of social interaction usually do not allow for slow and deliberate analysis of what has just been presented to us.⁹

Goffman explains that there are two kinds of expressions of self that create interpretable impressions: those we “give” and those we “give off.” The expressions we “give” are intentional and done with the purpose of cultivating specific impressions of ourselves in others. For example, you might speak softly so others think you are a gentle person, wear expensive clothing so that others think you are wealthy, or sharply say “no” in response to a question to convey certainty and rigidity. Expressions we “give off” are much more difficult to control, and many are unintentional and result in impressions of ourselves that we may or may not want. So, speaking softly can be interpreted to mean one is timid and meek, wearing expensive clothing may be perceived as arrogant, and sharply saying “no” might be felt to be dismissive and uncouth. Although Goffman makes the distinction between giving and giving off “expressions,” what he is ultimately referring to is the *impressions* we give and give off. That is, it is through the act of expression that impressions are made, but the focus and main concern is on how these expressions cultivate impressions of ourselves in others. Impression management is the art of carefully curating our expressions of self and our emotions in a conscious attempt to influence the impressions produced in others. Therefore, I predominantly employ the language of “giving” and “giving off” *impressions*, as is common in Goffman scholarship, because the result is the primary concern even though it is produced through giving and giving off *expressions*.

⁹ See David Kahneman’s model of system 1 (fast and intuitive) and system 2 (slow and deliberate) thinking for an intriguing analysis of human psychology and how it functions in various kinds of situations including social interaction. *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

I am primarily concerned with impressions we “give off” because they are much more difficult to control. One can only imperfectly predict how one’s presentations of self might impress on others, but one can also attempt to control against negative or undesired impressions. While there will always be unforeseeable impressions produced, one can consciously act in ways that decrease the chances of cultivating “bad” or unwanted impressions and increase the chances of producing “good” ones. For instance, following etiquette significantly increases the chances of “giving off” positive pro-social impressions while acting rudely, unsurprisingly, does the opposite. Etiquette is in fact the main mechanism of normative impression management. In trying to control or “manage” the kinds of impressions one gives off to help cultivate a productive, meaningful, and pro-social interaction, following etiquette is the most powerful determinant for making this possible. The problem is that in U.S. culture, the value of etiquette is increasingly questioned and challenged as values such as “authenticity” take priority. To diagnose and seek remedy for this problem, I draw from Goffman and early Confucianism to create a model of “Confucian moral impression management” (CMIM), which I will develop in detail below.

Dramaturgical Discipline and Normative Impression Management

In Erving Goffman’s early formulating of his notion of “impression management,” we only see him hint at the moral content that is inherently part of the practice. His emphasis in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, is on the art of impression management as the practice of getting the audience, those with whom one is interacting, to buy into what one is selling them. That is, one tries to get the audience to see one’s self as one wants it to be seen. While this is a fairly individualistic practice early Confucians were not unconcerned about, they were more concerned about the moral relevancies of one’s social performance, such as how one makes

others feel, and whether the impressions one gives and gives off are positive or negative. One is likely to produce a positive impression in others when one comes off as agreeable, considerate, civil, and attentive. A negative impression is made when one comes off as rude, off-putting, and anti-social. Goffman considers a successful act of impression management to entail an audience “buying into” one’s performance or presentation, resulting in effectively getting people to perceive oneself in the way that one desires. For the Confucians, a “successful” act of impression management is inherently moral, where one’s impressions are conducive to a positive and productive social discourse. The Confucians share Goffman’s concern about getting others to “buy into” our presentations of self only so far as it works towards a socio-moral goal.

Kongzi would say that a person skilled at managing impressions in order to help cultivate positive interactions and relations has *de* 德, a kind of moral power or influence on others. This is famously expressed in *Analects* 9.14: “The Master wanted to go and live amongst the nine clans of the Eastern Yi Barbarians. Someone said to him, ‘What would you do about their crudeness?’ The Master replied, ‘Were an exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) to live among them, what crudeness could there be?’”¹⁰ This is a reoccurring idea in the *Analects*, where a true moral exemplar has the *de*, crudely simplified as “power,” to influence people to act morally by simply living amongst them and functioning as a model.¹¹ People can see how skillfully and effortlessly an exemplar manages their roles and relations, and their general interactions with others. Of course, this skill took years of practice and only appears effortless because of their skill, but this appearance of being effortlessly skillful is itself an impression that has a powerful influence on

¹⁰ Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

¹¹ *Analects* 9.14 is a famous passage describing how a moral exemplar, by simply following etiquette and doing what is proper, has the inspirational and aesthetic power to influence behavior changes in others. 2.3 is another widely discussed passage that highlights the potential socio-political power of a ruler with *de*.

others. The overall point Kongzi makes in 9.14 is that both the behavior of a moral exemplar and the impressions they give off have moral weight and power.

I have only spoken in generalizations and vagaries so far about what successful impression management looks like for Goffman and the Confucians because I want to highlight that unlike the Confucians, for Goffman, impression management is not predominantly a moral practice, but he acknowledges that there are moral concerns inherently part of impression management and social interaction more generally. It is a subtle difference between Goffman and the Confucians, but it is necessary to acknowledge, so as not to give Goffman too strong of a Confucian flavor in his basic conception of impression management.¹² As Dillard et al. explain, Goffman does weave a commentary on moral standards throughout his work, but he “introduces and elaborates upon his quasi-moral notion of dramaturgical discipline under the rubric of impression management.”¹³ Goffman describes his social theory as “dramaturgical” because he metaphorically employs theatre terminology, such as “actors” and “audience” and “front stage” and “backstage”, to explain the nature of social interaction. A dramaturgically disciplined actor does not forget their lines, stays in character, performs their cues on time, and performs all the behaviors that require skilled training to not only not interrupt the performance, but to make it convincing to the audience. Goffman “suggests that performers use dramaturgical discipline as a defense to ensure that the show goes on without interruption.”¹⁴ The point of importance is that “dramaturgical discipline,” in essence, is impression management, so henceforward, I use the

¹² I do think the Confucians help illuminate Goffman’s theory and help clarify some of the more cryptic parts though. For instance, throughout this paper I employ more everyday language that is friendly to the already translated Confucian ideas instead of using Goffman’s heavy dramaturgical lingo. I would rather *Confucianize* Goffman than the other way around because my main argument has its foundation in Goffman but is more strongly Confucian in essence. Also, I believe the Confucians help explain Goffman and actually make clearer some of his more complex ideas and language.

¹³ Courtney Dillard et al., “Impression Management and the Use of Procedures at the Ritz-Carlton: Moral Standards and Dramaturgical Discipline,” *Communication Studies* 51, no. 4 (2000): 406, doi:10.1080/10510970009388534.

¹⁴ Dillard et al., “Impression Management,” 406.

term “impression management” with the implication that it is understood to be a disciplined practice. Disciplined, however, does not necessarily imply moral, especially in Goffman’s early work, but in later work he does lay out standards of dramaturgical discipline that more clearly show the moral aspects of one’s social performances. Goffman’s primary concern is that the “show goes on without interruption,” that one’s presentation of self is effectively pronounced and the audience buys into it.¹⁵ But if we look at Goffman’s list of “dramaturgical disciplines” through a Confucian lens, the moral significance becomes exceedingly apparent. Dillard et al. present this list as follows:

- Coping with dramaturgical contingencies
- Demonstrating intellectual and emotional involvement
- Remembering one’s part and not committing unmeant gestures or *faux pas*
- Not giving away secrets involuntarily
- Covering up inappropriate behavior on the part of teammates on the spur of the moment
- Offering plausible reasons or deep apologies for disruptive events
- Maintaining self-control (which we [Dillard et al.] will identify with such practices as speaking briefly and modestly)
- Suppressing emotions related to private problems
- Suppressing spontaneous feelings¹⁶

Dillard et al. also allude to one needing to be attentive and adaptive in order to do all of this:

“Specifically, performers need to discipline themselves in such a way that they play their roles fully while maintaining an ability to recognize and react to unexpected and possibly detrimental occurrences.”¹⁷ This point cannot be emphasized enough as it is a top moral priority for the Confucians.

¹⁵It is interesting to note that Goffman was aware of the moral relevancies of his dramaturgical model, and that contemporary researchers argue there is evidence that viewing theatrical productions, and even taking acting classes, can work to increase our sense of empathy. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-05-02/theater-empathy-live-performance-psychology>

¹⁶ Dillard et al., 406.

¹⁷ Dillard et al., 406.

Normative Impression Management: Confucian Moral Impression Management (CMIM)

This list of dramaturgical disciplines is the closest we get to a Goffman moral theory, and it is exceptionally creative in how these forms of discipline can be conceptualized as quite practical in everyday events and interactions. Goffman's point is that one who is disciplined as such is able to present one's self "effectively," resulting in an audience largely perceiving oneself like one desires, albeit never exactly, as that is impossible no matter how hard one tries. But being disciplined in this way also has more significant moral worth, as the Confucians will illuminate. For instance, being dramaturgically disciplined enables social interactions to minimize conflict. If conflict is unavoidable, being dramaturgically disciplined makes it more likely conflicts will be resolved in a civil manner that it is not uncomfortable and off-putting to those involved. Additionally, being disciplined helps avoid conflict by enabling social participants to express themselves meaningfully and fully without issue, reducing the probability of feeling resentful or psychologically distraught. In effect, this list of disciplined behavior is a model of what successful impression management involves, and particularly under a Confucian socio-ethical theory,¹⁸ even if some of the items in Goffman's list might not be especially important in the mundane everyday social interactions that are centrally important to the Confucians.¹⁹

¹⁸ This is not to say that there is a one-to-one correlation between this Goffman list and what would be included in a Confucian list of disciplined impression management.

¹⁹ And some items are not explicitly discussed in Confucian texts – e.g., "not giving away secrets involuntarily." 17.24 in the *Analects* does note the wrongness of "those who mistake the malicious exposing of other's private affairs for uprightness." Translation here by Edward Slingerland, *Confucius: Analects* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2003), Kindle. This seems to imply giving away secrets *voluntarily* for self-gain, however. But, if one's disposition is such that they always have a loose tongue and are generally ruthlessly looking to upgrade one's social positioning, then one could argue that if such an individual involuntarily gives away secrets that leads to self-promotion, they can hardly be said to be free of malice. This just goes to show the brilliance of the *Analects* because the text has so much to say that can be useful for navigating life's more mundane aspects as well as those of higher stakes.

The disciplinary elements I highlight are: (1) the general attentiveness and adaptability required to “recognize and react to unexpected and possibly detrimental occurrences,” where “unexpected and detrimental occurrences” refers to either one’s own conduct slip-ups or the interlocutor’s, that threaten the positive flow of a social interaction.²⁰ Included in this all-important attentiveness to the audience and being flexible/adaptive is “demonstrating intellectual and emotional involvement,” “remembering one’s part and not committing unmeant gestures or *faux pas*,” and “offering plausible reasons or deep apologies for disruptive events.” (2) Most relevant to the concerns of this project is “maintaining self-control,” which I identify with practices like speaking briefly so as to give one’s interlocutor space to speak and presenting oneself modestly. The *Analects* contains multiple passages about maintaining self-control in social discourse, such as by speaking cautiously and carefully, only speaking on things when one is in an appropriate position to do so²¹, and always avoiding glib talk.²² Presenting oneself modestly is a general value in Confucian social ethics that is central to the practice of normative impression management.²³ The Confucians make it apparent that being attentive to the social situation and the audience members one is addressing is required if one is to figure out how to be considerate and flexible in order to avoid coming off as rude and anti-social. Part of being attentive to and considerate of a situation and to one’s audience involves being modest in one’s self-presentation, such that one avoids being blunt and rude in one’s expressions. But it also

²⁰ Dillard et al., 406.

²¹ This point is reiterated throughout the text in the notion of (*yi* 義).

²² *Analects* 1.3, 5.25, 11.25, 15.11, and 16.4. Xunzi articulates these points and values about self-control in speaking more explicitly throughout his writings, such as in chapter one of the *Xunzi*. Eric L. Hutton comments on one of Xunzi’s arguments about speaking as follows: “Likewise, the gentleman does not show off his learning by speaking out of place, or by droning on about matters for which a shorter discussion will suffice.” Hutton, *Xunzi: The Complete Text* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), 6. This list of speech moderations encapsulates what Kongzi means by speaking “slowly.” *Analects* 4.24, 8.16, 12.3, and 19.25.

²³ *Analects* 3.4, 7.36, and 15.18. Kongzi is constantly critical of his student Zilu throughout the text for his immodesty.

entails that one avoid coming off as being overly timid and only saying whatever one thinks the audience wants to hear.²⁴

To begin articulating my conception of Confucian impression management, it helps to think of a spectrum of impressions given off. On the far left²⁵ is the brash and overly blunt individual who says and does whatever they wish with no concern for the impressions they give off. Not only do they *believe* they do not care how they come off²⁶, they might even acknowledge how off-putting they are and defend their behavior under the justification of “just being myself” or “I’m being true to myself.”²⁷ Under Mark Snyder’s famous psychological profiling, these individuals would be considered “low self-monitors,” who “are relatively unlikely to practice such situationally guided impression management strategies,” contrasting with “high self-monitors” whom “tailor their self-presentation for the sake of desired public appearances.”²⁸ The individual I am concerned about practices little to no self-monitoring beyond trying to get others to see them how they wish to be seen, and are so preoccupied with

²⁴ As Xunzi says, “Through *yi*, he [*junzi*] changes and adapts to circumstances, because he knows when it is appropriate to bend and straighten.” Hutton, *Xunzi*, 18.

²⁵ This spectrum is not meant to reflect any political categorization and is purely used as an expository model.

²⁶ I emphasize “believe” because no matter how strongly one claims they do not care about how they impress on others, and they do not care what others think of them, this is impossible unless one has some underlying psychological issue. Yet, an individual can certainly act as though they do not care. If one has a fairly good idea about how someone feels about them, they can use that to moderate their behavior to try to instigate a desirable response. One can do this for good and bad reasons, such as you are purposefully trying to get under someone’s skin or if you want them to favor you. This is an inherent part of the practice of impression management, but these individuals I have put on the left side of the spectrum try their hardest to not be reflexive and responsive to others.

²⁷ For a light article that I do not entirely agree with but acknowledges negative uses of authenticity, see: Michael F. Steger, “Don’t Use Authenticity as an Excuse to Be Cruel,” Greater Good Magazine, The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, December 11, 2019,

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/dont_use_authenticity_as_an_excuse_to_be_cruel. This kind of person would fall under the psychological profile coined by psychologist Mark Snyder as “low self-monitors” which Herminia Ibarra better relabels as “true-to-selfers.” Herminia Ibarra explains that “By contrast, “true-to-selfers” (Snyder’s “low self-monitors”) tend to express what they really think and feel, even when it runs counter to situational demands.” Ibarra, “The Authenticity Paradox,” *Harvard Business Review* (2015): <https://hbr.org/2015/01/the-authenticity-paradox>.

²⁸ Olivier Klein, Mark Snyder, and Robert W. Livingston, “Prejudice on the Stage: Self-Monitoring and the Public Expression of Group Attitudes,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 43, no. 2 (2004): 299, doi:10.1348/0144666041501697.

notions of uniqueness and “authenticity,” of being one’s “true self,” that they are likely to defend nasty behavior under the cloak of “being myself.”²⁹ In what follows, I will primarily critique this kind of person, as they are common in contemporary U.S. society, and the social consequences of their disposition are quite problematic.³⁰

On the far-right side of the impression spectrum is the individual who has no backbone, who holds no value, belief, or attitude strongly, and tries to only give off impressions that appease whatever audience they are trying to woo for either prestige, profit, or both. Think of a disingenuous social media influencer who does not actually use whatever products they claim they do, nor follow whatever practices they claim they do, but presents themselves online as doing so because it gains them followers and makes them money.³¹ There of course exist timorous individuals who aim to appease their audience and merely blend in for much less cynical reasons such as conflict-avoidance. And some individuals are inherently timid, more temperate, or simply weak-willed, so their motives for being overly agreeable and/or pushed over are not for prestige or profit, but to avoid social and physiological discomfort. These kinds of individuals are not my primary concern, as I explain below, but their existence is worth

²⁹ Although a quite informal post, and not verified academic study by any means, Sadiq A Ali’s blog post explains exactly the kind of person and behavior I am discussing and challenging. “Beware of Toxic Authenticity: Trust me it’s a thing, LinkedIn, August 30, 2019, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/beware-toxic-authenticity-trust-me-its-thing-sadiq-ali-mba>.

³⁰ It is extremely important to note that while authenticity appears to be a major cultural concern overall, individuals with marginalized identities are less likely to try to justify rude and nasty under the defense of authenticity because their status already makes them more likely to face hostilities and nastiness from others, meaning, they are less likely to be as brash and uncaring about how they impress on others. In other words, individuals that have a sense of superiority or being part of an empowered social group are more likely to express themselves with less concern for how their words or actions affect others i.e., express themselves more “authentically.” So, while anyone can, and certainly do, engage in nasty online behavior, it is likely that privileged individuals (white men) feel more confident to be rude, nasty, and hostile in order to express whatever they desire. Oliver L. Haimson et al., “The Online Authenticity Paradox: What Being ‘Authentic’ on Social Media Means, and Barriers to Achieving It,” *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, issue CSW2, no. 5 (2021): 1-18, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3479567>.

³¹ The Confucians would call this kind of person a “village worthy.” I will discuss this concept more below and in chapter 3 where they are referred to as “thieves of *de*.”

noting, and I will refer to them periodically in later chapters as they can play a negative role in social discourse.

Under a Confucian model of impression management, being a “high self-monitor” is morally neutral because it just means one is attentive to one’s audience and is willing to adjust one’s self-presentations to achieve desired impressions. It is one’s *intentions* in being attentive and flexible that push one into morally good or bad waters. The kind of normative impression management strategy the Confucians and I propose is a version of “high self-monitoring,” where the intent is to cultivate positive social interactions while still maintaining a moral backbone where one is not willing to go to extremes to avoid conflict and appease one’s audience. This is to be contrasted with a *problematic* “high self-monitor”³² who is willing to say and do whatever will help produce and maintain positive social interactions so that they can be exploited for personal benefit such as boosting one’s ego, social prestige, and/or profit.³³ I will provide further analysis of high self-monitors below, but my attention centers on low self-monitors as they are

³² The Confucians would likely call the person I am describing a “village worthy” (*xiang yuan* 鄉愿). Mengzi describes them as follows: “If you try to condemn them, there is nothing you can point to; if you try to censure them, there is nothing to censure. They are in agreement with the current customs; they are in harmony with the sordid era in which they live.” *Mengzi*, 7B 37.11. Bryan W. Van Norden, *Mengzi: With Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 2008).

³³ Through being overly timid one can actually achieve the same goals of personal benefit by being submissive and overly flexible. However, this individual needs to be distinguished from the genuinely timid individual who is not consciously trying to manipulate and gain something, but whose will is such that they are easily pushed around. They might sometimes achieve the same result as the purposefully timid person, but their goal orientation is different. The problematic high self-monitor can be seen as consciously attempting to manipulate with personal gain in mind whereas the truly timid practices high self-monitoring for other reasons such as not wanting to participate in certain social interactions. The truly timid still might act problematically in certain situations though. Judging those instances depends on how an audience interprets their behaviors and speculates about their intentions. One can imagine a person too scared or cautious to take a stand on an issue, but inevitably benefitting from maintaining the status-quo, facing the classic call-out of “if you are not part of the solution then you are part of the problem.” One might also argue that the manipulator is not “authentically” timid, but if they come off as timid and their audience buys into their presentation, then they are timid. The difference is they might be strong willed and can shift to more aggressive tactics if they choose whereas the weak-willed will not.

more potentially destructive to social relations, although Kongzi argued that the self-interested abuser of high self-monitoring can be quite dangerous to society as well.³⁴

I predominantly focus on the left side of the impression spectrum, with individuals who defend and attempt to justify their off-putting and anti-social behavior under the value of “authenticity,” as this kind of individual is not only increasingly prevalent in U.S. society, but is generally praised and defended in U.S. culture. For example, we can easily find activists of any political leaning defending rude and socially abrasive acts or words as expressions of their “authentic” feelings and being in the world, and they “will not let social pressures silence us or interfere.” This kind of sentiment is extremely common, especially online. When looking at the list of what is involved in disciplined impression management, it is quite obvious how this kind of individual is not disciplined and comes off as quite rude. Part of what is so problematic about these kind of authenticity focused individuals is that they have total disregard for social etiquette and ritual. It is not uncommon to see attitudes of contempt towards etiquette and ritual as they are perceived as authenticity inhibitors. Social etiquette and ritual are conceived as more like rigid social norms that haunt our society like an authenticity restricting boogeyman. “Social norms” are frequently invoked as a foil to personal individual freedom: they restrict our behavior, suppress our voices, and manipulate our values and beliefs. To make matters worse, because social norms are conceptualized as representing the position of “society” generally, society itself is perceived to be participating in restricting and oppressing us. I am not denying the existence of widespread social beliefs and attitudes that do contribute to forms of oppression,

³⁴ *Analects* 12.3 and 12.20. Hutton, *Xunzi*, 44-46. Arguably, “Upright Gong” in *Analects* 13.18 is an example of a dangerous high self-monitor because he is willing to go as far as to turn in his own father to the legal authorities to maintain his high “moral” status in the community. One could argue Gong was just following his local custom, or that he honestly believed he did the right thing, but I interpret his motive to be influenced by his concern about status. See *Mengzi* 7B37 for a more detailed analysis of what the Confucians call “village worthies” which I interpret Upright Gong to be. Basically, these are individuals who only care about maintaining their status as moral exemplars for personal gain when ultimately they have no moral backbone and do not care to develop one.

sometimes more hidden or unconsciously held by millions of people, such as systemic forms of racism and sexism. Sometimes oppressive views can be quite visible and explicit, such as forms of transphobia and white supremacy, but my argument stands that invoking the notion of “social norms” is usually not only too generalizing, but should not be used as a defense of rudeness. A misconceived and misguided condemnation of social norms does not, and cannot, justify socially destructive rude behavior.

I do not deny that there are situations where forms of civil disobedience and/or aggressive, provocative, and objectively rude, behaviors are useful, and arguably even justified, but the times such behaviors are justified are exceptionally rare because our everyday interactions are generally low stakes, such that being aggressive, provocative, and rude comes off as inappropriate.³⁵ It is through being aggressive, provocative, and rude that low stakes situations can become high stakes. Ultimately, we must use our judgment to decide when we believe a limit has been met that determines being polite as no longer a necessity, but that bar should be set extremely high. I argue that to the best of our ability—an ability untrained in most of us that can, and ought to be, trained, according to the Confucians—we should practice etiquette and respect social rituals. An overly simplistic dislike and rejection of “social norms” that are believed to restrict one’s authenticity is not a persuasive argument for justifying rude and anti-social behavior. This claim is controversial as stated because our everyday notions of etiquette and ritual are not well developed compared to the Confucian notion of *li* 禮, and do not really provide us with persuasive reasons for respecting etiquette and social ritual. But, by defining and explaining the concept of *li*, I can show how it fits into the practice of impression management

³⁵ Unfortunately, being aggressive, provocative, and rude are all so common in everyday online interactions. Because of this, conflict and hostility are the norm in comment sections of any social media outlet and ultimately serve as great examples of why it is imperative that in our daily offline interactions we practice good etiquette and manners so that these interactions do not begin to look like those we see online.

with the expectation that the reader will come to see how we already, every day, abide by norms of etiquette and social ritual, and be persuaded that it is morally important that we do. I then move on to discuss how we can improve our social interactions and relations with further training in practicing *li*.

Li 禮

One need not delve into the nuances and complexities of Confucian philosophy to develop a basic understanding of *li* and its relevance to our everyday lives. Thanks to the ingenious work of scholars like Amy Olberding, we can more easily make sense of the ritualistic nature of our quotidian social interactions without getting too entangled with the “ritual” part.³⁶ *Li* is generally translated as “ritual” or “ritual propriety”, but as Olberding explains, “etiquette” is an appropriate and illuminating translation in that it emphasizes the “banal, everyday conduct rather than the high ceremony typically evoked for English speakers by the term ‘ritual’.”³⁷ What makes *li* unique, and so useful for analyzing social interaction, is that both “ritual” and “etiquette” are embedded in its meaning, underscoring the ritualistic aspects of the forms of manners and etiquette we practice. This is significant because in contemporary U.S. culture, “etiquette” and “ritual” are perceived as conservative, and usually problematically so. Both face the condemnations of being “insincere,” “fake,” and “inauthentic.”³⁸ Yet the notion of “rudeness” persists, because norms of etiquette still exist in society. People appeal to rudeness when they want to criticize behaviors they find objectionable, and this is only possible because they have some sense of standards of what kinds of behavior they consider appropriate and

³⁶ Goffman attempted to make clear the ritualistic nature of our everyday interactions as well.

³⁷ Amy Olberding, “Etiquette: A Confucian Contribution to Moral Philosophy,” *Ethics* 126, no.2 (2016): 424, doi:10.1086/683538.

³⁸ See Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) for an interesting analysis of contemporary attitudes towards ritual and etiquette.

inappropriate. The standards used to judge behavior are called etiquette, and these standards are upheld by many members of society or of a given community. If we as members of society and various communities shared absolutely no beliefs about what is appropriate or not, there would be no way to determine and judge each other's behaviors—a necessary practice for better or worse. So, even though the word “etiquette” might have a bad reputation, it is still an inherent part of our social reality, and for ethical reasons, is ultimately indispensable.

The concept of *li*³⁹ can help diagnose the problem of rudeness in contemporary social discourse by illuminating how rudeness is often a byproduct of the fascination with, and prevalence of, individualistic conceptions of self. Negative attitudes towards ritual and etiquette, derived from their associations with insincerity and “being fake,” are inherently connected to the cultural fascination with “being your authentic/true self.” Ritual and etiquette are perceived as interfering with one's ability to be, or even possibility of being, authentic. A surface level understanding of *li* is likely to be criticized as excessively conservative and interfering with one's chances of being one's authentic/true self, but with some explanation, it becomes evident that *li* are in fact present in our daily lives and are necessary for the health of social functioning.

Contemporary scholarship does well to acknowledge the performative nature of *li* by translating it as “ritual,” which more quickly brings to mind performance than the word “etiquette,” but ultimately, the concept of *li* encapsulates both. Whether translated as “etiquette” or “ritual,” *li* is vulnerable to being conceptualized as rigidly defined guidelines akin to “social norms.” While a symbolic gesture is involved in every performance—e.g., a handshake shows respect, bowing shows respect, bringing a gift to a special occasion displays respect and care—

³⁹ From here on I use *li* and “etiquette” interchangeably for the most part.

the timing of enactment and the quality of the performance can vary greatly. One ultimately chooses when and how to perform *li*. While there might exist some expectation by the audience of what an appropriate or inappropriate act would be in a given situation, it is up to the performer to use their observational skills and receptivity to adapt their behavior to the situation. But, how much adaptability is appropriate, or even possible, is up for debate. After years of scholarly discourse, debate over the strictness or rigidity of *li*, and how much flexibility is allowed by the Confucians, still persists.⁴⁰ The *Analects* itself only provides a few passages to gain insights from—just enough to leave us perpetually speculating and debating. The same is true of the *Mengzi* and *Xunzi*.

I argue that the style of how one performs *li* can be just as important as the *li* itself, and sometimes even more so. *Li* serve as general guidelines, but to act appropriately in a given situation requires flexibility, so that one is able to adapt their behavior to the circumstances. In being flexible, I do not mean one chooses to practice *li* or not, or changes a particular *li* in some radical way, but that because the performance of *li* can be done in so many different ways, “flexibility” refers to one’s ability to adapt the *performance* of a *li* to the needs of the situation. Of course, sometimes, a situation may demand a change to a ritual itself, but I am emphasizing how the power of performance is often all that is needed.⁴¹ As Ames explains, Kongzi gives

⁴⁰ See Karyn Lai, “*Li* in the ‘*Analects*’: Training in Moral Competence and the Question of Flexibility,” *Philosophy East and West* 56, no. 1 (2006): 69-83, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4488001>. Thomas Radice, “*Li* (ritual) in Early Chinese Philosophy,” *Philosophy Compass* 12, no. 10 (2017): e12463, doi:10.1111/phc3.12463. See Kelly Epley, “Care Ethics and Confucianism: Caring through *Li*,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 4 (2015): 881-896, doi:10.1111/hypa.12158 for a thorough analysis of how a care ethics interpretation of Confucian ethics and *li* reignited the debate about the flexibility of *li* for a couple of years. How conservative Confucianism is interpreted to be is an issue that permeates all contemporary literature, and due to the nature of the textual materials scholars are discussing, a consensus on *li*’s flexibility or rigidity will never be achieved.

⁴¹ There certainly are instances where a given *li* is in need of major modification and possibly even rejection, but one does not face these kind of dramatic moments often in daily life. In any given social interaction multiple *li* are at play in the background where years of training and repetition make one practice them almost involuntarily such as saying “please” and “thank you.” The kind of “big” moment events where one consciously and aggressively questions a social ritual or norm of etiquette are fairly rare unless one is in the mindset of closely analyzing social

“primacy to the manner and attitude with which actions are carried out rather than to the specific, formal actions themselves.”⁴² Let us look at an example where the *li* stays the same, but differing performances can give off different impressions.

Consider shaking hands, for example. I can throw my hand out right away, have a slight delay, slowly move my hand, aggressively move my hand forward, not put my hand out at all after my interlocutor does, squeeze lightly, squeeze tightly, try to turn it into a grasp, respond to the gesture to shake with a fist bump, look down at our hands when shaking, keep eye contact when shaking, comment on their grip, and there are a couple of other less common things I could do, like rub my finger on their palm when shaking to creep them out. The identity of the individual I am shaking hands with matters too. For instance, if it is a big strong looking person, I might squeeze harder. If I perceive them as a woman or elderly, I might squeeze lighter. If it is a child, I might not put my hand out at all.⁴³ How my performance pans out shows the moral significance of the performance itself. I might find out that the big strong looking person actually tried to shake lightly, and my tight squeeze squishes their fingers together painfully, annoying them, since they assume that I felt it necessary to squeeze hard because I perceived them as big and strong. An individual might take offense if they feel that I squeezed lightly because I perceived them as a woman, but they also might think I was trying to prove my machismo if I squeeze hard.

Most *li* that would fall into the categories of “good manners” or “etiquette” could be analyzed in this way. What these detailed accounts would prove is that the performance of *li* is a

situations and thinking about what can be changed. It is easy to think that Kongzi is suggesting we live in this kind of hyper scrutinizing state, but he is not, and instead puts more weight on performance and style. When it comes to preexistent norms of etiquette and ritual, *li*, the Confucians are less concerned with *what* one is doing and more with *how* one is doing it.

⁴² Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2011), 171.

⁴³ I would like to think I shake hands gently and consistently across the identity board, but I probably do not as implicit bias and internalized stereotypes exist. Young children, however, I have no remorse in ignoring.

significant part of what it means to manage impressions, and that the more skilled one is at being attentive to others and reading the social situation, the better one will be able to adapt one's performance to be appropriate. And likewise, if one is flexible and receptive to others, even when a performance of *li* is off to a rough start, such as noticing an off-putting response when one shakes hands incorrectly, one can avoid further degradation of the impression they give off through apology, a joke, a redirection, and so forth. Normative Confucian impression management takes a lot of time, effort, and care to successfully do and improve. It was not until Kongzi himself, a moral exemplar, turned seventy that his ability to optimally manage impressions became like second nature.⁴⁴

Objective Standards?

By claiming one can adapt their performance of *li* to the situation in order to do what is most appropriate does not mean that no *li* have objective standards. In fact, it is we, as members of society, who uphold standards together that are then perceived as objective. But the problem with so-called "objectivity" is that we are so diverse with different beliefs, values, and attitudes, and we all live different lives with various roles and relationships. All of these factors have an effect on how we expect to be treated and what we consider appropriate behavior. Different behavioral standards influenced by one's ethnicity, nationality, religion, and other major identity traits are much more clearly recognizable, and it is easy to see how they result in differences of opinion about "objectivity." It is the standards that we as members of a given society generally agree on, and are likely to claim as "objective," that become less clearly objective when we see how our different roles and relationships affect them. For example, you treat your own grandma a bit different than the elderly woman down the street, you talk differently to your friends than

⁴⁴ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 2.4.

your parents, you shake the hands of a strong looking man differently than you would a sick person in the hospital. These examples are all just differences in performance, and it is the difference in performance that often makes us believe that we have different moral standards of behavior when we might not.

For instance, it is not because you respect your grandma less than the elderly woman down the street that you tease your grandma. Rather, the teasing is a bonding mechanism you two developed that would be inappropriate to do with your elderly neighbor. And your friend might try to tease their own grandma like you do yours just to find out that their grandma felt it disrespectful and got angry. You and your friend both agree that one should respect one's grandparents, but how one performs that respect can vary greatly depending on the particulars of one's relationships.⁴⁵ Whether or not objective moral standards exist is somewhat irrelevant because the most pertinent factor in how we evaluate and judge the appropriateness of each other's behavior is primarily based on performance. This being the case, it is imperative that we are attentive to our performances and adaptive when need be, such as when we need to be more receptive to others. This, I argue, is what the Confucians were really trying to direct our attention to—to impression management—as is shown in the importance of how one performs *li*.

Individuals who believe they are justified to act however they feel no matter the situation, because they give priority to “being their self,” fail miserably at impression management, and do not fully appreciate the significance of performance. They believe that they can simply claim to

⁴⁵ In other words, the style of one's performance will be unique and particular to the relationship in question, meaning every relationship one has will have its own style. In this grandmother example, for instance, the shared value is respect, the standards, whatever they are, are etiquette, but the style of how one shows respect and follows the standards will differ. That is, there are particular etiquettes being practiced that share the same goal to show respect. There might exist widespread shared standards about certain etiquettes such as how one should behave on a bus, but when it comes to relationships it becomes a bit more complex and diverse. What I am trying to make clear here is that what is implied by “performance” is ultimately style, and style can vary greatly when the actual activity and goal are the same. Think about how differently people walk yet they are doing the same activity, walking.

hold the same standards as others, while acting in ways that do not reflect that, because they expect others to respect their dedication to being “authentic” and permit their transgressions. It is not uncommon to hear someone excuse their bad behavior with sentiments such as “it’s ok, they know I don’t mean it that way.” This individual may be attentive in that they recognize how their behavior may make them come off differently than they feel or wish, but they might be undervaluing the importance of being receptive to one’s audience if they fail to apologize or make amends if the audience takes offense to what was said or done. And most importantly, individuals who fail to respect the importance of performance, and think just having certain values and holding various standards in esteem is good enough, often fail to send off pro-social signals which, ultimately, is the entire point of practicing *li*. As Kongzi explains, “candor unmediated by observing ritual propriety [*li*] is rudeness.”⁴⁶ *Li* do not just reflect moral standards through rules of etiquette but are predominately performance guides to help make sure our behaviors give off appropriate and pro-social impressions.

Pro-Social Goals

This discussion above about objectivity was meant to manage the tension between understanding *li* as objective standards of morality, as they are sometimes interpreted, with the claim that *li* can be modified and are adaptive. My response was that *li* function in a complex way in society where what matters most is the performative nature of *li*. But the ultimate Confucian goal is to practice *li* in order to achieve better social relations and conditions. As Patricia Ebrey explains: “Rituals need not reflect actual social circumstances: they can function most powerfully when they create images of a ‘true’ order at considerable odds from the actual

⁴⁶ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 8.2.

social order.”⁴⁷ Hagen adds that what Ebrey means by “true” is likely to mean “an ideal.” “That is, when rituals are incongruent with the existing social situation, they may gesture powerfully at a possible better way.”⁴⁸ Hagen is hinting at the aspirational nature of *li*, that the everyday etiquette rituals we participate in function to help us present ourselves in a better way, as “exemplary” even when we are not. By doing this we signal to others not only that we respect them, but that we are devoted to the shared social goal of trying to get along.

Li Chenyang describes *li* as a “cultural grammar” because *li* function like grammatical rules of a language we all know, we just do not always choose to follow the rules, or simply are not good at doing so because of a lack of training. Following this metaphor, one’s speaking ability (how well one follows grammatical rules) functions as a form of self-presentation that gives off impressions that people either interpret positively or negatively— e.g., “this person is not very bright”, “this person is quite educated,” “what a pretentious asshole,” “obviously this person has no class and does not know when it is appropriate to speak properly,” “this person must have grown up poor,” etc. Now, when we think of *li*/etiquette as a grammar system, then one’s competency, and choice to follow the rules⁴⁹ or not, will give off impressions that either present oneself in a pro-social or anti-social way.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Patricia Buckley Ebrey, *Confucianism and Family Rituals in Imperial China: A Social History of Writings about Rites* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1991), 219.

⁴⁸ Kurtis Hagen, *The Philosophy of Xunzi: A Reconstruction* (Chicago and La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 2007), 117.

⁴⁹ And when I say “rules” I do not mean to imply that *li* are rigid and inflexible like rules, a point I will discuss more below, but that there are socially prescribed ways that we all recognize as appropriate and polite and the absence of as inappropriate and rude.

⁵⁰ On the surface a generalized conception of proper “standards” reads as pretentious and quite elitist, but it must be acknowledged that the standards will vary from one group of people to another, just as grammatical norms and rules vary. For example, what is considered appropriate or normal amongst French creole families in New Orleans will differ greatly from the norms and expectations of upper-class New Yorkers, or even rich New Orleans families for that matter. I am not proclaiming an “anything goes” relativism, but that our society is so pluralistic that what is deemed “appropriate” will depend on one’s social setting and personal identity. Successful impression management requires an individual to be as alert as possible to these realities to be adaptive and receptive. Generally, this requires

Hagen's analysis of *li* beautifully illuminates the performative suggestiveness of *li* which I have used to highlight how central *li* are for a normative form of impression management. To reiterate, choosing to act in accordance with *li* gives off the impression that one is primed to try to have a positive social interaction. It also shows that one is attentive to their audience. Then the actual *performance* of the *li* will give off further impressions as well. According to the Confucians, a ritual's (*li*) meaning, "...is in its pragmatic effects."⁵¹ Those effects are that one is pro-social, and is actually trying to be one's "best," most moral, self. By practicing *li*/etiquette, one signals they are "paying attention"⁵² to what is socially appropriate, which under Confucianism, means what is moral. Sarkissian summarizes this point perfectly: "When we submit to ritualized demeanor and decorum, we do so out of a desire to signal to others that they are within the scope of our moral concern, that we acknowledge them as meriting consideration and respect."⁵³ He adds, "To comport oneself according to the *li* in the presence of others signals that one cares. Refusing to do so, or neglecting to do so, signals the opposite—that others are not worthy of one's moral attention."⁵⁴

Flexibility and Adaptivity

As Hagen explains, regarding Xunzi, "[*Li*] are not fundamentally the specific elements associated with ritual actions but are rather actions and interactions that answer to an aesthetic

a "when in Rome" mentality, unless one feels they are being personally disrespected and attacked. Then one need be diplomatic and charitable to discuss why they feel offended with those who have caused offense. Of course, instances of blatant rudeness are different, and are precisely why I target them generally. The kind of misunderstandings and accidental slights are part of social intercourse, especially in such a diverse environment like those found in U.S. cities for example. The point here is that I am not defending a classist and elitist view that there is a universal moral grammar, but that one must cultivate their selves to be the kind of reflexive, observant, and open-minded individual who can navigate a diverse and complex waterway.

⁵¹ Hagen, *Xunzi*, 117.

⁵² Johnathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 103.

⁵³ Hagop Sarkissian, "Ritual and Rightness in the *Analects*," in *Dao Companion to the Analects*, ed. Amy Olberding (Springer, 2014), 101, PDF eBook, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-7113-0_6.

⁵⁴ Sarkissian, 101.

sense of what is fitting.”⁵⁵ I argue that the practice of impression management inherently requires one to be flexible and adaptive in order to be attentive to and caring about the needs of one’s audience, to “what is fitting.” That is, how one presents oneself will necessarily shift depending on who one is talking to, the situation, the general context of the interaction, and so forth. If we look a little deeper at *Analects* 9.14, we see this point implicitly acknowledged. If Kongzi were to go live with the “Eastern Yi barbarians,” labeled “barbarians” for they have customs quite different from his own that are considered “crude,” it is inevitable that Kongzi would need to first adjust to their customs to some extent before hoping to be influential. We can even imagine his life being in danger if he were not careful enough. Of course, it is implied in the passage that Kongzi’s morality is “correct,” and is so powerful that it would transform the “barbarians,” but part of that power comes from Kongzi’s ability to read his audience and figure out how to adjust to their norms and customs of showing respect and so forth. Anyone who has interacted with someone vastly different from oneself knows how attentive, careful, and ideally, skilled one has to be to figure out how not to come off as rude. Fortunately, an unintentional and accidental impression of rudeness can be mitigated by giving off the impression that one is trying their hardest to be respectful and courteous.

One’s willingness and ability to adapt to context is an extremely important part of moral impression management. For example, telling a joke might reduce the tension and prove socially beneficial when giving a public talk at a political convention, but maybe not when giving a eulogy (unless the dead individual was known for their humor and your relationship with them involved a lot of joking). And again, *li* exist as guides for acting that help us present ourselves in ways that give and give off pro-social impressions, so it would be problematic if *li* were rigid

⁵⁵ Sarkissian, 89.

rules because they would conflict with the practice of morally managing impressions. For example, if there were a strict rule dictating that telling a joke while giving a eulogy is inappropriate and immoral, it would deny the possibility of using a joke by the speaker to relate to their friend's death in a way that helps them cope, also denying those in the audience mourning a positive moment of reflection on the kind of person their dead loved one was that might help them cope. This could also be a moment where everyone laughs together, helping cultivate a sense of togetherness which is so important after having lost a loved one.

Xunzi sets the standards for *li* as follows: "If it is not timely and fitting, it is not respectfully sociable, if it is not cheerfully enjoyed, although it may be beautiful, it is not ritual propriety [*li*]." ⁵⁶ Further, "Exemplary people [*junzi*] are reverent but not pressed, respectful but not bound." And, "When they [*junzi*] encounter changing circumstances, they carefully examine *li*.... The exemplary person's response to change is reasonable, and regularly provides benefits and success without causing confusion." ⁵⁷ What enables one to be flexible like this with *li* while still acting socially appropriate is *shu* 恕. As Amy Olberding explains, "In the *li* we have a guide, but it is *shu* that saves the *li* from empty formalism, from operating as rigid, insensate rules." ⁵⁸

***Shu* 恕**

To express the central importance of *shu* in my model of Confucian impression management I must first define the term, but as Eric Hutton explains: "The virtue of *shu* is difficult to translate into English. According to Confucius's statement in *Analects* 15.15, it involves not doing to others what one would not want for oneself. Thus, it can be understood as a

⁵⁶ Hagen translation of Xunzi in *Xunzi: A Reconstruction*, 89.

⁵⁷ Hagen translation of Xunzi in *Xunzi: A Reconstruction*, 91.

⁵⁸ Amy Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects: A Good Person is That* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 166, PDF eBook, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203804599>.

kind of ‘sympathetic understanding’ or ‘reciprocity.’”⁵⁹ This aspect of *shu*, often referred to as the “silver rule,” does not fully explain all of the meanings and relevant uses of the term.⁶⁰ However, as Slingerland explains, in the *Analects* passages that are “...directly or indirectly concerned with *shu* (5.12, 6.30, 12.2, and 15.24)...“ it is clear that *shu* “...involves some sort of consideration of others—an ability to imaginatively project oneself into another’s place.”⁶¹ The problem is that this is an extremely difficult thing to actually do because of the nature of human psychology and how we give and give off impressions, as well as how we interpret and respond to impressions.

Above I primarily focused on the active practice of impression management where attention is on controlling oneself and being attentive to how one’s words and actions impress on others. *Shu* certainly provides resources for thinking about this active aspect, but I want to direct attention to the *receptive* aspect of *shu* that is about how one responds to impressions given off by others in an ethical manner. This responsive side to impression management really illuminates Olberding’s observation above that *shu* saves *li* from “empty formalism, from operating as rigid insensate rules” in an additional way that is not so obvious. Olberding explains that *shu* pushes us to “imagine ourselves in the place of the other and thereby discover how to fit our behavior and demeanor to best address her particular need.”⁶² This empathetic function is not something *li* alone can achieve because *li* are general guidelines and cannot offer us resources for every single particular situation we find ourselves in, especially considering how unique every one of our roles and relationships are. For example, no one else has my particular relationship to my mother, so they will never have the knowledge and ability required to make her feel better like I

⁵⁹ Eric Hutton, *Xunzi*, 332.

⁶⁰ I will expand on *shu* much further in the third chapter.

⁶¹ Slingerland, *Analects*, 34.

⁶² Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects*, 166.

have. But there is another ability *li* does not necessarily lack, but is limited in, and that is providing guidance for how best to act in response to another's behavior. *Li/etiquette* do provide us resources for thinking about how to respond respectfully to another's action such as when they put their hand out to shake or simply when to say "sorry" and "thank you," but once attention is given to impressions, *li/etiquette* start to lose some power beyond thinking about how one ought to *act* in response. *Li* cannot provide us detailed, customized suggestions on how to act based on our roles and relationships. Only through *shu* is this possible. And what about the impressions our responses give off? This is where *shu* really shines.

Li are generally thought of as guides for thinking about *active* behavior towards others, but equally important is thinking about how one *responds* to the words or actions of others. In presenting my model of Confucian impression management, through an analysis of *li*, I have given attention to traits that are emphasized by the notion of *shu*, such as attentiveness and flexibility, as they relate to how one acts or speaks towards someone. Another significant part of the Confucian impression management project is managing how one responds to impressions given and given off by others because one's response itself gives off an impression, albeit an impression that can be quite difficult to control/manage, for reasons I discuss below. A fascinating aspect of Confucian ethics is that through concepts like *shu*, we are provided resources useful for bringing attention to some inherent vulnerabilities in our psychology⁶³ that

⁶³ It is important to acknowledge that "human" psychology can differ greatly because of various cultural factors. Any time I refer to human psychology, I am specifically referring to the predominate ways people in the U.S. think. People raised in U.S. culture would likely be included in this grouping. Of course, this requires some generalizing as the U.S. is a diverse place with countless cultures and sub-cultures, but there are consistent trends of observable behavior, especially online. It is also true that various other peoples might share some of the psychological characteristics I discuss such as in other "Western" countries, but this is beyond the scope of my concerns as I am focusing on issues within the U.S. That said, the reason for studying and presenting ancient Confucian ideas is that they are insightful and relevant to contemporary issues, making it apparent that some of the cultural and "psychological" traits were existent in ancient China as well. For example, selfishness appears to have been a problem in the society Kongzi lived in just as it is a problem now in the contemporary U.S.

can be detrimental to the success rate of our impression management, but that also illuminate our interdependence with others.

For instance, *shu* pushes us to slow down and contemplate our potential responses to impressions we receive from others. Intuitive impressions are generally unconscious, unreflexive, quickly developed, and flavored by our emotions, but one's interpretation of a received impression, and the following response, can change with slowed down, conscious, reflection. Unfortunately, we often quickly and intuitively respond to the words and actions of others, and in everyday discourse we are not given much time to reflect and deliberate, unless of course we want to have an incredibly awkward and long conversation with endless pausing and silence (acting this way itself might give off bad impressions). This is why actively trying to manage the impressions we give and give off is so important because we know how our own psychology works in discourse, which is that our responses are generally quick and spontaneous. Therefore, we must be attentive to the fact that others' interpretations of the impressions we give and give off will be swift, and practically instinctual as well. With this acknowledgment, a realization the Confucians discussed through *li* and *shu*, we can be better prepared for social interaction. We now can be better than the everyday person who has individualistic tendencies and drives, like being overly concerned with "being authentic."

Confucian Impression Management Redux

By managing impressions, we are not only doing it for the benefit of ourselves, but as consideration for the other in that we provide information to them that attempts to shape their emotional response in a positive way. This might seem like an odd form of consideration, but having a negative response to someone is not a pleasant experience, and can make one feel anxious, uncomfortable, confused, hurt, and just generally negative. The socially pragmatic

points I have emphasized are that contributing to making someone feel negative will not prime them for positive social interaction, but quite the opposite, and there seems to be something inherently wrong in being so careless and unconcerned in how we present ourselves when it makes others feel bad and less pro-social. Carelessness or lack of concern is what differentiates the wrongness of rudeness from general malicious forms of nastiness such as actively, consciously, and purposely trying to make someone feel bad. Although being purposefully hostile and noxious *can* come off as rude, the typical sense of rudeness seems to be more salient to acts and speech acts that are interpreted to be done in a careless and inconsiderate manner.

Rudeness can also have a special negative power when it is committed by someone you trusted, or had positive preconceived beliefs about, and their behavior does not match up with what you expected of them. Think about having a conversation with a person you know to be politically on the opposite side of the spectrum from you and who has a history of hostility online, who is then rude to you, compared to having a conversation with a person you think would be a political ally, and you have come to believe is a “nice” person, but they act rude towards you. Preloaded expectations can have a major effect on how one emotionally responds to a given situation or person, which gives weight to the significance and importance of trying to manage impressions. There are so many subtle and superficially trivial ways we can make others feel bad that are not always so obvious.

I articulate the Confucian notion of *shu* in a simplistic, and maybe unattractive way, as consciously trying to not make people feel bad. I do not mean “bad” in its general usage, but “bad” in a normative sense as situationally inappropriate. This is a necessary distinction because sometimes feeling “bad” in a quotidian emotional way is a “good” thing, sometimes even a necessity, such as feeling sad in order to properly mourn and try to adjust to the loss of a loved

one. Feeling sad is also a way to connect with others in a shared activity that brings all closer together. Another example is how feeling bad can bring about a sense of shame to let you know that you did something wrong, but that you can learn from it. What is “bad” for the Confucians is when the negative emotions are not situationally appropriate. Examples of situationally inappropriate emotions would include shaming a student in front of a class for getting an answer to a very difficult question wrong when it was obvious the student tried their hardest, or laughing at your visibly upset friend while they try to explain something that really upset them earlier in the day because you think it is trivial and not worth getting that upset about. A more salient and direct example is simply *being rude* because, as I have explained above, rudeness is often felt as a result of a sort of mismatch between how we expect someone to act and how they actually act, which we might see as a form of situational inappropriateness.⁶⁴

As I argued above, *li* exist as guides to help us figure out what behaviors and responses to behavior are situationally appropriate, but “successful” moral impression management requires one to take on additional responsibilities and learn new skills in order to be effective at acting in ways that are situationally appropriate. Normative impression management requires being attentive and responsive to others. These two traits are encapsulated in the notion of *shu* and its

⁶⁴ I think there is a positive way to articulate the aim of *shu* and *ren* generally such as Kongzi saying to improve oneself you must improve others first and so forth, but it would be inaccurate to say that a Confucian ethical goal is to make people “feel good.” The reason is as I explain in this section that “bad” for the Confucians often means something more like “situationally inappropriate” which almost always brings with it some kind of negative emotional response whereas situational appropriateness does not always involve “feeling good” and sometimes involves/requires feeling “bad”—e.g., sad or shamed.

related partner, *ren*.⁶⁵ I even make the controversial claim⁶⁶ that simply giving off the impression of being attentive and responsive to who you are interacting with, even if you really could not care less about them or what they are saying, is considered acting moral by the Confucians to some extent because, in doing so, one avoids coming off as rude, and presents oneself in a way that is conducive to positive discourse. If we take the silver rule interpretation of *shu* to heart, this claim should not be considered controversial because impressions are largely about how we make people feel, and I think it is safe to say that people like to feel that they are being listened to and cared about. The importance of whether they acknowledge the attentiveness and care they receive as genuine or sincere depends on the type of relationship. For example, one feels hurt if

⁶⁵ As Ronnie L. Littlejohn explains, “*Ren* (仁) is a most difficult Chinese term to translate. It has been rendered as humaneness, compassion, benevolence, authoritative person and goodness.” It is generally interpreted as a “virtue,” and frequently as the highest one. The *Analects* sometimes presents it as standing alongside other virtues, but it also can appear to encapsulate many, if not all, of the so-called Confucian virtues. I like Littlejohn’s interpretation where he takes *ren* to be “referring to a way of being in the world.” *Confucianism: An Introduction* (London: I.B. Taurus and Co Ltd, 2011), 28-29. Ames’s translation of *ren* as “consummate personhood” reflects the same conceptualization because it highlights the transformation of self aspect, whereas “virtue” is more easily understood as like a trait one has and does not reflect that so well. “Being” *ren* is not an achieved state of being, but an ongoing process of being in the world in a morally excellent fashion. The term is also inherently relational such that one can only be *ren*-like if their behavior is conducive towards healthy relationships, and influences others to cultivate healthy relations. This is what exemplarist readings of the *Analects* highlight, that a person of *ren* functions as a moral exemplar for others. It should be apparent from this footnote that explaining *ren* is no easy feat, and ultimately requires much more explanation than is necessary for the purposes of my claims. Practicing *li* and being *shu* puts one right in the vicinity of *ren* though, something Kongzi says in *Analects* 4.15, 15.24. *Shu* is often interpreted as putting oneself in someone else’s shoes which further emphasizes the relational aspect of *ren*. In order to be a Confucian moral exemplar, to be *ren*-like, it means nothing to “cultivate virtue” as an isolated independent practice. That is, the “right” thing to do in any situation is what is appropriate and best for the individuals in consideration, and the relationship/s in question. For example, a teacher has a particular relationship to their students that has rules of etiquette/*li*, and in order for the teacher to act morally exemplarily, they must understand the particular needs of the specific group of students first and foremost. Only then can the teacher begin to try to figure out what behaviors are appropriate for their self as well as the students, specifically, what is needed for the classroom to flourish as a place of learning and friendship, and how must everyone act for this goal to be achieved. By being *shu*, and being attentive to *li*, the teacher can work towards “being” *ren* and the students can learn from the teacher’s exemplary behavior to follow suit, but ultimately the teacher and students must work together to make to make this possible. The same dynamic applies for all social interactions and the relationships involved in them. The particulars and the stakes will differ based on the situation and circumstances. But the *ren*-like person will always keep *shu* and *li* in mind and use them to guide their behavior.

⁶⁶ This claim is controversial because of the uncertainty about “village worthies or “thieves of *de*.” I discuss this issue in chapter three.

they think their friend's attention and care is fake and has ulterior motives but one does not really care if a stranger's kindness is insincere.⁶⁷

Being appropriately responsive can be a bit tricky though. Being responsive can involve more basic acts like vocally responding to what someone says, but if a situation requires an actual physical response too, then giving the mere appearance of being responsive is not enough because one's words will have to be supported by action. The Confucians encapsulated the ethical significance of making good on one's word in the notion of *xin* 信. This might be getting us too deeply into another topic, however. It is enough, for my purposes here, that being responsive entails whatever makes one's interlocutor feel that one has adequately met their emotional requirements, whether that be simply vocally responding in a meaningful way or committing a physical act.

The upshot of my above analysis of *shu*, and the emotional considerations around it, is that impression management involves just as much attention to how one makes others feel as it is about how one responds to the words and actions of others. *Shu* illuminates, and highlights, how discourse is a two-way street. For instance, how we respond to the words or actions of someone will itself produce an impression that will be taken up positively or negatively. In moral theorizing, it is easy to become preoccupied with thinking about what one should do or not do to or for others, but Confucianism really directs our attention to the ethical significance of how we respond to others as well.

⁶⁷ This is a major point of contention for Confucian scholars because being a "village worthy" is the most depraved kind of person one can be, but it seems that in daily social discourse we often must "put on a show"—i.e., practice impression management to keep the peace. I will address this controversy in detail below, but the simple response is that the ultimate moral Confucian ideal would be to always match one's emotions and internal states with one's outward presentation, but as this is an ideal, something to aim for, and it cannot be realistically expected of us. That does not mean we are doomed to be village worthies, but that there must be distinctions for situations and social standings that have higher standards than most of our everyday situations. That is, in our daily interactions with co-workers and customer service representatives, being disingenuously attentive and caring is a pragmatic necessity whereas being disingenuous with one's ruler, or parent, is unacceptable.

Slow and deeply reflexive responses are difficult to achieve in everyday discourse, at least for those of us less morally developed, so fortunately, practicing and trying to develop the skills of being attentive and responsive are strongly aided by *li*/etiquette. The more skilled one is at practicing *li*, the more likely one is to quickly figure out what behaviors are situationally appropriate and how to respond to other's words and actions in ways that are less likely to give off negative impressions. An important part of this skill acquisition is learning and practicing those *li* that help guide our responses to rude and nasty behaviors others commit. We cannot expect others to practice normative forms of impression management, especially when they actively oppose it, such as those whose claims to authenticity are used to defend being un-reflexive and unresponsive.⁶⁸ So, avoiding, or at least reducing, the severity of a negative interaction, often relies on how one *responds* to others' words and actions. This is a much more difficult skill to cultivate, because when we are wronged and treated rudely, it is quite difficult to maintain composure and respond in a civil manner⁶⁹, or in ways that simply will not make things

⁶⁸ Here I am adopting the notion of "reflexivity" as a sociological concept influenced by Anthony Giddens: "Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as *reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space: but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent." Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1991), 57, https://search-alexanderstreetcom.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/view/work/bibliographic_entity|bibliographic_details|4712194. More simply put, "Instead of taking for granted or passively inheriting who we are, we actively shape, reflect on, and monitor our selves, crafting our biographical narratives as we go through life. We treat our identities, then, as a project, something that we actively construct and are ultimately responsible for." "Anthony Giddens | Social Theory Rewired: New Connections to Classical and Contemporary Perspectives," *New Directions in Social Work*, accessed November 17, 2024, <https://www.routledgesoc.com/profile/anthony-giddens>. I modify this account by emphasizing the relational nature of our existence. Our identities are co-created with others, so it is difficult to theorize how much of our self-construction is of our own doing and how much is more strongly constructed by others. It would be most accurate to say we construct ourselves *with* others. So, while we are in fact active in this construction, and ultimately held responsible for it, I understand reflexivity to refer to thinking of the self in connection with others such as how we influence and affect others. Impression management then is a core component of being reflexive. So, to be un-reflexive means one does not think about how they impress on others, and how they generally influence and affect others.

⁶⁹ A point Amy Olberding makes so apparent in the chapters titled "Temptations to Incivility" and "Temptations to Bad Manners" in her book *The Wrong of Rudeness: Learning Modern Civility from Ancient Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

get much worse much quicker.⁷⁰ This is why *shu* is such a powerful notion, as it pushes us to think about how we make others feel both from our actions towards them, but also in our responses to other's actions towards ourselves. Translating *shu* to mean something like “sympathetic understanding” entails thinking more about our responsiveness to others, trying to sympathize and understand where someone is coming from, such as thinking about why they said what they did, or why they did what they did, and pushes one to be as attentive and caring as possible.

Empathy

Since Confucian impression management involves trying to manage the impressions we give off in response to the impressions others give off, it requires empathy and understanding of the individual who acted or said something towards us. If we are to respond in ways that avoid making interactions fall apart, we must try to be empathetic to why our interlocutors act or say what they do in the first place. At the very least we must try to be sympathetic in the sense of letting slights of etiquette pass unless or until they become too inappropriate or too hostile to tolerate or allow. In other words, I can try to be the “better” person and uphold manners and civility, and maybe through trying to empathize and understand why someone is acting as they are, we can eventually reach some understanding and improve the interaction. When we try to be the “better” person, “we imagine ourselves in the place of the other and thereby discover how to

⁷⁰ In this chapter I have emphasized the demands of the receptive part of normative IM more than the active part as our everyday interactions, online especially, will involve some form of rudeness directed at us where our responses can easily make things worse. In our generally individualistic society, the concern about how we treat others directly is slightly more urgent than how we respond to others, but they are equally important as I emphasize in the last chapter.

fit our behavior and demeanor to best address her particular needs.”⁷¹ According to Olberding, this in itself is *shu*: “‘Shu’ 恕 is the receptive and reflexive capacity to achieve sympathy with the particular circumstance of another, to imaginatively identify with her and respond accordingly (4.15, 5.12).”⁷² I simply have added an emphasis on the need to manage impressions as it is impossible to be *shu* without doing so.

Responding to rudeness with rudeness will always make things worse, so at least I, as an individual trying to morally self-cultivate, can try to ethically manage the impressions I give off through my responses to other’s behavior. The ideal situation is of course that we all practice being *shu* at all times. In a world where we all always ethically manage impressions, negative discourse would be practically made impossible. Since this is not ever going to happen, the Confucians provide those of us trying to be better with some guidance with their concept of *shu*. By managing impressions and trying to be *shu*, we can at least keep the peace. Often we are just creating a veneer by being the better person, because we might not actually feel civil or kind, but we present ourselves as such anyway. These are the masks Goffman discusses, the “fronts” that one never completely takes off but that one will change from person to person and situation to situation. Goffman points out that it is what we do with these masks that determines “who we are.” For the Confucians, it is not what we generally do with them that matters, but that we use our masks to create and help cultivate positive social discourse while avoiding creating conflict as much as possible. This means that sometimes we must wear a mask such that one’s emotions do not match up with one’s external performance and presentation. Putting on a mask is required

⁷¹ Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects*, 166.

⁷² Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects*, 86. Passage numbers refer to those of the *Analects*.

of us almost daily, especially online, unless we want to avoid discourse altogether or always be in the middle of social chaos.

The Power of Impressions

The sad reality is that chaos dominates many domains of social discourse, from comment sections on social media to public displays in the streets. To use a Confucian idiom, the problem is there are too many *xiaoren* and not enough of us trying to be *junzi*. *Xiaoren* are morally stunted individuals who prioritize their own interests and concerns over all else, even if that means having underdeveloped and unhealthy relationships. Xunzi would say that *xiaoren* are *e* 惡: ugly, detestable, and revolting.⁷³ The social danger *xiaoren* pose highlights the significant moral power of impressions and the need for impression management. As Master Zeng states in *Analects* 8.4:

There are three things that exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) consider of utmost importance in making their way (*dao* 道): by maintaining a dignified demeanor, they keep violent and rancorous conduct at a distance; by maintaining a proper countenance, they keep trust and confidence near at hand; by taking care in choice of language and mode of expression, they keep vulgarity and impropriety at a distance.⁷⁴

How we appear, or “come off,” to others strongly influences how they interact with us. In other words, how we impress on others has a major effect on how a social interaction will go. For example, by ignoring, or purposefully disregarding, etiquette one gives off impressions that present oneself as rude and therefore reduces the chances of having a positive interaction and increase the likelihood of having a negative one. As Amy Olberding explains: “Xunzi’s defense of etiquette issues from a more prosaic sensibility: the joint recognition that cooperative, communal life requires that we find human company appealing and attractive, and that human

⁷³ I discuss this word *e* 惡 more in chapter two as it is a significant part of Xunzi’s aestheticized moral theory.

⁷⁴ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 8.4.

beings in their natural state are, if not as a rule then too often for our shared good, unappealing and unattractive to their fellows.”⁷⁵ And, “By controlling the conditions under which we encounter others, etiquette affords protection against misanthropy, regulating human conduct so that we are less exposed to human behaviors and communication that would stimulate enmity, dislike, and aversion to others.”⁷⁶

I have argued that etiquette is but one aspect of the wider practice of impression management, albeit a central and powerful one. Impression management is primarily an aesthetic practice that requires one to carefully and methodically pay attention to one’s self-presentation. This requires one to both hypothesize how one’s actions might affect others and to be receptive and adaptive to other’s responses. Being attentive to managing impressions enables one to diagnose what is going wrong when a social discourse breaks down, and it also illuminates the potential ways one can fix and improve the interaction. And paying attention to the impressions others give off also illuminates strategies one can employ to influence the trajectory of an interaction by trying to influence the words and actions of those involved. Etiquette provides guidelines for everyone that are fundamentally important and helpful, but giving close attention to impressions given off by oneself and others is a necessary requirement for cultivating positive social interactions as I have shown above. I am highlighting impression management to emphasize a similar point, from a slightly different angle, to illuminate what often goes wrong in social discourse and argue for what is needed to improve it.

To further emphasize the power of impressions, consider how much of the polarization and tribalism we see today is a result of how people interpret and judge others based on the

⁷⁵ Amy Olberding, “From Corpses to Courtesy: Xunzi’s Defense of Etiquette,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 49 (2015): 147, doi:10.1007/s10790-014-9466-5.

⁷⁶ Olberding, “From Corpses to Courtesy,” 147.

impression they have of them just from material objects.⁷⁷ For instance, an individual who has sympathies with views typically associated with being “liberal,” “left,” or “progressive”, even transgressive, sees an individual with a lifted truck, wearing a camouflage hat, NRA stickers everywhere, and an American flag on their front porch with a police support sign staked in the yard, and instantly develops negative feelings and attitudes as a response to these presentations of self. The impression they get is of an ignorant, entitled, racist, stupid, backwards, “has a lot to learn” individual. Someone who shares similar tastes, ideas, and values as this “right” winged individual will get a totally opposite impression. Obviously, this right-wing individual will develop negative impressions of the “left” individual and think them ignorant, sheep like, corrupted by immoral ideas, close minded, and so forth if the “left” individual has a septum piercing with colored hair, “all cops are bastards” stickers on their hybrid-electric vehicle pro-abortion yard signs, and “fuck Trump” flag spread across their window. In other words, it is not just an issue of thinking the other is wrong in their views, but both use the impressions they give off to judge each other.

While these individuals *are* managing impressions, they arguably are, or are perceived to be by some, doing so in a blunt “in-your-face” manner aimed at “getting a rise out of people,” as well as signaling to those of their own tribe that they are an ally. I am reluctant to say that people ought not adorn their private property with their personal political commitments, but there is certainly an air of rudeness in doing it in certain ways, like attaching huge Trump flags to vehicles or spray-painting ACAB (all cops are bastards) all over walls. An impression meant to provoke is not inherently problematic, and for social justice issues, sometimes provocation is

⁷⁷ See Amy Olberding, “Looking Philosophical: Stuff, Stereotypes, and Self-Presentation,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 4 (2015): 692–707, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24541976>. This paper provides a great analysis of how one’s material environment plays a strong role in how we impress on others and how we use such impressions to evaluate and judge each other.

necessary, but there is a difference between provocation and jabbing. When dealing with controversial issues, individuals should aim to give off impressions of an attentiveness and respect for the other, and of a willingness to try to look past their differences to talk out some difficult issues. We must work to try to give off socially acceptable, or at least tolerable, impressions through our words, gestures, body language, and willingness to respectfully interact with each other, even when we are aiming to provoke and challenge one another.

As our society becomes increasingly polarized, too much effort is made to give off impressions that offensively provoke one's "opponents" while simultaneously signaling support to one's in-group. The norm has become to neglect a normative kind of impression management, the very practice that makes productive and meaningful social interaction possible. Impressions of stubbornness, inflexibility, and dogmatic close-mindedness are now commonplace and expected. They are given off when one is unwilling to have genuine discourse and uses claims to authenticity to defend this unwillingness. For example, a willingness to say, "I get where you are coming from, but I simply disagree" gives off quite a bit different impression than "you are wrong, and what you think is absurd, harmful, and idiotic." Both statements might still result in conflict, but which one is more likely to be worse and result in a shutting down of the discourse? And which one, when members outside the discourse observe, is likely to reinforce their views and positions instead of giving them reason to question them and try to understand the side they are currently skeptical of? Ultimately, what is needed is for more members of society to adopt and practice a form of moral or normative impression management. Something increasingly less likely to happen for a variety of reasons, but primarily because of what I label the "authenticity problem."

Chapter Two: Addressing the Authenticity Problem

“There is no property ABSOLUTELY essential to any one thing. The same property which figures as the essence of a thing on one occasion becomes a very essential feature on the other.”
 – William James, *Principles of Psychology*

An underlying theme that runs from the previous chapter and is central to the following is of carelessness. What I mean by carelessness is not that one does not care about the consequences of one’s actions, but that (1) one is careless when one *unwittingly* does not acknowledge or fully appreciate the context and specifics of a social interaction, or (2) when one *wittingly* ignores the context and specifics of a social interaction with no other goal in mind beyond doing or saying what one intuitively feels like at the moment. The referent of the lack of care is not only the person/s one is interacting with, but also the relevant etiquette of the situational context. By either unwittingly or wittingly not respecting the rules, norms, and rituals of the situation, one is careless. A recipient of an actor’s carelessness is not necessarily a *direct* target because the actor might in fact care about the recipient, but one *indirectly* becomes a victim of an actor’s carelessness when the actor fails to properly practice the relevant forms of etiquette. What I am highlighting here is that in having a disposition of carelessness, one is not ruthlessly uncaring about others. Instead, by failing to properly acknowledge and respect the context of a social interaction, particularly its rules of etiquette, one is more likely than not to impress negatively on one’s interlocutors and harm one’s relationship with them. The failure to practice moral impression management is generally not due to having a malicious or truly apathetic disposition, but of having a careless one that makes one vulnerable to “stumbling into bad behavior.”⁷⁸ There are numerous factors that can cause one to “stumble” in social

⁷⁸ Here borrowing the catchphrase of Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel from “Stumbling into Bad Behavior,” *The New York Times*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/21/opinion/21bazerman.html> and Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots* (Princeton, N.J. Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

interactions, but a current, culturally significant one is the overvaluing and over prioritizing of “authenticity.” The goal of this chapter is to illuminate and diagnose this problem of authenticity and how it seduces one into a kind of social carelessness that disregards moral impression management. To achieve this goal, I analyze and discuss various philosophical, psychological, and social concepts such as identity, human nature, autonomy, shame, ritual, etiquette, convention, and civility. I primarily use Goffman’s sociology and Confucian philosophy to inform and articulate my diagnostic of the problem of authenticity and to begin formulating normative claims that I develop further in the last chapter of this thesis.

Through analyzing various psychological studies and experiments, Bazerman and Tenbrunsel came to the conclusion that when “we fail to notice that a decision has an ethical component, we are able to behave unethically while maintaining a positive self-image.”⁷⁹ As discussed in the previous chapter, it is not an uncommon belief in contemporary American society to think that etiquette and social rituals are just empty rules, void of any moral content. Therefore, when one does not respect and practice the etiquette a given context requires, one feels free from moral wrongdoing if one believes the relevant etiquette to be irrelevant. But to emphasize what Bazerman and Tenbrunsel said, one might simply “fail to notice that a decision has an ethical component.” But how could someone fail to notice that there is moral worth to practicing etiquette? In other words, how could, or how might, one fail to notice that impression management can have a moral component? I posit that one can be seduced by the attraction of prioritizing and valuing “being oneself.” The issue I am addressing is not that people consciously and purposefully want to be rude assholes, although such individuals certainly exist, but that people become careless in social interactions when they are more attracted to, and motivated by,

⁷⁹ Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, “Stumbling into Bad Behavior.”

being “authentic.” To defend this claim, I shall first explain what I mean by “authenticity,” then argue that it fails on its own terms and unfortunately seduces individuals away from practicing moral impression management.

Authenticity and its Problems

According to Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D’Ambrosio, modern “authenticity and individualism blossomed when personal autonomy and creativity became identity ideals.”⁸⁰ These ideals now permeate the cultural ethos of our social media age. Charles Taylor describes authenticity as each of us having our “...own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.”⁸¹ As Moeller and D’Ambrosio explain, authenticity “is then marked by the demand that everyone ought to develop their own uniqueness, regardless of social powers or conventions that may obstruct such an endeavor.”⁸² I refer to “authenticity” as the belief that one “has” a “true” essential self that one either “discovers” or “creates” “regardless of social powers or conventions that may obstruct such an endeavor.”⁸³ The “authentic” self is held in some opposition to social influences and norms believed to interfere with efforts to truly “be

⁸⁰ Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D’Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile: Identity After Authenticity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 168.

⁸¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge (Mass.): The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 475.

⁸² Moeller and D’Ambrosio, 168-169.

⁸³ For a thorough philosophical analysis of the concept of authenticity and of how complex and diverse its meanings can be, see Lauren Bialystok, “Authenticity and the Limits of Philosophy,” *Dialogue* 53, no. 2 (2014): 271-298, doi: 10.1017/S001221731300111X. For an in-depth analysis of the problems of authenticity, see Simon Feldman, *Against Authenticity: Why You Shouldn’t Be Yourself* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014). I discovered this book after I articulated my main socio-ethical concerns about authenticity, so I found it quite inspiring to find that the last two chapters of this book target almost precisely what I have focused on in this thesis.

oneself.”⁸⁴ This conception of self is inherently individualistic, as it not only implies a drastic independence from others, but even pits others as potential obstructions to self and identity formation. Thus, convention, and conformity to it, are likely to be perceived as enemies of authenticity or, at the very least, certainly not allies.

Generally, people acknowledge some influence from friends and family on “who they are,” but individuals who prioritize authenticity want to believe they have a higher degree of power to moderate this influence. For example, one may claim to deny or reject the influence of a person one once acknowledged as influential if that person is now believed to be interfering with one’s authenticity. This kind of change in attitude about influence is quite common when a child becomes a teenager and their parents’ influence transforms from being a source of pride to a source of embarrassment and perceived oppression. Ultimately, what we find in U.S. culture is a tension between authenticity and conformity, where conformity is generally discouraged or derided unless one consciously *chooses* to conform. There exists a pervasive fascination with control and autonomy in U.S. culture that might exist precisely because people realize they have significantly less control over “who they are” than they would like.⁸⁵ This uncomfortable realization can lead to problematic attempts to regain a sense of control, such as unapologetic, spontaneous expressions of one’s thoughts and feelings, behavior that is likely to impress on

⁸⁴ “Impression management is sometimes viewed as ‘phony’ even when it is not viewed as unethical: phony because people sometimes monitor and control their own actions instead of ‘acting naturally’ or phony because people sometimes try to please others instead of pleasing themselves or being themselves. Some writers note that many people wear masks in public and that these masks hide people’s ‘real selves’ and cause them to act self-consciously. These writers prescribe that such people can never enter into healthy relationships; instead, people should ‘be themselves,’ shed their masks, and act without thinking about themselves and how their actions make them look.” Barry R. Schlenker, *Impression Management: The Self-Concept, Social Identity, and Interpersonal Relations* (Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company, 1980), 305.

⁸⁵ As arguments based on various psychological studies, including ones by these authors, say, “a personal sense of uniqueness refers to an unconditional or noncontingent self-worth that is based on an internal locus of control.” Selda Koydemir et al., “Feeling Special, Feeling Happy: Authenticity Mediates the Relationship Between Sense of Uniqueness and Happiness,” *Current Psychology* 39 (2020): 1596, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-018-9865-z>.

others as rude and potentially anti-social.⁸⁶ But one may try to defend rudeness as necessary or simply unavoidable, claiming that social behavioral norms and etiquette are conducive to inauthentic fakery. As Karen Stohr observes:

One of the primary contemporary objections to etiquette as a normative force in society is the idea that its rules impose on us an artificial standard of behavior, one that doesn't reflect who we really are or what we really think. Good manners, it might be argued, prevent us from being ourselves. Politeness demands that we present a public façade that covers up our real attitudes, opinions, and feelings.⁸⁷

A commitment to “being oneself” can, in short, readily transmute into rejection of etiquette.

While superficially non-conformist, the authenticity-seeker may, ironically, conform to norms of rebellion or opposition. That is, as unfiltered, unchecked self-expression gains currency, it gains a recognizable, shared social form.

Goffman makes it quite clear in his work on social interaction and ritual that we inherently live in environments of etiquette and ritual, environments we are born and socialized into, often without conscious realization until we come into confrontation with them.⁸⁸ Every social arena, from one's household to a public building, has its own standards of etiquette, and while one is not expected to know and follow all of the standards right away, wherever one interacts frequently and centrally, one is eventually expected to. It is therefore tempting to want to frame errors in social interactions as predominantly a result of an individual's personal faults, but as we are creatures strongly influenced by what others believe, value, and do, we cannot *completely* pass blame on the individual, especially when living in highly competitive capitalistic

⁸⁶ “Imprisoned in his self-awareness, modern man longs for the lost innocence of spontaneous feeling. Unable to express emotion without calculating its effects on others, he doubts the authenticity of its expression in others and therefore derives little comfort from audience reactions to his own performance, even when the audience claims to be deeply moved.” Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 93.

⁸⁷ Karen Stohr, *On Manners: Thinking in Action* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 70.

⁸⁸ Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* and *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.

societies.⁸⁹ Nowhere is this more apparent than online, particularly on social media platforms. It is there, I argue, that the unfiltered, unchecked self-expressing “authentic” social form gains most of its currency because the main concern is not having civil discourses but competing for “clout.”⁹⁰ Crudely put, to gain attention, likes, and more followers, one must participate in an endless cycle of “one-upping” others. One must be more funny, more useful, more “enlightened,” more “un-enlightened,” more offensive, more *less* offensive, more caring, more un-caring, etc. And it is not enough to simply present a certain way to garner attention, one must present as “authentically” that way to be most effective.

Authenticity is the social currency of the online world because whatever one presents about oneself, it must convince one’s audience that it somehow reflects something *sincere* about oneself. In the age of influencing, personal identity has become an extremely important part of the presentation of one’s online self, and the presentation of “being authentic” is a popular way individuals attempt to distinguish themselves from others to gain likes and followers. Eschewing etiquette and norms in order to present oneself as superficially “blunt,” “honest,” and “authentic” has itself become a predominant norm. This is most evident in controversial discourses over trending social issues. For example, moral outrage language has become commonplace because

⁸⁹ “It [capitalism] has given rise to a new culture, the narcissistic culture of our time, which has translated the predatory individualism of the American Adam into a therapeutic jargon that celebrates not so much individualism as solipsism, justifying self-absorption as ‘authenticity’ and ‘awareness’.” Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, 218.

⁹⁰ The contemporary online use of “clout” differs slightly from the traditional definition of the term. Online “clout” refers primarily to fame or attention and less on power. Cameron Vargas, “Authenticity Over Validation: How TikTok and Other Social Medias are Changing,” SocialLadder, May 2, 2023, <https://socialladderapp.com/blog/authenticity-vs-validation-socialladder/>. This online article presents various ways multiple social media platforms have implemented new features to try to address the problem of validation seeking (clout) online. Interestingly enough though, the article explains that the prioritization of validation has made users feel that authenticity is being lost and that the desire for popularity actually reduces “authentic” content and discourse. Putting aside the main claims of this article, what is made apparent is that people strongly desire a sense of authenticity, so much so that they are looking for alternative channels and methods to help cultivate it. The demand for alternative communication channels does not contradict my claim above about the competitive nature of social media but reinforces it because the desire for authenticity has become so strong that some people want out of the competition of gaining likes and followers. What this illuminates is that individuals who prize authenticity will only give their attention to something and take it seriously if they believe it “authentic.”

it works to present a speaker as “authentically” upset and bothered by some issue with the intent of showing others that one *truly* strongly cares. In mostly text-based comment sections, using harsh, inflammatory, and uncivil language is believed to more effectively present one’s “genuine” moral outrage, especially when one is attacking another’s position. And individuals who discuss the need for civility and modesty are frequently called out for “sitting on the fence,” enablers of whatever problem is occurring, or as simply not caring enough – hence the popularity of the slogan “silence is violence.” I am not claiming that those “outraged” are faking and do not genuinely feel what they are espousing, but that rudeness and incivility have become common tools for gaining “authentic” social currency.⁹¹ There are other ways that the shared social form of authentic self-presentation functions that I discuss below, but the online world is where it thrives and continues to influence norms about acceptable behavior.

It is quite paradoxical that being authentic largely entails deprioritizing concern for norms and etiquette, yet we increasingly see discussions and arguments about “normalization.” There exists a powerful narrative about being oneself and showing one’s “true colors,” yet countless arguments to “stop normalizing this” but to “normalize” something else are commonplace online. These discourses on normalization highlight the ritualized nature of the

⁹¹ William J. Brady et al., “How Social Learning Amplifies Moral Outrage Expression in Online Social Networks,” *Science Advances* 7 (2021): 1-14, doi:10.1126/sciadv.abe5641. This article does not discuss authenticity or rudeness, but it argues that if moral outrage language is received positively, it is likely that one will continue to use moral outrage expressions and possibly increase their usage of them. The article does well to emphasize how social responses, and the particular norms of a social media platform, affect one’s language usage and general online behaviors. This acknowledgment defends my claim that the normalization of unfiltered and unchecked expressions of self under the justification of “being authentic” occurred because users not only permit it but praise it because they value and prioritize authenticity. And those who value and prioritize authenticity are likely to use unfiltered harsh moral outrage language, especially when it is perceived to more effectively express oneself and one’s opinions. As the authors explain: “Crucially, reinforcement learning and norm learning processes might interact with one another: When individuals can directly observe which actions are most valuable, they rely less on reinforcement learning. Thus, moral outrage expressions might be guided more by norm learning than reinforcement learning when normative information is readily observable in a network.” Brady et al., 1. So even if one’s behavior is not received positively, if it has become normalized and many others practice it, one is still likely to do so as well. I argue that rude behavior and incivility are perpetuated both by reinforcement learning and being normalized through the defense and prioritization of “authentic” self-expression.

environments we live in, but they are contradictory to claims about authenticity. When a person comments about what should or should not be normalized, they are arguing that their worldview of how things should be is the appropriate one, the better one, but they do not want to acknowledge that this means that some individuals must restrain or hide aspects of themselves in order to cohere with whatever norms are being proposed. Crudely put, an alternative conception of authenticity being proposed by some is to be authentic as long as it does not interfere with the norms or violate the etiquette of a given social environment, but this conception is contradictory to the core notion and values of the predominant conceptualization of authenticity spreading through the current cultural psyche that limits individuals' ability to realize and accept that we live in ritualized environments that sometimes require self-restraint. When it comes to basic norms of etiquette, especially in face-to-face interactions, there seems to be some level of agreement that self-control is valuable, but the idea of needing etiquette and norms to moderate one's self-presentation and identity expression is perceived as "problematic."⁹² This apparent dilemma need not be a dilemma, however, if the narrative around authenticity were not present.

⁹² I scare quote "problematic" as it is a trendy word in online discourses. Its use is frowned upon in professional writing precisely because it projects strong moral condemnation, yet it is so vacuous in meaning. That probably explains its popularity online because it fits well with other popular slogans such as "do better" and "it's not my job to educate you." There is a strong emphasis online now that many social issues are the fault of personal individual failings and that it is the individual's responsibility to figure out how to "fix" themselves and that society is no longer responsible for trying to help them do so. This attitude is understandable for issues that have been in the spotlight for decades, like racism, where more than enough effort and educational resources have been made widely available, but when it comes to issues that are only recently becoming public domain or are unfolding contemporaneously, the attitude is not so charitable or helpful. Saying "do better" not only comes off as condescending, which is not conducive to having civil discourses, it implies that one has the moral high ground even though it is not obvious why one believes that they do. If one does not feel like arguing or providing educational resources or evidence to defend one's claims or position then practicing self-restraint and saying nothing might be optimal, but that conflicts with the belief that "silence is violence." In today's online world there is constant pressure to take a position on any given topic whether or not one knows anything about it or cares, hence the use of vague slogans and displays like changes to one's avatars and profile images are extremely commonplace. These developments make sense considering that brash "authentic" self-expression is socially prized, and that self-restraint and modesty are devalued (unless and individual expresses an "unpopular opinion" and then are attacked and told that it would have been better to keep their opinion to themselves). A point being illuminated here is made above: that we in fact live in ritualized environments with norms and etiquettes and the "authenticity" trend conflicts with this reality resulting in various social problems that need not exist.

What should be popularized is a concern for impression management, which requires every individual to navigate their particular social situations mindfully and carefully. What is needed for the sake of civility is an understanding and acceptance of the fact that we live in diverse, highly ritualized environments and that prioritizing “being authentic” makes it more difficult to navigate these environments productively and positively.

It may seem odd that any individual would be attracted to a disposition that frequently results in conflicts with others, but social beliefs and attitudes around “authenticity” are creating social environments where less pro-social values and behaviors flourish and appear attractive.

Xunzi says:

The root of the *lan huai* plant is sweet-smelling angelica, but if you soak it in foul water then the gentleman [*junzi* 君子] will not draw near it, and the common people will not wear it. This happens not because the original material is not fragrant, but rather because of what it is soaked in. Therefore, the gentleman is sure to select carefully the village where he dwells, and he is sure to associate with well-bred men when he travels.⁹³

The comment sections of any given social media platform, for instance, are like oceans of foul water where rude, un-checked and unfiltered self-expression is the norm, but because of how the online world functions, one cannot easily “not draw near it” and “not wear it.” The stench surrounds us and soaks into our clothing and we sometimes find ourselves acting as nasty as anyone else.⁹⁴ As Cheng et al. came to conclude through social discourse experiments:

If antisocial behavior becomes the norm, this can lead to a community to further perpetuate it despite its undesirability. Further evidence for the impact of antisocial behavior stems from research on negativity bias- that negative traits or events tend to dominate positive ones. Negative entities are more contagious than positive ones, and bad impressions are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation.⁹⁵

⁹³ Eric L. Hutton, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 2.

⁹⁴ Justin Cheng et al. discovered that through “an experiment simulating an online discussion, we find that both negative mood and seeing troll posts by others significantly increases the probability of a user trolling, and together double this probability.” Their study resulted in their suggesting that “ordinary people can, under the right circumstances, behave like trolls.” Justin Cheng et al. “Anyone Can Become a Troll: Causes of Trolling Behavior in Online Discussions” (Portland Oregon USA: ACM, 2017), 1217–30, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998213>.

⁹⁵ Cheng et al. 1219.

In the conclusion to this dissertation, I discuss how and why the structure of online environments are especially conducive to “bad behavior” but the point I am making here is that all individuals are susceptible to norms and etiquettes, whether pro-social or anti-social, regardless of whether they think they are or not.

Identity and the Style of One’s Self-Presentation

My main concern is how a belief in authenticity, and trying to be authentic, can negatively affect how one attempts to present one’s identity to others, namely, less filtered and more careless.⁹⁶ This is a sensitive subject because the expression of one’s identity involves one’s sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, skin color, age, ethnicity, nationality, etc. That is why my focus of critique is not on the expression of identity itself, but primarily on *how* one expresses thoughts and feelings. Simply put, when I criticize authenticity, I am not criticizing the act of expressing one’s identity, nor am I suggesting one should hide aspects or parts of one’s identity to appease others.⁹⁷ I am criticizing the notion of authenticity as it influences the words and actions one uses to express oneself, and particularly the style of the performance of those expressions. Because one’s opinions are tied up with one’s identity, and opinions are used in

⁹⁶ It must be noted that my priority is not targeting *identity*, which is what people generally think about in relation to authenticity, but the conception of authenticity that entails a minimally filtered expression of one’s thoughts and feelings through one’s words and actions. Expressing oneself through the expression of one’s thoughts and feelings is a fundamental part of one’s identity, particularly one’s social identity. People use interpretations of each other’s words and actions, and the impressions they give off, to construct an image or conception of each other. One has a conception of one’s identity in one’s own mind, and there are the infinitely growing number of conceptions of one’s identity in the minds of others.

⁹⁷ What one chooses to “show” is dependent on one’s own judgment, and it is not for me alone to discuss setting rules or boundaries of what is permissible unless engaged in a wider social deliberation with others. But with notions like “code switching” becoming prevalent in the public consciousness, more people are now familiar with the kinds of self-regulating behavior we all practice to some degree or another. This means people should be more comfortable with the idea that people sometimes “hide” aspects of themselves and self-censor when they deem it necessary. Whether such self-regulation is “good” or “bad” is ultimately up to the discretion of the individual, but with the popularity of “authenticity” and “coming out,” it appears that the general cultural attitude is that self-regulation is “bad.”

constructing perceptions of others' identities, *how* one expresses an opinion, the “style,” matters greatly by influencing how we perceive others and in determining how well an interaction goes. For example, imagine a younger individual who, in order to “stick out,” chooses to wear a flashy, flamboyant outfit to a funeral of an older person who always wore fairly conservative attire. And the individual assumed most of the other attendees would be traditionally dressed for a funeral. Many pages could be written discussing the complexities of this case, from generational differences to the importance of clothing in various cultures and sub-cultures, but my take is that the individual prioritized their “authentic” expression of self. In doing so, they gave off impressions that made them appear to be trying to make the event more about their self, which likely came off as rude to many of the attendees.

I cannot deny that how one expresses one's identity is highly controversial because the *style* of how one presents oneself to others is intertwined with one's identity. This is why it is essential to one's psychological well-being to have some degree of control over when, where, and how one presents the more personal aspects of one's identity. Finding an ideal balance between self-autonomy and being attentive and responsive to social pressures and influences is complex and difficult, and one goal of this project is to lay out a strategy for achieving this balance. My strong argument is that an unfiltered “authentic” expression of one's thoughts and feelings ought not be the *prioritized* goal in most everyday social interactions. And while it is not permissible for me to say how someone from a marginalized and/or oppressed group of people I am not part of ought to express themselves, members within an individual's in-group certainly can, and do. As I discussed in the previous chapter, there are various etiquettes in society, one for every community, group, sub-group, and so forth. The rules and standards are for them to construct, enforce, and challenge and change. Within every group that shares social identity

traits, there will be shared and contested conventions, standards, and rules of etiquette, and I can only make the general claim that issues will arise when individuals express themselves carelessly under the banner of authenticity. Rudeness is a universal phenomenon, but it can be achieved through a variety of words and actions that only members of a shared in-group might notice and understand. However, whenever authenticity is prioritized in any social group, rudeness is a likely companion.

I am not arguing that a belief in, and admiration for, authenticity is deterministic, such that one will inevitably be individualistic and selfish if they desire and aim for authenticity, but that selfish and individualistic traits are always close at hand. Even worse, as the expression of one's beliefs and attitudes through impressions shape and prime others' beliefs and attitudes, "authentic" individuals are likely to influence others in ways that motivate self-centered and individualistic feelings and behaviors. What precisely is worrisome about authenticity is not just the belief in and desire for it, but that it can be used to justify behaviors that one might otherwise want to avoid if their concern for social etiquette were higher than their concern for authenticity. The disposition one has in regards to one's own inclinations and desires primes the expected behaviors and justifications of them. How one's self-presentation is *framed* in one's own mind depends on the kinds of internal values, beliefs, and attitudes one has. What I think is quite clear in contemporary American culture is that authenticity is believed to be something achievable, and it is highly valued and sought after.⁹⁸ The repercussions of this reality are a primary target of my analysis, and I find it concerning that authenticity is so seductive.

⁹⁸ Alice Marwick and danah boyd, "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience," *New Media & Society* 13, no.1 (2011): 114-133, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810365313>. This is a great paper that conceptualizes authenticity similarly to how I do and makes it apparent that authenticity is highly prized and valued, especially online, so much so that they acknowledge that there exists a "contextual social norm of personal identity." Marwick and boyd, 124.

The Allure of Authenticity

Currently the hashtag #authenticity is used in 2.6 million posts on Instagram and #authentic is used in 12.5 million posts. Even more illuminating is that #liveauthentic is used in 31.7 million posts.⁹⁹ Of course, a large number of these posts are about clothes, restaurants, and selling products in general, and they are coming from users all around the world. But a significant number of them are from typical self-help posts or from self-proclaimed “life coaches.” If we narrow the search even further to more explicitly psychological and philosophical terminology by inputting #authenticself, we find 731,000 posts—still a large amount.¹⁰⁰ These overwhelmingly are “self love,” “self help,” or “life coaching” posts that present the kind of narrative about which I am concerned. One such post has a self-proclaimed “personal coach” putting into words precisely the kind of view and beliefs about the self and social interactions that I argue seduce individuals into having a careless disposition. In a video the user says:

I have decided that from this moment forward, I am going to start enjoying my life for me and not enjoying my life for other people. Why did it take me so long to realize this? Because it turns out when you try to appease every person you come across and make yourself the most malleable version of you so that you can suit any person you’re around, you’re not like *a whole person because you’re fragments of different versions of you.*

It must be noted that the italicized part the user says with a tone of awe and condemnation because if read without this tone, it just appears as a factual statement with which Goffman and myself would somewhat agree. We would add that these “fragments,” which Goffman calls “masks,” all together constitute “you,” not different versions of you. The real meaning of this

⁹⁹ These numbers were recorded sometime in late 2023 or early 2024. Now in November 2024, #authenticity is 3.1 million, #authentic is 13.2 million, and #liveauthentic is still 31.2 million.

¹⁰⁰ In a previous draft of this chapter, written a month earlier, the number was 715,000. In November 2024 it is up to 836,000.

user's view is made in her comment below the video where she says "I'm done appeasing! I'm done masking! I've unleashed my inner goblin and she's ready to f**k things up [emoji]." ¹⁰¹

This user has nicely summarized the problem of authenticity as I articulate it, and what she is defending as "healthy" is exactly what I am challenging as worrisome and problematic. But the user has also highlighted the attraction of such a narrative because caring about what others think can be extremely tiring and difficult—hence the Confucians frequently comment on the difficulty of being *ren*, of being a person who cares about etiquette and how one makes others feel, a person who understands the social value of attentiveness, receptiveness, and, when appropriate, appeasement. It can indeed be "easier" to "not care what others think about you," as so many life-coaches, self-help websites, and even psychologists condone, but this careless mentality does not understand, acknowledge, or care enough about the socio-ethical implications of individuals who take this motto to heart. And what exactly is "easier" about it, especially when it might lead to issues in social interactions and relationships? The answer is that this disposition leans into being self-focused and self-interested by arguing that it is more psychologically healthy to live predominantly by internal reasoning and motivations. Simply put, it is argued to be healthy to prioritize self-interest, but many people do not want to say that in such explicit terms. Instead, we see slogans like "don't worry about what others think of you" and "be yourself no matter what." But trying to live this way is actually impossible because we simply do care what others think. Yet individuals are still seduced by the call for authenticity because it promises a more "natural," psychologically healthy life where you get to prioritize yourself and be more mentally healthy for it. How we conceptualize our inner mental workings

¹⁰¹ Censorship was done by the user. It appears to be less a concern for moral impression management and more a concern about Instagrams built in filtering system that sometimes deletes posts for content including coarse and offensive language.

frames what we consider “natural” and “healthy” ways to think and behave, but the reality of how we function, what we think is possible, and what is actually good for us and society is much more complex and nuanced. “Authenticity” appears attractive because it bypasses that complexity and nuance by framing it as “natural” to be predominantly motivated by self-centered feelings and desires and is believed to make living that way possible.¹⁰²

Naturalness, Self-Positivity Bias, and Validation: A Recipe for Social Disaster

The potential social danger of putting too much weight on equating what is “natural” with what is healthy and “good” is illuminated through the debate between Mengzi and Xunzi on “human nature” (*xing* 性). Mengzi claims that it is part of our nature to have “tendencies” (*duan* 端, often translated as “sprouts”) towards feeling compassion, shame, respect, and a sense of what is right and wrong.¹⁰³ Mengzi thinks it “natural” to *sometimes* feel these things, and as a

¹⁰² In psychological analyses, there is a difference between *being* authentic and *feeling* authentic. As the article cited below suggests, what often makes us feel authentic is not necessarily the same thing as being authentic. This suggests that if one believes *being* authentic is a real thing, it does not entail that what behaviors actually most closely reflect your “true self” will feel authentic. This dichotomy raises many questions and concerns because it should be that “being” authentic inherently makes one feel most authentic, but if this is not always the case, then maybe what individuals are feeling is something different than authenticity, especially when this supposed feeling of authenticity often arises when we conform. As Jennifer Beer explains, “However, until we learn more about whether being authentic reaps the same benefits as feeling authentic, we are left with a tough decision between loyalty to our true selves and conformity to social convention.” Jennifer Beer, “The Inconvenient Truth about Your ‘Authentic’ Self,” *Scientific American*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/observations/the-inconvenient-truth-about-your-authentic-self/>. What Beer describes as connected with *feeling* authentic sounds quite like what ancient Confucians were emphasizing as ideal emotions for developing positive social relations. Whatever *being* authentic is, what is clear is that it is not even in line with one’s own psychology and emotions, but appears to be a stubbornness to act in ways that one, at the moment, believes reflect their “true self” regardless of how it feels or the kinds of social consequences it has. This means this conception of “authenticity,” the one I am challenging, is both nonsensical and selfish, but maybe because it is psychologically “easier” to embrace one’s uncultivated and inferior self, it is the most attractive option to many, especially in a society that emphasizes embracing “how one is.” This is completely paradoxical, but as Beer said, there is always this tension between our internal states and social convention, and when the social convention says to defy social convention, then well, it becomes increasingly paradoxical and confusing.

¹⁰³ Each sprout has a corresponding “virtue” which represent a sprout that has grown to its fullest potential. As Mengzi explains: “The feeling of compassion is benevolence [*ren* 仁]. The feeling of disdain [I prefer shame] is righteousness [*yi* 義]. The feeling of respect is propriety [*li* 禮]. The feeling approval and disapproval [right and wrong] is wisdom [*zhi* 智].” Van Norden, *Mengzi* 6A6. Brackets are my own. The sprouts, and their corresponding virtues, have been translated many different ways, and sometimes take on slightly different meanings in Mengzi’s

person morally develops, they will feel them more frequently. Contrarily, Xunzi says one will not “naturally” feel compassion, shame, respect, or a sense of right and wrong, and must be trained to do so. He does not deny that one has moments where they feel these things, but that without moral education and training starting from a young age, the chances of feeling them are quite low and one is more likely to act out of self-interest. While Mengzi’s ethical theory relies quite heavily on truth claims about human nature, Xunzi’s claims about human nature only superficially appear as truth claims to try to counteract the danger he sees in Mengzi’s claims. Xunzi makes a second-order observation that if people believe Mengzi’s claims about human nature, then negative social consequences are likely to increase as people’s attention is directed more to their self-interest than to etiquette and moral education. Xunzi wants to direct attention away from false beliefs and attitudes about the supposed inherent moral feelings and tendencies we have in order to direct more attention towards moral education and etiquette. It is a clever strategy that has influenced the arguments I employ below.

The affinity for naturalness and authenticity go hand in hand because one only believes they are living authentically when they are supposedly acting “natural.” But what exactly do people mean by “acting natural?” I argue that those who prioritize and idealize “naturalness” and authenticity believe that it is a part of “natural” human functioning to be motivated to act based on internal reasoning, primarily desires. They frame it as “natural” to desire living “authentically.” This internalist disposition is part of a problematic cultural narrative that helps perpetuate the belief that it is “natural” to follow one’s desires and holds that anything external to oneself, like *li* and etiquette, are “artificial” and ought to be met with skepticism and scrutiny

teachings, so I have labeled them according to how I understand their basic meaning. For instance, I think “wisdom” (*zhi*) is better translated as a feeling of “right and wrong” because one can use those feelings to then approve and disapprove of behaviors.

before one *chooses* to practice them. More elegantly put: “The sincere mode of behavior seeks to replace the ‘mere convention’ of ritual with a genuine and thoughtful state of internal conviction. Rather than becoming what we do in action through ritual, we do according to what we have become through self-examination. This form of thought emphasizes tropes of ‘authenticity,’ and each individual thus takes on an enormous responsibility.”¹⁰⁴ Those who prioritize authenticity believe that they alone dictate “who they are,” and the role of others in shaping their sense of self is severely downplayed and generally seen as an obstruction.¹⁰⁵

With authenticity, one can practically claim anything as part of one’s “authentic being” including negative traits and characteristics, but people typically only attribute positive traits to their “unique individual nature.” Negative traits or tendencies are posited as effects of trauma, moments of being out of character, and can even be redescribed as positive traits – e.g., someone habitually rude in speech claiming to be a “blunt no bull-shitter” or a “straight-talker.” Authenticity can take something ugly, like being selfish, and give it a veneer of being beautiful. Being authentic is presented as a *better* way to be, not just a socially tolerable and permissible way. But something has gone askew if “being authentic” is associated with being one’s best self

¹⁰⁴ Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 103.

¹⁰⁵ This kind of perspective on self and authenticity is prevalent and condoned on countless pop and academic psychology websites, in the words of motivational speakers, and posted on “life coaching” social media accounts. For example, according to “motivational speaker” Tony Robbins: “To prioritize yourself, it’s essential to remember one thing: the expectations of others-especially strangers-don’t matter. You must create your own blueprint for your life.” He says to “stop thinking of prioritizing yourself as selfish,” and “once you forget others’ expectations, you’re free to discover your true self.” Tony Robbins, “How to Prioritize Yourself: 5 Ways to Start Prioritizing Yourself Today,” accessed November 15, 2024, <https://www.tonyrobbins.com/blog/how-to-prioritize-yourself>. In academic literature there are studies arguing that having “power” over one’s life increases one’s sense of “authenticity” and therefore enhances one’s “subjective well-being (SWB)”: “Because power increases the correspondence between internal states and behavior, we hypothesized that power enhances subjective well-being by leading people to feel more authentic.” The authors supply evidence via experiments to argue that “because the powerful can navigate their lives in congruence with their internal desires and inclinations, they feel more authentic and, consequently, achieve greater SWB than the powerless do.” Kifer et al., “The Good Life of the Powerful: The Experience of Power and Authenticity Enhances Subjective Well-Being,” *Psychological Studies* 24, no. 3 (2013): 280-288, doi:10.1177/0956797612450891. I return to claims like this below in discussing the connection between a sense of autonomy and authenticity.

when it is an ideal inherently intertwined with selfishness and individualism.¹⁰⁶ This is not really surprising though, as Scott Barry Kaufman explains:

Once you take a closer scientific examination, it seems that what people refer to as their “true self” really is just the aspects of themselves that make them feel the best about themselves. All around the world, people show an *authenticity positivity bias*: people include their most positive and moral qualities—such as kind, giving and honest—in their descriptions of their true self. People judge their positive behaviors as more authentic than their negative behaviors even when both behaviors are consistent with their personal characteristics and desires.¹⁰⁷

For example, one may judge their own selfishness as necessary for mental health reasons yet frame it to others as a concern about “being authentic.” This way they maintain a positivity bias towards their self-image that prevents psychological discomfort and provides a defense when called out for committing a social error or grievance. For individuals who over-value and prioritize authenticity, there is nothing worse than having their self-image threatened, and when it is, anti-social responses often ensue. As evidence of this, there are studies that have hypothesized a connection between aggressive anti-social behavior as a result of a threatened self-image. As Christina Salmivalli notes:

There are, in fact, empirical studies that have aimed at clarifying the aggression–self-esteem link by including such additional variables as instability of self-esteem, narcissism, a grandiose or an “overly positive” self-view, or defensiveness in response to criticism, in the study. Although other interpretations are also possible, all the variables mentioned can be interpreted as signs of underlying insecurity regarding the self-view. It is interesting that all of them — alone or together with a high self-reported self-esteem —

¹⁰⁶ This is true with the kind of “authenticity” ideal I am discussing. It is closely related to the culturally prominent attitude of “being oneself” in an absolute and rigid way, which is not the only way to conceptualize “authenticity.” For example, according to Jennifer Beer, “a number of studies have shown that people’s *feelings* of authenticity are often shaped by something other than their loyalty to their unique qualities. Paradoxically, feelings of authenticity seem to be related to a kind of social conformity.” This claim actually gives support to my arguments and Confucian attitudes about morality. Beer, “The Inconvenient Truth About Your ‘Authentic Self,’” *Scientific American*, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/observations/the-inconvenient-truth-about-your-authentic-self/>.

¹⁰⁷ Scott Barry Kaufman, “Authenticity under Fire,” *Scientific American*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/blog/beautiful-minds/authenticity-under-fire/>.

have been found to be related to hostility, aggression, or violence in one way or another.¹⁰⁸

I argue that the excessive attention and concern for authenticity in our culture is evidence of a high concern for self-validation, particularly as being “real” and not “fake.” Currently, being “real” has high social value. Therefore, it is perceived as being essential to one’s positive self-image. Those who strive for authenticity want their self-image to be validated, but they also want others to validate their internal power and control to shape exactly who they want to be. They want others to concede their social influence to some degree and admit that there ultimately is nothing they can do to change or shape someone else; that only authentic individuals alone “know their true self” and get to dictate who they are. They are so concerned about maintaining a positive self image that any challenge to it, such as when called out for bad behavior or being made to feel ashamed for it, is perceived as a threat to their positive self image and sense of autonomy. Aggressive, hostile, and anti-social behavior is therefore a likely response as one’s disposition becomes increasingly resistant to criticism and shame.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Christina Salmivalli, “Feeling Good About Oneself, Being Bad to Others? Remarks on Self-Esteem, Hostility, and Aggressive Behavior,” *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 6, no.4 (2001): 381, doi:10.1016/S1359-1789(00)00012-4. This study has cited Salmivalli’s claims in attempt to provide an additional explanation for the prevalence of trolling and cyber-bullying amongst adolescents online: Evita March and Genevieve Steele, “High Esteem and Hurting Others Online: Trait Sadism Moderates the Relationship Between Self-Esteem and Internet Trolling,” *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 23, no. 7 (2020): doi:10.1089/cyber.2019.0652.

¹⁰⁹ One study enacted an experiment that resulted in narcissistic children being more aggressive than others, but only after being shamed. The researchers claim that “narcissism in combination with high-self esteem led to exceptionally high aggression.” Sander Thomaes et al., “Trumping Shame by Blasts of Noises: Narcissism, Self-Esteem, Shame, and Aggression in Young Adolescents,” *Child Development* 79, no. 6 (2008): 1792, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01226.x>. In future work I will address some interesting similarities between narcissistic personality disorder and those who prioritize authenticity. For instance, Christopher Lasch’s 1979 book, *The Culture of Narcissism*, is the earliest reference I can find noting similarities between those with Narcissistic Personality Disorder and authenticity. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy states that: “According to Lasch, narcissism and authenticity are both characterized by deficient empathic skills, self-indulgence and self-absorbed behavior.” Somogy Varga and Charles Guignon, “Authenticity,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, Summer 2023 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2023/entries/authenticity/>.

Autonomy and Shame

At the heart of anyone's self-conception is a tension one feels and must face in managing the interplay between autonomy and convention. Those who overvalue authenticity are likely to overvalue autonomy such that social influence, and sometimes simply pressure, is perceived as a threat to autonomy.¹¹⁰ This combination can make an individual so self-centered that they overvalue their own personal judgments and therefore are likely to disregard the judgments of others to such an extent that they become increasingly vulnerable to becoming shameless. I employ Krista Thomason's definition of shame henceforth to defend this claim. I will also argue that a Confucian understanding of shame is a necessary component of practicing normative or moral impression management, but I shall first address the problem of shamelessness as it relates to the problem of authenticity.

Thomason describes shame as follows: "While we feel guilt about particular wrong actions and choices, shame has a broader scope. We feel shame when we fail to be the people that we hope or strive to be."¹¹¹ She elaborates:

¹¹⁰ Under Sarah McLachlan et al., model of Self-Determination Theory, there are three categories of dispositional orientations: "Autonomy-orientated individuals are likely to feel less controlled by social events and environmental contingencies that affect motivation and instead experience such contingencies as affirmation that their behaviour emanates from the self (supports autonomy) or is informational about their performance (supports competence). The controlled orientation reflects a tendency to interpret external events as controlling, leading to an external locus of causality and the feeling that one should or must behave in accordance with the desires of external agents or environmental reinforcements. Finally, the impersonal orientation refers to the tendency for individuals to experience their behaviour as being outside intentional control. Essentially, tasks are seen as being beyond the individual's capacity to control or master, and can lead to a decreased sense of autonomy and competence." Sarah McLachlan et al., "Shame: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective" in *Psychology of Neuroticism and Shame*, ed. Raymond G. Jackson (Hauppauge, New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2011), 8. I argue that individuals that desire and prioritize authenticity want to be autonomy orientated but share the feelings of a more control and/or impersonal orientated individual. I argue that no individual holds one of these three "dispositional orientations" absolutely but moves between them depending on situation and social context. But as cultural values and norms increasingly push and glorify being autonomy orientated, one is likely to increasingly desire that orientation, resulting in behavior that one believes helps them achieve it. I argue that such individuals are misguided by values that make them interpret having a controlled or impersonal orientation as inherently negative and harmful to their sense of self and psychological well-being. Simply put, autonomy and its sibling authenticity are over-prized and prioritized, resulting in less-pro social behavior I elaborate on in this chapter.

¹¹¹ Krista Thomason, *Naked: The Dark Side of Shame and Moral Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

I want to suggest that what is bad about shamelessness is that it reveals someone's failure to recognize the limitations of her own self-conception. Shame arises because some feature of my identity that I do not fully see as part of my self-conception becomes prominent or salient to me in a way that it was not before. Sometimes that experience is brought about by my interactions with others, and sometimes it comes about because I suddenly see myself in a different light. The things that cause us shame disrupt or shake our sense of ourselves. The fact that my sense of myself can be shaken in this way means that I do not see my own self-conception as the final authority on who I am. On my view, the shameless person suffers from a kind of imperviousness. We might say that the shameless person never feels self-conscious. Having no liability to shame means that the authority of my own self-conception is never called into question, disrupted, or shaken.¹¹²

Simply put, being shameless “means that nothing disrupts my own self-estimation. So the shameless person will only rely on her own self-conception to determine who she is.”¹¹³ An extension of this belief in self-reliance is a belief that one's nature is “good” and one's “natural” self is defensible and need not be made better, which is generally construed as an argument against shame.¹¹⁴ By embracing and glorifying one's authenticity, shame is implicitly positioned as one's arch-nemesis, a sentiment prominent in U.S. culture, and widely defended in contemporary psychology, such as in statements like shame “is the feeling that destroys the self.”¹¹⁵ Feeling shame can only be this damning to one's self esteem if one's beliefs and

¹¹² Thomason, *Naked*, 149.

¹¹³ Thomason, *Naked*, 149-150.

¹¹⁴ For example, John Amodeo claims: “Being authentic is a verb, not a noun. It's a process of mindfully noticing the ever-changing flow of experiencing inside us, apart from the contaminating influences of shame and our inner critic.” I sympathize with his attempt to leave a little room for the legitimacy of shame when he comments that as “we realize that we may have shame, but that we are not the shame—we can more freely spread our wings and enjoy our precious life,” but he also describes shame as “destructive”: “As we come to recognize when shame is operating and how it holds us back, it begins to loosen its destructive grip over us. Gradually, we can honor and stand behind ourselves, regardless of how others might judge us.” It is also apparent that he does not accept Goffman's notion of impression management: “We realize more and more that we have no control over what others think about us.” Not only is this statement false, it is a perfect example of contemporary therapeutic psychology that aims to justify a self-centered conception of self in order to mitigate the effects of social influence and pressure. According to this narrative, if we can displace “our real or imagined thoughts about how we're being perceived by others” – that is, combat what Amodeo claims is a “false self” – then we can “discover how freeing and empowering it is to be our authentic self.” While that might sound comforting and liberating to some extent, it is false, misguided, and ultimately dangerous because it predisposes one against socially necessary realities like the need for, and ethical usefulness, of conventions and etiquette. “How Shame Shapes Our False Self,” Psych Central, June 12, 2020, <https://psychcentral.com/blog/how-shame-shapes-our-false-self>.

¹¹⁵ Peter Fonagy, “The Feeling that Destroys the Self: The Role of Mentalizing in the Catastrophic Sequelae of Shame,” in *The Problem of Shame* (Houston: Menninger Clinic, September 27, 2019), 9,

attitudes about shame are framed negatively. And feeling this negative about shame is legitimized and emboldened when one lives in a social environment where individualism and authenticity are idealized. It is not difficult to comprehend why shame is argued to have no place in an individualistic environment because "...we have entered the province of shame whenever we feel bad about who we are. Nearly all definitions of shame agree on this point: shame entails a negative feeling of self-value (e.g., Nussbaum, 2004, p. 184.)"¹¹⁶ Feeling bad about "who you are" is perceived as a serious issue under an ideology of "authenticity," where it is believed one has a fairly stable essence or nature that is difficult, if not impossible, to change and therefore ought to be embraced and lived by. Let me use a personal example of being a father to illustrate this belief and to explicate my attention to shame. My attention is extensive because it is the central emotion in combatting self-centered tendencies and promoting socially oriented goals.

Sometimes when my toddler throws a tantrum, I get angry, raise my voice, and just become a generally negative energy in the room. This makes me feel extremely ashamed after I

<https://www.menningerclinic.org/Assets/2019-menninger-symposium-emailwebsite-version.pdf>. Mark Berkson provides a nice summary of Western scholarship's attitude and general condemnation of shame in the beginning of this essay: "A Confucian Defense of Shame: Morality, Self-Cultivation, and the Dangers of Shamelessness," *Religions* 12, no. 32 (2021): 1, doi:10.3390/rel12010032. According to Sarah McLachlan et al., under a "Self-Determination Theory Perspective," a central concern is the need for autonomy, i.e., "the need to experience oneself as the initiator and regulator of one's behavior." They argue that: "Shame-prone individuals are unlikely to show behavioral persistence because of the development of an introjected regulatory style and the thwarting of autonomy. It therefore seems crucial to provide such individuals with an autonomy supportive environment that facilitates the internalisation process, to shift regulation from shame avoidance and other forms of introjection to engaging in behaviour for more autonomous reasons." This may help explain the popularity of attention to authenticity as it is believed to facilitate such "supportive" environments that help individuals engage in behavior for "more autonomous reasons." McLachlan et al., 6. It is important to note how they frame "introjection," a psychological concept where one "unconsciously adopts the ideas or attitudes of others," in a somewhat negative light and "behavioral persistence" in a positive one. They also state that since "most individuals *naturally* seek out behaviours and contexts likely to support their psychological needs, particularly autonomy, it is probable that they will avoid situations that are incongruent with their needs such as those that foster controlling forms of motivation" (emphasis is mine). McLachlan et al., 4-5. Under their psychological theory it is easy to see why one would find "authenticity" attractive, but my arguments throughout this thesis show that their perspective is one-sided in its predominant focus individual mental health over wider social and ethical concerns.

¹¹⁶Nathaniel F. Barrett, "A Confucian Theory of Shame," *Sophia* 54 (2014): 150, doi:10.1007/s11841-014-0426-0; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

cool down, but what if it did not make me feel ashamed? For instance, I know that there is a history of anger and violence in my family, known through both stories and firsthand accounts. I know that some of this rubbed off on me, and many of my tendencies, good and bad, are influenced from my experiences with friends and family. Now, the anger felt when your child throws a tantrum is considered extremely normal, so much so that many might consider it just human nature to get angry when your child is out of your control and acting irrationally. At least we feel that it is irrational at the moment until we reflect later and realize multiple legitimate reasons for the tantrum (e.g., teething, hunger, fatigue, frustration from inability to communicate effectively). But we could hypothesize that it is human nature to get frustrated and angry with *anything* out of our control and perceived as irrational. Believing this claim about human nature could give me a psychological option to try to reduce my shame by trying to rationalize my anger and negative emotions. If I add in the belief that familial influences have made me even more edgy, then I have a potent formula for excusing my outburst and trying to legitimize what is ultimately unacceptable behavior. Yes, a significant part of being a parent is failing to live up to self-set standards, but some things, like angry outbursts, are, in my opinion, not redeemable and ought to be eliminated from my repertoire of potential behaviors with my child. But again, I could fall back on claims about human nature, or my own personal nature as it has been influenced by my family, to lighten the sense of shame and move on. In some twisted sense, I could say I am being “authentic” when I become angry because “it’s just the way I am” and “it runs in the family.”

This, I would argue, is extremely selfish because in trying to excuse my shameful behavior, I am more likely to not change and continue to have angry outbursts whenever my child throws a tantrum. And these outbursts harm my child psychologically, and they harm

whoever happens to be in my close environment, namely my wife. These outbursts are not good for anyone, and no matter how I might try to explain and excuse them away, they are still harmful. Therefore, it is quite selfish to continue having outbursts and not try to prevent myself from doing so. If I fall back on the justification that “it’s just how I am” yet claim “I’ll try to do better,” it is unlikely that my self and behavior will miraculously improve. Before I can try to be better, I must first acknowledge the selfishness of that attitude and belief and embrace the shame I feel in the harming those I love.

In our current culture, where authenticity is socially prized, there is a possible expectation that when one is called out for being rude, offensive, or for generally “bad” behavior, instead of feeling ashamed, one expects that one’s devotion to authenticity will garner them respect from *some*, overriding any condemnation of one’s behavior. Statements such as “I’m just being myself” or “I can’t change who I am” are made with the expectation that others will respect one’s “authenticity” and forgive one’s transgressions. One may believe it permissible to continue doing whatever behavior was originally interpreted as rude or off-putting because it is fundamental to the ideal of being “authentic.” So, paradoxically, there exists a convention where it is considered permissible to eschew shame and prioritize one’s autonomy when the supposed goal is maintaining authenticity. Those who adhere to this convention are at risk of becoming vehemently shameless. Barrett helps explain why:

Because shame reminds us of our frailty and limitation as human beings, we want to rid ourselves not only just of shame but also of its roots in human nature—this is what Nussbaum means by ‘hiding from humanity.’ Attempting to rid ourselves of shame and its root causes, we project our shame onto others, who we then treat as sub-human while we cling to a false, narcissistic, shame-free image of ourselves.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Barrett, “A Confucian Theory of Shame,” 160.

Nussbaum's point is that people try to distance themselves from feeling shame by blaming others for making them feel shame instead of owning up to one's own behavior that brought that feeling about. And some take it a step further and try to eliminate the ability to feel shame completely from their self-identity by arguing that feeling shame is not in their "nature," as if it is some cursed emotion that others make them unjustly feel. As Thomason explains:

The shameless person takes her own self-conception to be the authority on who she is. Her point of view about herself is the only one that she takes seriously or the only one that matters to her. As long as she approves of the way she represents her behavior to herself, then evidence to the contrary can be ignored or explained away. We are far more likely to evaluate ourselves positively as a whole when we think we are doing a fine job of things.¹¹⁸

It is telling that shame is largely condemned as psychologically harmful and best to be avoided, when possible,¹¹⁹ but guilt is often cited as the more acceptable and legitimate moral guiding emotion.¹²⁰ As Thomason notes: "We assume guilt is better because it more closely tracks our conscious willing. Isenberg, for example, approves of guilt over shame because guilt allows for the possibility to make up for the wrong we have done."¹²¹ The preference for guilt, in other words, arises from the deeply held conviction that the "proper domain of moral assessment is restricted to ... things over which we exercise control."¹²² Thomason adds that "the trouble with this preference for guilt is that it is founded on the assumption that it is healthier or better for us to feel bad about what we can control and to ignore what we cannot control."¹²³ When a

¹¹⁸ Thomason, *Naked*, 151.

¹¹⁹ Thomason calls these the "pessimistic views" on shame. "First, some philosophers who hold this view argue that shame is morally immature—shame is 'primitive' or backwards. This view is consistent with the claim that shame might be a stage of moral development, but it is ultimately one that we should move past. Second, some philosophers claim that shame is corrupt from the start. It is an always destructive or unhealthy emotion." Thomason, 127.

¹²⁰ Barrett notes the apparent bias against shame, and that it is frequently portrayed as morally inferior to guilt. "A Confucian Theory of Shame," 144 and 149.

¹²¹ Arnold Isenberg, "Natural Pride and Natural Shame," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 10, no. 1 (1949): 18-19, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2103241>.

¹²² Michelle Mason, "On Shamelessness," *Philosophical Papers* 39, no. 3 (2010): 414, doi:10.1080/05568641.2010.538916.

¹²³ Thomason, 162-163.

shameless individual commits an action that clearly caused offense and/or gave off a bad impression they may attempt to explain away responsibility and avoid feeling bad for the action by claiming a lack of control due to the “natural” spontaneous expression of authentic selfhood. They consider it intolerable to be made to feel psychological pain or discomfort via the influence of others or the standards of society, but they find it acceptable if in some abstract way they feel bad because they have internally, autonomously, deemed their own behavior unacceptable according to *solely* their own standards (or to some higher law or principles they have chosen to adopt—e.g., religious morals). Thomason explains it this way:

So, if the shameless person does something that hurts someone else, she will likely feel guilty because she sees the harm she has done as a product of her self-conception. Trouble will occur if the shameless person hurts someone in ways that she does not intend. Because she takes her own self-conception as authoritative, nothing will challenge her own views about her actions. As long as she contends that she did not intend or choose to hurt anyone, then she has done nothing wrong and has nothing to apologize for. But her failure here is her refusal to see the nonvoluntary parts of her identity as really hers; she does not accept that who she is extends beyond her conscious will. What she has failed to do is see herself in the right way. As I have argued, a liability to shame is part of the wide rather than the narrow view of ourselves.¹²⁴

Over-valuing authenticity makes one vulnerable to developing a narrow self-conception that does not take into account the social embeddedness of one’s self and feeds into a vicious circle of shamelessness and carelessness, resulting in one being unapologetically inattentive and unresponsive to the feelings, concerns, and authorities of others.

Confucian Shame and Pro-Social Dispositions

An individual with a careless disposition becomes resistant to change because they are critical of shame, the very social power that functions to influence change in oneself. Confucian ethics argues that not only can one change, but that one *must* change if one is to become a better

¹²⁴ Thomason, *Naked*, 163-164.

person.¹²⁵ As Berkson explains: “In Confucian thought, then, the feeling of shame is not directed towards who you fundamentally are, but at the gap between who you are now and who you could be. The tension between the present state of your character and the ideal state of your character produces shame.”¹²⁶ Mengzi argues that the ability to feel shame is like a built-in moral guide that we should follow and use as much as possible, and I agree. And while the real moral power of the Confucian defense of shame is found in its social grounding, it still allows space for one’s own personal judgments.¹²⁷ Without “a sense of right and wrong and a responsiveness to what is shameful and what is not, one cannot establish a communicative channel between oneself and others; in contrast, such a responsiveness opens the door to moral improvement and change, which the individual can moderate according to her own standards.”¹²⁸

In *Analects* 4.10, Kongzi says: “Exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) in making their way in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate (*yi* 義).”¹²⁹ Slingerland interprets the passage to indicate “the situational responsiveness of the gentleman, who relies upon his internal moral sense—rather than conventional social prejudice—when judging people or affairs.”¹³⁰ What Slingerland means by saying one “relies upon his internal moral sense” is at risk as being misinterpreted to mean solely one’s internal judgments about what is “right” or “wrong”, but what Kongzi means is that one relies upon one’s

¹²⁵ “Having a sense of shame—the ability to feel shame—is viewed as an integral part of a person’s character. A person who has no regard for their moral character is sometimes called shameless and is deemed hopeless in the moral domain. Mencius specifically mentions that such a person is no better than a beast (2A6, 7A6, 7A7).” Jing Iris Hu, “Shame, Vulnerability, and Change,” *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 8, no. 2 (2022): 387, doi:10.1017/apa.2021.21.

¹²⁶ Berkson, “A Confucian Defense of Shame,” 8.

¹²⁷ I refrain from using the word “autonomy” here because it entails much more than just personal judgment, but to some extent, feeling that one’s personal judgments are legitimate and hold weight in one’s ethical deliberations with others helps perpetuate a sense of having autonomy.

¹²⁸ Hu, 387.

¹²⁹ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects*, 90.

¹³⁰ Slingerland, *Analects*, 32.

internal moral sense of what is appropriate (*yi*), which is informed by a concern for relationships and *li*—i.e., it is a cultivated judgment that involves input from others and a strong concern for others. Before one can trust their “internal sense” one must cultivate it through social interaction, such as by listening and learning from others and from being responsive to feeling shame. Kongzi condones being situationally responsive, not being blindly obedient to social convention. He condones a pragmatic disposition that takes into account social conventions and norms, and the consequences, emotions, and particularities of one’s roles and relationships with others. Individuals in contemporary society need not completely disregard the notion of authenticity (although I suggest it would be better to), but it must be balanced amongst a wide range of considerations, and not idealized so strongly that one’s approval and devotion to it overpowers fundamental social considerations like *li* and civility.

Xunzi explains that what we idealize and “approve of” affects what we desire and how we go about achieving or obtaining whatever that is. If we set our sights on approving (*ke*) the “right” kinds of things, like respecting *li* and trying to be *ren* (仁), then our desires will be oriented properly. According to the Confucians, that means desiring to act only in ways that are socially beneficial. Those who approve of and desire authenticity but disapprove of and want to avoid feeling shame are more likely to practice behaviors that are not socially beneficial and impress on others as anti-social. Those who care about others, who are attentive and responsive to them, approve of shame because they realize the socially beneficial value of it. As Thomason says: “A liability to shame, on my view, is something we need before we can internalize another point of view and before we take seriously the demands of our social world.”¹³¹ Because “authentic” individuals want to feel that they are completely self-determined and autonomous,

¹³¹ Thomason, *Naked*, 153.

and they believe feeling shame directly challenges those objectives, they are less likely to achieve either of Thomason's demands.¹³² Their aversion to shame reflects a rigid conception of self that feels threatened by social influence, and by extension, others. Such a disposition does not position one well to handle complex and multi-faceted social interactions, especially ones involving controversial issues or topics. If one is to positively, productively, and peacefully participate in social discourses with increasingly diverse positions and points of view being presented, one must learn to develop an open and "mindful" disposition such that one is flexible and receptive to being influenced, and possibly changed, by others.¹³³ This is only possible if one is open and responsive to shame. As Bongrae Seok explains: "In early Confucian texts, shame is not a reactive emotion of an endangered self but a moral disposition that supports a self-critical and self-transformative process of moral development."¹³⁴ Even if one adheres to and lives by a Confucian conception of shame however, one can still maintain autonomy and some sense of unique individuality (albeit one complexly intertwined with others) through *li*.

¹³² Sarah McLachlan et al., "Shame: A Self-Determination Theory Perspective," 1-14. These authors do not discuss authenticity, but claim that people in general, according to "Self-Determination Theory" (SDT) try to avoid contexts or behaviors that produce a sense of shame, particularly when their autonomy feels threatened. "Contexts that induce shame may lead to the development of introjected regulation and motivation to avoid the context or behaviour that leads to feelings of shame." "It is probable that shame-prone individuals will anticipate shame and become regulated by introjection for behaviours for which they have previously encountered shame experiences. This is consistent with Schmader and Lickel's (2006) postulation that shame is associated with avoidance responses intended to protect the self from negative evaluation." McLachlan et al., 5; Toni Schmader and Brian Lickel, "The Approach and Avoidance Function of Guilt and Shame Emotions: Comparing Reactions to Self-Caused and Other-Caused Wrongdoing," *Motivation and Emotion* 30 (2006): 42-55, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-006-9006-0>.

I claim that the authenticity prioritizing individual I have proposed will even more strongly engage in these kind of psyche protecting maneuvers in order to maintain a strong sense of autonomy and self-determination such that they believe and argue shame itself is problematic and harmful. Instead of avoiding shame producing behaviors and contexts, they claim that it is illegitimate to feel shame for "being their self" and do or say as they wish even if others are trying to shame them.

¹³³ I have been influenced by and inspired by Charlene Tan's conception of Neo-Confucian mindfulness (Tan renders it as *jing* 靜). Tan argues that *jing* "essentially refers to maintaining a full, respectful and humanity-centered attention towards others." Charlene Tan, "Mindfulness and Morality: Educational Insights from Confucius," *Journal of Moral Education*, 50, no. 3 (2021): 356, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2020.1779045>.

¹³⁴ Bongrae Seok, "Moral Psychology of Shame in Early Confucian Philosophy," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 10, no. 1 (2015): 21, <https://doi.org/10.3868/s030-004-015-0003-4>.

Living with Shame but Maintaining Autonomy Through the Social Power of *Li*

Confucianism helps us see that we have some control over when and why we feel shame depending on what we value.¹³⁵ Confucianism attempts to orientate our values towards more relational and communal concerns so that social values, like civility, are not perceived as abstract and entirely external to the self, but as intrinsic and essential to one's self-understanding and well-being. If by convincing an individual that the connection between their self and others is extremely interdependent and relies on both acting appropriately, pro-social behavior will more likely not be perceived as simply appeasing others by following arbitrary, or even oppressive, external standards. Instead, pro-social behavior becomes understood as necessary because the health of one's relationships, and one's own psychological health, rely on it. If one's relationality is realized and embraced, then shame will be felt appropriately when one acts in a way that harms one's relationships through causing unnecessary conflict, strife, and discomfort. In our daily lives, where major moral matters are usually not at stake and general social interaction occurs, manners and etiquette are ultimately the primary moral factors of concern. Since social interactions are extremely complex and rife with moments when individuals can misunderstand one another, we need social rituals (*li*) and etiquette as a shared cultural grammar to help guide us. As long as the guide is efficient, practical, and not over-burdening, it can help an average communicator navigate everyday life smoothly while helping a skilled communicator appear as if they are "naturally" a nice person.¹³⁶ Feeling shame for messing up is simply the starting point

¹³⁵ See Justin Tiwald's article "Punishment and Autonomous Shame in Confucian Thought," *Criminal Justice Ethics* 36, no. 1 (2017): 45-60, doi:10.1080/0731129X.2017.1301487., for a conceptualization of what he calls "autonomous shame". He claims that in the *Analects*, it is one's own personal sense of shame that determines whether one feels ashamed or not. This is only one part of it though because convention, if appropriate, should have some play as well. What it looks like is another pragmatic position where one's own feelings largely determine one's sense of shame, but others and convention can play a role as well when it is appropriate to.

¹³⁶ See Li Chen-Yang's conceptualization of "cultural grammar" in "*Li* as Cultural Grammar: On the Relation between *Li* and *Ren* in Confucius' *Analects*," *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 3 (2007): 311-329, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2007.0033>.

in one's moral social development, according to the Confucian guidebook. As one becomes more skilled at practicing etiquette and impression management the frequency with which one feels shame lessens, but the threat is always present, keeping one in check.

Both Berkson and Jing Hu¹³⁷ explain how the Confucian conception of shame, which I condone, also contains an element of internal dialogue and autonomy, not because the Confucians had a concern for maintaining autonomy and control over oneself contra the oppressive external world, but because there are appropriate and inappropriate ways and times to feel shame. To discover these appropriate ways and times, beyond those made apparent through social rituals and etiquette, one must practice some level of internal reflection to help consciously approve values and attitudes that then affect when one feels ashamed. Otherwise, one would be vulnerable to feeling shame for reasons dependent on *only* the values, attitudes, and norms of society. One cannot rely solely on convention to figure out when feeling shame is appropriate or not. But if one becomes too defensive against and critical of social influence, one's responsiveness to it might become hostile and put one at risk of frequently impressing on others as anti-social. One need not be spineless and at the complete mercy of the opinions and judgments of others to the extent that one's autonomy is threatened, however. Justin Tiwald presents a balanced possibility: "...We can have an autonomous sense of shame when our confidence in, say, a ritual tradition, is based on considerable personal experience with that tradition, and when we aspire to understand the basis of that tradition—the reasons it treats some things as shameful or the features that make it shameful—for ourselves."¹³⁸ It is possible to balance one's own personal thoughts and feelings with those of one's tradition, of the cultures and societies one lives in. One must be attentive to one's social situation and others to develop an

¹³⁷ Jing Iris Hu, "Same, Vulnerability, and Change," 373-390.

¹³⁸ Justin Tiwald, "Punishment and Autonomous Shame in Confucian Thought," 51.

appropriately informed, *unique*, personal disposition that maintains autonomy yet is receptive to shame. One's autonomy is maintained through embracing the *li* and etiquettes of one's social sphere as one's own and realizing that one can only construct and modify them with others. This may not be the strong autonomy "authentic" individuals value and desire, but it is the kind of autonomy that prioritizes positive social interactions and relationships.

In *Analects* 15.42,¹³⁹ for example, Kongzi is responsive to the situation and is willing to "sacrifice his dignity as a host" in order to "deftly and respectfully serve as a guide for the blind Music Master, without being overly fussy or condescending."¹⁴⁰ Kongzi's student, Zizhang, seems to suggest that under ordinary conventions of hosting, Kongzi should feel ashamed for his treatment of the music master as it is not in complete accordance with the usual *li*. But under this particular situation, Kongzi would feel ashamed if he *had* followed through with the conventional *li*. It is not that Kongzi is eschewing *li* entirely, but that the pro-social goal of practicing *li* is sometimes only achieved by modifying and adapting *li* to meet the needs of a particular situation. In many cases, what is most socially beneficial is not strict adherence to rigid conceptions of *li* but what one communicates by simply *respecting* and *practicing li*, conventionally or otherwise. In 15.42, Kongzi exercises his autonomy and eschews the *conventional li* about how he is supposed to present himself, and in doing so, enables himself to better practice the more *imperative li* of showing care, concern, and respect for the music master. *Li* generally set the standard for when someone should feel ashamed, which aids one in determining how to morally navigate complex social situations, but it is also important that one

¹³⁹ "The Music Master Mian came to see Confucius. When they came to the steps, the Master said, 'Here are the steps.' When they reached his seat, the Master said, 'Here is your seat.' After everyone was seated, the Master informed him as to who was present, saying, 'So-and-so is seated here, and So-and-so is seated over there.' When the Music Master left, Zizhang asked, 'Is this the way to converse with a Music Master?' The Master replied, 'Yes, this is indeed the way to assist a Music Master.'" Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects*.

¹⁴⁰ Slingerland, *Analects*, 190.

feels shame at the appropriate times and for appropriate reasons, and one's autonomy plays a role in this. Those who prioritize authenticity value and desire a radical self-centered kind of autonomy that is not only mythical, but socially dangerous, because in seeking it out, they become careless, shameless, and uncivil in the process.

Prioritizing Internal States: The Problem of Downplaying Social Convention and Concern for Civility

An extension of this problem about autonomy is articulated in Cheshire Calhoun's distinction between what she calls "socially critical moral points of view" and civility. Calhoun explains:

When one adopts a socially critical moral point of view, one does not try to determine how people ought to be treated by investigating how they are treated, or how social conventions recommend they should be treated, or any other social fact of this kind. Instead, adopting a socially critical moral point of view means adopting a standpoint that enables one to evaluate the moral merit of established social norms and to recommend the moral principles that, ideally, would be embodied in our social norms. Adopting a socially critical moral point of view means being prepared to violate existing social conventions.¹⁴¹

Calhoun argues that holding a socially critical moral point of view can be problematic because, as she argues: "conformity is critical to civility's moral function. The function of civility, I will suggest, is to *communicate* basic moral attitudes of respect, tolerance, and considerateness. We can successfully communicate these basic moral attitudes to others only by following socially conventional rules for the expression of respect, tolerance, and considerateness."¹⁴² Kongzi presents as a model of civility in *Analects* 15.42 because he did not violate convention but simply modified his performance of the rules to fit the needs of a particular situation and relationship. Being civil is a performative action that signals to others that one is primed to have

¹⁴¹ Cheshire Calhoun, "The Virtue of Civility," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2000): 252, doi:10.1111/j.1088-4963.2000.00251.x.

¹⁴² Calhoun, 255.

a positive discourse by giving off impressions of respect, tolerance, and consideration As

Calhoun argues:

Only by appealing to social understandings [norms and conventions] can civility norms provide us with a common language for displaying respect, tolerance, and considerateness to each other under social conditions where our different critical moralities create dispute over what genuine respect, tolerance, and considerateness amount to. Civility is thus akin, not to integrity, but to civil obedience. Both civility and civil obedience may require compliance with social norms or laws that are objectionable from a socially critical moral point of view. Neither aims to safeguard our integrity. Both aim to safeguard the possibility of a common social life together.¹⁴³

Calhoun is aware that some social norms and conventions can be problematic, but when one wishes to challenge and change them, the discourse must remain civil.

Regarding the problem of authenticity, there is a salient point about individual judgment in Calhoun's claims about civility. An individual who holds a socially critical moral view believes they have "gotten it right" such that they find any view incompatible with their own intolerable and they feel justified in acting uncivil to express their position. I find this worrisome, as does Calhoun: "I find something odd, and oddly troubling, about the great confidence one must have in one's own judgment (and lack of confidence in others') to be willing to be uncivil to others in the name of a higher moral calling."¹⁴⁴ An individual who believes it justified to "be oneself no matter what" prioritizes their internal states and their own judgements, and is likely to de-value and de-prioritize concerns for civility.¹⁴⁵ They become primed for confrontation in their failure to understand and embrace civility as a social virtue that members of society buy into and help reinforce through shared understandings of social conventions and etiquettes. The moral

¹⁴³ Calhoun, "The Virtue of Civility," 272.

¹⁴⁴ "When one is very very sure that one has gotten it right, and when avoiding a major wrong is at stake, civility does indeed seem a minor consideration. But to adopt a principle of eschewing civility in favor of one's own best judgment seems a kind of hubris." Calhoun, 275.

¹⁴⁵ As Xunzi says: "if you do not concur with your teacher and the proper model [Dao] but instead like to use your own judgment, then this is like relying on a blind person to distinguish colors, or like relying on a deaf person to distinguish sounds. You will accomplish nothing but chaos and recklessness." Hutton, *Xunzi*, 14.

significance of this failure is most apparent in social disputes. Calhoun says that to “imagine that civility requires that we display tolerance only to what we, as individual reasoners, have concluded are tolerable opinions or genuine moral positions is to imagine a norm of civility that cannot regulate disputes.”¹⁴⁶ It is in fact “a display of *intolerance* to insist on using one’s own judgment to decide what deserves a civil response.”¹⁴⁷ Those who prioritize authenticity I label “radical internalists” because they perceive internal workings (desires, feelings, aims, etc.) as the primary driving force behind behavior and are less likely to be responsive to external factors (e.g., the social need for civility). They believe moral authority is ultimately found within oneself and not with and through interactions with others. If morality is something we uphold and practice together, then prioritizing authenticity is anathema to it.

I argue that the locus of moral authority is produced in the interplay between internal and external motivations. When one *believes* moral authority is produced internally, external factors become severely downplayed as part of one’s deliberations before acting. One cannot completely eschew external influences and pressures on one’s motivations to act, but one may become less receptive to them, or worse, hostile, resulting in a disposition that does not sufficiently take into account the feelings and concerns of others. “Authentic” individuals feel justified in prioritizing themselves because they believe the moral authority of human reasoning is found internally. If all humans have the authority to dictate who they are and what they do based solely on internal justifications then it is not selfish or socially harmful to eschew external considerations, but “human nature” to do so. Xunzi’s theory of approval contests this belief and illuminates the

¹⁴⁶ Calhoun, “The Virtue of Civility,” 269. “Because civility has its point and place precisely with respect to views that are under dispute in a society, civility norms must require civil responses to some views regardless of what individual reasoners think about them. Thus, individual judgment cannot determine the views whose expression or enactment are not owed, a civil response. This is true no matter how careful, objective, and well informed individual moral reasoners attempt to be.” Calhoun, 269-270.

¹⁴⁷ Calhoun, 270.

socio-ethical benefits of understanding moral authority as a balancing act of internal and external considerations.

Xunzi's Approval: Balancing the Internal and External

Xunzi seems aware that people have a tendency to prioritize their desires and internal judgments, but he explains that what *actually* shapes our behavior is what we approve of. He argues that: “All people share one thing in common: when hungry they desire to eat, when cold they desire warmth, when tired they desire rest, they like what is beneficial and hate what is harmful.”¹⁴⁸ But while people “share the same desires” they also “have different understandings.” That is, people’s “understanding” about what they think is “beneficial” and “harmful” will differ because of social influences. He says: “The children of the Han, Yue, Yi, and Mo peoples all cry with the same sound at birth, but when grown they have different customs, because teaching makes them thus.”¹⁴⁹ Tradition, customs, and teachings, all external influences, shape what we value, think, and ultimately desire such that what we approve and find appropriate will differ.¹⁵⁰ In our contemporary U.S. culture, “authenticity” is believed to be “beneficial” and essential to achieving well-being, so it is approved of, desired, and sought out. This belief itself is problematic as I have argued above, but an additional issue arises when one does not realize, or respect, the external influence in forming this belief. It is quite paradoxical that there is an external influence to deprioritize and devalue external influences, and the consequences of this are convoluted social narratives and situations. For example, an “authentic”

¹⁴⁸ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 27.

¹⁴⁹ Hutton, 1.

¹⁵⁰ As Hans-Georg Gadamer explains: “Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 1989), 290.

individual holds a socially moral critical point of view that they believe is the “right” one, but so do all other “authentic” individuals and not everyone can be “right.” This commonly leads to “pissing matches” where neither side is truly listening and being receptive to the other. What one approves of ultimately has much broader social implications than what “authentic” people realize or want to accept. Xunzi helps articulate what those implications are and why they are so morally significant.

Xunzi “asserts that a person’s actions are determined, not by what he desires, but by what he approves of [*ke* 可].”¹⁵¹ Van Norden gives the example of a man that becomes promiscuous not because he desires casual sex per se, but because he approves of an ideal of macho masculinity that exists in society. Xunzi explains that: “The occurrence of desires does not wait upon the permissibility of fulfilling them, but those who seek to fulfill them follow what they approve of.”¹⁵² Having desires itself is not the problem, it is that what one approves of shapes one’s desires, so if what one approves of is problematic, then so too will be one’s desires. In Xunzi’s words, “order and disorder reside in what the heart approves of, they are not present in the desires from one’s dispositions.”¹⁵³ The main problem is that people approve of values like authenticity that influence them to follow their more instinctual, spontaneous, desires based on whatever feelings they happen to have at the moment-i.e., they can rather globally approve of acting on immediate feelings.¹⁵⁴ Xunzi finds it worrisome that people perceive living in a

¹⁵¹ Bryan Van Norden, “Mengzi and Xunzi: Two Views of Human Agency,” in *Virtue, Nature, and Moral Agency in the Xunzi*, ed. T. C. Kline and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 118. Xunzi adds that “everyone approves of something, and in this the wise and the stupid are the same. Yet, what they approve of differs, and this is what divides the wise from the stupid,” Hutton, *Xunzi*, 83. “Wise” people are those who do what is socially beneficial and “stupid” people do the opposite.

¹⁵² Hutton, 243.

¹⁵³ Hutton, 244.

¹⁵⁴ Confucians frequently espouse the virtue of living in a *wuwei* manner where *wuwei* is sometimes translated as “spontaneous.” My use of “spontaneously” here is not referring to *wuwei* but instead the more quotidian understanding “impulsive.” Now, Xunzi praises a kind of impulsive acting but only after one has been thoroughly

spontaneous way attractive and take “comfort” in it but do not realize how damaging it is to themselves and society.¹⁵⁵ As Xunzi argues: “The Way [*Dao*] is the correct balance from ancient times to the present. If one departs from the Way and instead, looking within, chooses based on himself alone, then he will not know to what disaster and good fortune are attached.”¹⁵⁶ Those who approve of authenticity have desires focused on control, autonomy, and acting more intuitively and spontaneously, which moves them away from concerns about etiquette and achieving more socially oriented goals, goals that require one to put in a “deliberate effort” (*wei* 偽) to challenge one’s spontaneous internal motivations and focus more on moral impression management, balancing the internal with the external.¹⁵⁷

To start moving into the normative claims of this thesis, one can adopt Xunzi’s philosophy of approval as a guiding model for navigating the interplay of internal reasoning with external standards. Internally we are aware of many of our desires, and we do have the power to

trained and practiced in the social art of morality, a practice that requires a constant careful awareness of others and situational factors. *Wuwei* is like a trained spontaneity where one acts properly quickly and apparently effortlessly, but to develop such a skilled disposition is no easy effort, nor something most of us will ever accomplish. Being able to “spontaneously” act morally is an ideal to strive for, but the average person must put in much *wei* (effort) to stay on a straight path. This means one must continue being keenly observant of others and social situations and work hard to be attentive and responsive to the needs of a relationship and situation. So, for the common morally underdeveloped person, spontaneity is a negative trait that will likely result in negative consequences, for it is equivalent to acting carelessly and based primarily on one’s intuitive feelings and desires, which are by default suspect and likely to be self-interested. Those who espouse “authenticity” in fact praise spontaneity understood as such as a positive trait that in many ways defines what it means to live “authentically.”

¹⁵⁵ “Those who give rein to their nature and inborn dispositions, who take comfort in being utterly unrestrained, and who violate ritual and *yi*, become petty men.” Hutton, *Xunzi*, 248. Although what Xunzi means by “nature” is different than “feelings,” he explains that the “feelings of liking and disliking, happiness and anger, and sadness and joy in one’s nature are called the “dispositions.” Hutton, 236.

¹⁵⁶ Hutton, 245. And “If one departs from the Way and instead, looking within, chooses based on oneself alone, then this is like exchanging two for one—what gain would there be?” It is no wonder that, as Kongzi claims, the *xiaoren* is “always agitated and anxious” because such a lifestyle can be difficult to achieve, and the social results are more likely than not to be undesirable. Being agitated and anxious is probably the most accurate way to describe the generalized online persona. At least that is how people come off in comment sections of videos and social media posts.

¹⁵⁷ “Xunzi exalts *wei* 偽. The word *wei* originally connotes what is “artificial” in a negative sense, but in Xunzi’s hands it becomes a technical term (rendered here as “deliberate effort”) for ways of behaving that do not arise from human nature and may even be contrary to it, and that thus provide a way to avoid the misdeeds and troubles to which human nature would otherwise lead us.” Hutton, 259.

reflect on them and judge them against the social conventions and standards of those around us. But while the mental process of “approving” is done internally, what keeps it from being radically internal is that *what* we approve of also involves external social standards and conventions. Embedded in the notion of approval is socio-ethical consideration. By approving something verbally or through acting, one sends a signal, or gives off an impression, that one deems it acceptable or permissible. For example, when one commits an act without vocalizing one’s approval of it, silent signals of one’s acceptance and permission of the act are still sent off. And when one commits an act but vocalizes disapproval of it, we are likely to criticize the individual as a hypocrite. Behaviors (external signals) issuing from approval (internal assent) are mediated through social standards internalized *and* behavior gives social signals to others of what we approve of. As Goffman says: “...human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without.”¹⁵⁸ Eric Hutton highlights this fact as well, albeit indirectly, when he explains that when he translates *ke* verbally in the *Xunzi* he takes it to mean “approve,” but when *ke* is used adjectivally or adverbially, he usually renders it as “permissible” where he takes *Xunzi* to mean “should be approved.”¹⁵⁹ Thus, according to *Xunzi*, our actions generally entail a moral judgment about what ought to be approved, although not always. Sometimes we exercise approval in unreflective ways, such as when we replicate patterns of behavior we have not given much thought to. But when those unreflective actions are challenged by others, or we self-reflect and begin to question certain behaviors because we happen to notice the social effects of them, we are engaging in moral judgment. Conscious of it

¹⁵⁸ Charles C. Lemert and Ann Branaman, eds., *The Goffman Reader*, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), 110.

¹⁵⁹ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 243.

or not, the reasoning behind our actions involves an interplay between internal reasoning and external standards and conventions.

The internal aspect is apparent when one approves or disapproves of something because it requires one to make autonomous internal judgments. This is made evident if we re-frame the promiscuous man example and say that he does not care about the macho ideal in society, but that he is promiscuous simply because he desires sex as it brings him pleasure. Thinking and living this way means he approves of living to attain pleasure by trying to fulfill one's desires, a standard of living that certainly exists in society. His actions, issuing from his approval, function implicitly to universalize the claim that his way of life is permissible and acceptable. He is not actively approving or disapproving of other people per se, but implicitly sets a standard for what is permissible and acceptable (whether or not people "buy" into it is a different issue). More importantly, even if he does *not* approve of the standards he currently lives by, *in living by them* he gives off the impression that he does approve of them.¹⁶⁰ This highlights the external aspects of behavior because the impressions he gives off influence others, but also there must be some externally derived reason/s he would continue to act in certain ways even if he does not internally approve of the standards behind them (e.g., conventions, rules of etiquette, concern for civility).

¹⁶⁰ One could object that by simply committing an action one is not giving approval of it or of anything that influenced one to do it because sometimes people do things they do not desire to do, and even do not think are morally permissible. While true, these kinds of cases are likely to occur because one has lost some control and autonomy such as in cases of addiction, or where social norms or conventions have totally overpowered one's own personal desires and judgments. I have never suggested that norms and conventions cannot be problematic or overpowering, especially if we consider the power of bias, particularly implicit bias. People certainly do unconsciously take on beliefs and attitudes and participate in behaviors that go against their conscious beliefs and values as is apparent in issues like systemic racism. This reality does not refute my argument of the moral importance of norms and etiquette however, it just illuminates the fact that we as members of a society must work together to raise awareness of problematic norms and conventions and resolve them. But we must practice good etiquette and develop positive norms of social discourse together to do so in a civil manner.

One who has an affinity for “naturalness” predominantly looks *inward* at one’s own thoughts and emotions and gives them *too* much authority to judge one’s own behavior as “good” or “bad.” By legitimizing these judgments as such, one becomes morally complacent and lazy—i.e., careless—because *external* criteria are less accounted for in these judgments. Careless individuals do not give enough thought and concern towards the effects of their words and actions on others, or to how others respond to their traits and characteristics. It is important to acknowledge that people are not willingly becoming “assholes” but are lured into an individualistic and careless disposition through the interplay of self-centered beliefs about the self that are reinforced by individualistic cultural narratives. In most everyday situations, unless one is imprisoned, addicted, or in some position that severely restricts one’s autonomy, one’s behaviors are motivated by the interplay of internal and external reasoning and approvals. This is what makes Xunzi’s argument that it is not desire that motivates our actions, but approval, so powerfully insightful, and attractive, because it frames social interaction as a balancing act where we have some element of control over ourselves while also being influenced by social factors. The moral implication of Xunzi’s conception of approval is that one ought to approve of the “right” things, like moral impression management, *li*, and civility, and this can only be achieved if one does not over-prioritize concerns for autonomy and “authenticity.”

Chapter Three: *Zhong* 忠, *Shu* 恕, and Exemplarism: A Guide to Practicing Confucian Moral Impression Management

“The Master said, ‘In the old days, the common people had three faults that people of today perhaps have done away with. Of old, rash people were merely reckless, but nowadays they have managed to overcome all restraint. Of old, proud people were merely smug, but nowadays they are quarrelsome and easily provoked. Of old, stupid people were frank and direct, but nowadays they are positively deceitful.’”¹⁶¹

The ultimate aim of this final chapter is to present an understanding of impression management, infused with Confucian moral philosophy and useful for our daily lives. I explain how one might develop a mindful disposition through the cultivation of the Confucian virtues of *zhong* 忠 and *shu* 恕. The virtues have two primary elements: the intellectual (self-reflection and strong attention to *li*, encapsulated in the term *zhong* 忠) and the emotional (silver-rule and empathy, encapsulated in the term *shu*). In cultivating *zhong* and *shu*, one learns how to morally manage impressions and comes to understand why doing so is so socially important. *Zhong* and *shu* are “Confucius’ prescription for how best to determine appropriate conduct.”¹⁶² The Confucian model of moral impression management I propose entails extensive self-cultivation and effort because as one tries to understand how to *act* morally, one simultaneously learns to be effective and responsible in morally managing impressions.

I begin by defining the virtues of *zhong* and *shu* and discussing the core behaviors entailed in their cultivation to articulate my model of Confucian moral impression management (CMIM). I argue that the cultivation of *shu* and *zhong*, alongside reverence for *li*, involves emotional and intellectual practices that all together constitute a “mindful” disposition, and one learns how to practice CMIM in trying to develop such a disposition. I then move to a discussion of the social importance of CMIM exemplars and how we must try to learn from them. Before I

¹⁶¹ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 17.16. All *Analects* translations are by Ames and Rosemont Jr. unless otherwise noted.

¹⁶² Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects*, 59.

begin, however, I must address two caveats about the Confucian concept of *xin* 心 (heart-mind) as it relates to the relationship between *zhong* and *shu*.

Xin 心 is often translated as solely “mind” or “heart,” depending on which meaning seems appropriate to the context of a passage in a Confucian text, but since *xin* 心 ultimately encapsulates both meanings, “heart-mind” is the most common translation. Rosemont Jr. and Ames explain that they render *xin* 心 as “heart-and-mind” to “remind the reader that there are no altogether disembodied thoughts for Confucius, nor any raw feelings altogether lacking (what in English would be called) ‘cognitive content.’”¹⁶³ *Xin* 心 illuminates the relationship between *zhong* and *shu* in that neither virtue can be conceptualized as purely “intellectual” or “emotional,” hence neither virtue can be understood separately from the other. They inform one another to make it possible for both to be fully realized. I only separate the virtues for the sake of analysis, and it is essential that this separation is not misconstrued as representing a reason-emotion dualism. *Zhong* and *shu* are the “one continuous strand” that binds Kongzi’s moral philosophy together.¹⁶⁴ As Ames and Rosemont Jr. explain: “Perhaps it seems odd that the ‘one’ strand is in fact ‘two,’ *zhong* and *shu*, but in addition to being two aspects of one method, what ties them together is the presence of the shared ‘heart-and-mind (*xin* 心)’.”¹⁶⁵ It is no coincidence that the characters of *zhong* 忠 and *shu* 恕 both contain *xin* 心.

¹⁶³ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects*, 56.

¹⁶⁴ *Analects* 4.15 says: “The Master said, ‘Zeng, my friend! My way (*dao* 道) is bound together with one continuous strand.’ Master Zeng replied, ‘Indeed.’ When the Master had left, the disciples asked, ‘What was he referring to?’ Master Zeng said, ‘The way of the Master is doing one’s utmost (*zhong* 忠) and putting oneself in the other’s place (*shu* 恕), nothing more.’”

¹⁶⁵ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects*, 59. Some scholars take issue with interpreting *zhong* and *shu* so strongly as the core virtues of all of Kongzi’s philosophy. Ultimately, for my purposes, *zhong* and *shu* do not need to be understood as such, but they are fundamental to my Confucian ethical project. See footnote 18 on page 5 for further explanation of this issue.

Understanding *xin* 心 is also essential to my model of CMIM. Putting aside philosophical claims about “pure reason” and the more contemporary acceptance that reason and emotion can be ontologically separated, the Confucian picture of human psychology conceptualized in *xin* 心 intuitively rings true, especially when deliberating about actions.¹⁶⁶ In our everyday deliberations we reason about our emotions and our emotions affect how we reason. For example, feeling sad may trigger a desire for an unhealthy desert, but one’s reasoning about living a healthy lifestyle may interject. But one may be so sad, one’s reasoning about health concerns are totally overridden (although one thought about those concerns for a second) as one runs home to the refrigerator. I am hard pressed to think of an example where reason and emotion are not both invoked in one’s deliberations to act, contrary to the belief that they can be such, as when jurors are asked to “appeal to reason,” not emotion. One need not accept *xin* 心 as representative of human psychology to *understand* how it informs the relationships between *zhong* and *shu*, but my ethical theory relies on the assumption that *xin* 心 does in fact accurately represent our daily behavioral psychology. With these caveats about wanting to avoid being interpreted as defending a dualistic picture of *zhong* and *shu*, I can begin my analysis of *zhong* and *shu*, starting with *shu*.

Defining *Shu* Starts and Ends with the “One-Thread” Problem

The two classic definitional accounts of *shu* are found in *Analects* 4.15 and 15.24. The former passage explains that Kongzi’s teachings amount to “doing one’s utmost (*zhong* 忠) and putting oneself in the other’s place (*shu* 恕), nothing more.”¹⁶⁷ This passage explains why *shu* is

¹⁶⁶ Ames and Rosemont Jr., explain that the Confucian tradition “does not rely upon the notion of *psyche* as a way of defining the human experience.” *Analects*, 49. Hence, I am hesitant to use the term “psychology” here as it brings with it baggage foreign to the Confucian tradition, but it is a term contemporary audiences can easily grasp to understand what I am proposing.

¹⁶⁷ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 4.15.

often translated as “empathy,” which I will argue does not represent *shu* in its entirety. The second account is comparable to what is called the “silver rule,” or the “negative golden rule” in Western traditions: “Zigong asked, ‘Is there one expression that can be acted upon until the end of one’s days?’ The Master replied, ‘There is *shu* 恕: do not impose on others what you yourself do not want.’”¹⁶⁸ Wang Bi interprets *shu* as “reflecting upon one’s emotions in order to have sympathy with other beings.”¹⁶⁹ This is an insightful definition because it highlights the emotional and intellectual aspects of *shu* that are not so obvious from its basic definitions in the *Analects*. In deliberating how to behave, *shu* demands that one reflect on one’s inner thoughts and emotions, as well as try to understand *and feel* what others think and feel, to deliberate how to behave.¹⁷⁰ Sin Yee Chan emphasizes the emotional more than the intellectual, but her articulation of *shu* highlights both aspects well:

Shu asks us vicariously to *feel* what others *feel*, and not merely take cognitive note of what they think. In this way, *shu* calls for the full utilization of our emotions and not merely our intellectual analytic skills. It also requires contextual thinking by asking us to seek an intimate grasp of another’s particular situation.¹⁷¹

Shu (as well as *zhong*) is a virtue¹⁷² that can be articulated as a disposition and other times as more of a practice, depending on the context in which it is being invoked. *Shu* is a complex concept that entails embracing the silver-rule, being empathetic, and, when paired with

¹⁶⁸ Kongzi says something similar in 12.2 when asked to explain what *ren* entails. This fact can be interpreted as quite significant since *ren* is generally understood as the grand virtue that in some way or another encapsulates them all. Equally significant is that in 4.15, *shu* is referenced as part of Kongzi’s *dao*. Whatever one makes of these passages, I do not think it debatable that *shu* is especially important and central to Kongzi’s moral philosophy.

¹⁶⁹ Slingerland, *Analects*, 34. Wang Bi was a Three Kingdoms period philosopher and politician, most famous for his commentaries on the *Daodejing* and the *Yijing*.

¹⁷⁰ See Yan Tang and Zhiping Yu, “Towards Others: Confucian *Shu*’s (Due Consideration) Three Types of Gongfu (Practice),” *Religions* 14, no. 7 (2023): 824, doi:10.3390/rel14070824 for emphasis on the internal aspects of *shu*.

¹⁷¹ Sin Yee Chan, “Can *Shu* be the One Word that Serves as the Guiding Principle of Caring Actions?” *Philosophy East and West* 50, no. 4 (2000): 516-517, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1400281>.

¹⁷² I have reservations about calling it a “virtue” because my model of Confucian Impression Management is not a virtue ethic as I understand it. But my interpretation of *shu* has enough in common with a virtue reading that it makes sense to refer to it as a virtue, largely for a lack of a better term. I simply use the term “virtue” for convenience and not out of conviction.

zhong, being devoted to the practice of *li* and practicing self-moderation. It requires using one's emotions and intellect in imaginative and analytic ways. Doing all of this is not so simple, however, as it requires a careful balancing of emotional and intellectual skills and considerations. The complexity of *shu* is highlighted by the fact that *shu* cannot be completely understood without also understanding *zhong*.

On the surface, it seems odd that the word *shu* 恕 is only explicitly used *twice* in the *Analects*, yet Kongzi states in 15.24 that *shu* is the one idea or word that can be “acted upon until the end of one's days.”¹⁷³ Even more perplexing is that in *Analects* passage 4.15 *shu* is paired with *zhong* to represent the “one strand” that binds Kongzi's moral philosophy together:

The Master said, “Zeng, my friend! My way (*dao* 道) is bound together with one continuous strand.” Master Zeng replied, “Indeed.” When the Master had left, the disciples asked, “What was he referring to?” Master Zeng said, “The way of the Master is doing one's utmost (*zhong* 忠) and putting oneself in the other's place (*shu* 恕), nothing more.”¹⁷⁴

Arguably, the reason Kongzi tells Zigong in 15.24 that *shu alone* is the “one expression that can be acted upon until the end of one's day” is because Zigong is lacking in *shu*, not *zhong*. Putting that explanation aside for the moment, the “one-thread” problem plaguing scholars for generations has been trying to understand the intricate relationship between *zhong* and *shu*.¹⁷⁵ Figuring out what “these two words mean and how they fit together as two strands to form the ‘one thread’ of Confucius' Way [*dao*] is our central problem.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷³ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 15.24. In the passage Kongzi is asked by Zigong if there is “one expression [sometimes translated as ‘word’] that can be acted upon until the end of one's days” and Kongzi replies that it is *shu*. Bracket is my comment.

¹⁷⁴ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 4.15.

¹⁷⁵ Philip J. Ivanhoe refers to the “strand” as a “thread” and I prefer this word. “Reweaving the ‘One Thread’ of the *Analects*, *Philosophy East and West* 40, no. 1 (1990): 29, doi:10.2307/1399547.

¹⁷⁶ Ivanhoe, 17.

Zhong 忠

Paul R. Goldin says the most “mechanical” translation of *zhong* is “loyalty.”¹⁷⁷ He explains that “throughout the imperial period, and in many Eastern Zhou contexts, *zhong* did indeed mean something very similar to loyalty. However, simply plugging in the word ‘loyalty’ every time one encounters *zhong* can lead to seriously incorrect translations, especially when dealing with texts from before the third century BCE [like the *Analects*].”¹⁷⁸ In trying to avoid incorrect translations, scholars have provided a wide range of translations for *zhong* such as: “doing one’s utmost,”¹⁷⁹ “dutifulness” or “dutiful,”¹⁸⁰ “fulfill one’s humanity,”¹⁸¹ and more complex renderings like “being honest with oneself in dealing with others.”¹⁸² It appears that *zhong* (like most terms in the *Analects*) needs increasingly long descriptions to make sense of it because it is predominately paired with other virtues, including *li*, *xin* 信, and, obviously, *shu*.

It is consistent to translate *zhong* as “loyalty” or “dutifulness” in passages where it is paired with *li* because one feature of *zhong* is “loyalty” to the patterns of *li*, dedication to upholding the duties prescribed by one’s roles and relationships. For example, Kongzi often invokes *zhong* in political contexts to inform us how good rulers and their ministers behave, such as in passage 3.19 when Kongzi is asked, “How should rulers employ their ministers, and how should ministers serve their lord?” Kongzi replies, “Rulers should employ their ministers by observing ritual propriety (*li*), and ministers should serve their lord by doing their utmost (*zhong*)” where, in this instance, “utmost” means doing their duties as ministers in accordance

¹⁷⁷ Paul R. Goldin, “When *Zhong* Does Not Mean ‘Loyalty,’” *Dao* (2008): doi:166, 10.1007/s11712-008-9064-y.

¹⁷⁸ Goldin, 165.

¹⁷⁹ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects*, 59.

¹⁸⁰ Slingerland, *Analects*, 237.

¹⁸¹ Simon Leys, *The Analects of Confucius* (Grapevine India, 2022), 72, Kindle.

¹⁸² Goldin, “When *Zhong* Does Not Mean ‘Loyalty,’” 165.

with the prescribed *li*.¹⁸³ These political connotations of *zhong* then extend to the general populous in that *zhong* means dutifully committing to whatever roles you have by practicing the appropriate *li* of those roles – e.g., “The ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, the son son.”¹⁸⁴ As Slingerland explains, a ruler would have “no need for some special technique or theory of ‘governing’ if “everyone would simply concentrate on conscientiously fulfilling their role-specific duties” (*zhong*) because that would make order “result naturally.”¹⁸⁵ A *zhong* person is loyal and trustworthy (*xin* 信) not because they are obedient to a ruler or superior, but to the “spirit of the *li*.”¹⁸⁶ They are reliably trustworthy because you know they will respect and practice *li*. If “*shu* helps to ensure the promotion of the interests of the other person,” not just oneself, who else could be trustworthy to do this but a person who is *zhong*?¹⁸⁷ Master Zeng provides himself as an example:

Daily I examine my person on three counts. In my undertaking on behalf of other people, have I failed to do my utmost (*zhong*)? In my interactions with colleagues and friends, have I failed to make good on my word (*xin*)? In what has been passed on to me [*li*], have I failed to carry it into practice?¹⁸⁸

Herbert Fingarette emphasizes that *zhong* has a strong connection to *xin* 信, generally translated as “making good on one’s word,”¹⁸⁹ and its related meaning is “being trustworthy.”¹⁹⁰ When these two meanings are combined, “they describe a person who is reliable and worthy of trust.”¹⁹¹ Fingarette’s interpretation of *zhong* integrates *xin* 信: “Let there always be good faith

¹⁸³ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 3.19.

¹⁸⁴ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 12.11.

¹⁸⁵ Slingerland, *Analects*, 130.

¹⁸⁶ Ivanhoe, “Reweaving,” 22.

¹⁸⁷ Chan, “Can *Shu* Be the One Word,” 518.

¹⁸⁸ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 1.5.

¹⁸⁹ Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 205.

¹⁹⁰ Ivanhoe, “Reweaving,” 21. Xunzi frequently pairs *zhong* with *xin*, significantly more than does Kongzi in the *Analects*.

¹⁹¹ Ivanhoe, “Reweaving,” 21.

and loyalty of one person to another, as specified for various circumstances and persons by the *li*; and let this always be conditioned by direct analogizing of self with other, rather than being solely a matter of conventions and rules and laws.”¹⁹² Note that loyalty here is to other persons, not to *li* itself. Hence Fingarette claims that in the *Analects* there is the presence of a hybrid concept of *zhong-xin* 信¹⁹³ that refers to a kind of “interpersonal good faith.” But Ivanhoe argues that Fingarette has misunderstood *xin* 信, causing him to misunderstand *zhong*. Ivanhoe argues that Fingarette’s interpretation “obscures the very specific and clear use of the term *Zhong*” because it “always means ‘doing one’s duty in the service to another’,”¹⁹⁴— that *zhong* is a loyalty to “the spirit of *li*,”¹⁹⁵ not to other persons.¹⁹⁶ Ivanhoe fails to realize, however, that the “good faith” Fingarette refers to is exactly *that*, a loyalty to the “spirit of *li*”: to have faith in each other that we will uphold the duty to each other to respect and practice *li*, conditioned by *shu*, is “doing one’s duty in the service to another.”¹⁹⁷ One who is *zhong* is “trustworthy” (*xin* 信) because one sincerely has the other’s best interests at heart, as is made evident through reliably practicing *li*, but not so rigidly that one fails to be insensitive to the other’s feelings and situation.

¹⁹² Herbert Fingarette, “Following the ‘One Thread’ of the *Analects*,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 47, no. 3 (1979): 397.

¹⁹³ *Analects* passages 1.4, 5.28, 7.24, 9.24 discuss *zhong* and *xin* 信 together.

¹⁹⁴ Ivanhoe, “Reweaving,” 21.

¹⁹⁵ Ivanhoe, “Reweaving,” 22.

¹⁹⁶ Van Norden admits that he does “not think that Ivanhoe disagrees with Fingarette as much as he thinks he does. Indeed, his disagreements could almost be seen as ‘friendly amendments’ to Fingarette’s position.” *Confucius and the Analects: New Essays*, ed. Bryan Van Norden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 230, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195133950.001.0001>, PDF eBook. It is unclear to me why Ivanhoe is so harsh on Fingarette considering the number of passages in the *Analects* discussing both terms together, particularly 9.25 where Kongzi says to take *zhong* and *xin* 信 as your “mainstay.”

¹⁹⁷ The quotation is Ivanhoe’s words, but I have appropriated them here to emphasize how Fingarette’s interpretation of *zhong* more accurately understands what doing one’s duty for another entails. Ivanhoe, “Reweave,” 21.

Fingarette's account of *zhong-xin* 信 helps inform Paul R. Goldin's translation of *zhong*.¹⁹⁸ Goldin explains that taking "into account the propinquity of *zhong* to both *shu*, 'reciprocity,' and *xin*, 'trustworthiness,' I propose the definition 'being honest with oneself in dealing with others' for *Zhong*."¹⁹⁹ He elaborates further that:

Zhong bespeaks a scrupulous self-analysis necessary to ensure the integrity of *shu*. Confucius tells us that we must relate to other people by taking ourselves as an analogy, by placing ourselves in the position of our comrades. However, this requires that we be vigilantly self-aware, lest we come to pretend that what is immediately and unreflectively advantageous to us is somehow advantageous to those whom we deal with.²⁰⁰

Ames notes that the *Shuowen* lexicon actually glosses *xin* 信 as *cheng* 誠 "acting sincerely and with integrity, and vice versa, glosses *cheng* as *xin*."²⁰¹ Being honest with oneself entails *xin* 信 and *cheng* such that when one enacts *shu*, imagining oneself in the place of another, one does so with integrity, sincerely taking into consideration other's feelings and situation. We can trust someone who does this because they act in "good-faith." And one can maintain this sense of good-faith in being attentive and responsive to impressions. When one misreads another person, or fails to practice *li* properly, and commits a behavior they did not like, one will acknowledge that person's response and try to make amends, thereby giving off an impression of care and concern that will help uphold "interpersonal good-faith." *Zhong* is the practice that maintains the integrity of *shu* such that individuals are inclined to continue trusting one another and feel confident that they can rely on each other. I will elaborate more on how *zhong* moderates *shu* below.

¹⁹⁸ Goldin explains that *zhong* "also tends to be associated with *xin* 信, 'trustworthiness'..." and he cites Fingarette, "Following the 'One Thread' of the *Analects*" as evidence. Goldin, "When *Zhong* Does Not Mean 'Loyalty'," 169.

¹⁹⁹ Goldin, 169.

²⁰⁰ Goldin, 170.

²⁰¹ Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 206.

Fingarette and Ivanhoe associate *zhong together with shu*, the “one-thread,” with the Golden-Rule, because if one likes it when others are dedicated to *li* and attentive and responsive to one’s emotions and situation, then one should return the favor to others, but they disagree on how *zhong* and *shu* individually contribute to the rule. It is primarily with conceptualizing *zhong* that they diverge, and this affects how both scholars understand the relationship between *zhong* and *shu*. Hence the relationship requires further investigation.

The Relationship Between *Zhong* and *Shu*: A Silver and Gold Problem

In the *Analects*, the silver-rule is most explicitly invoked whereas the golden-rule is less apparent or more implicit. To understand the relation between *zhong* and *shu*, it is helpful to consider how both rules feature. While *shu* includes both the silver-rule *and* cultivated empathy, in this section, I limit my analysis to focus on its silver-rule aspect in order to clarify the distinction between the silver and golden rule and how they relate to *zhong* and *shu*. This self-consciously narrow approach helps to illuminate how *zhong* is more closely associated with the golden-rule while *shu* is more associated with the silver-rule. This enables me to individually explicate the virtues more clearly, saving the discussion of the complex interplay between the virtues until later.

Feng Youlan (Fung Yu-Lan) understands *zhong* as representing the golden rule: “‘Do to others what you wish yourself.’ This is the positive aspect of the practice [*ren*] which was called by Confucius *zhong* or ‘conscientiousness to others.’”²⁰² Feng claims *shu* represents the silver-rule: “the negative aspect, which was called by Confucius *shu* or ‘altruism,’ is: ‘Do not do to others what you do not wish yourself.’”²⁰³ Ivanhoe rightly observes that *zhong* and *shu* together,

²⁰² Feng, *A short History of Chinese Philosophy*, trans., Derek Bodde (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1953), 43.

²⁰³ Feng, 43.

as a whole, represent the notion of “reversibility”—“that I should treat others as I would want to be treated by them, were we to exchange our positions.”²⁰⁴ But he objects to Feng’s claim that *zhong* represents the “positive” aspect because there is “not a single passage in the *Analects* which describes *zhong* as a case of reversibility, positive or negative,” and because he believes “there is simply no logical difference between the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ statements of the principle of reversibility.”²⁰⁵ Simply put, Ivanhoe thinks no real insights are gained by distinguishing the silver-rule from the golden; they imply the same thing. While it is true there is “not a single” passage that *explicitly* presents *zhong* as the golden-rule, I disagree with Ivanhoe and argue that *zhong* can be interpreted as a positive principle of reversibility (golden rule) which affects how it interacts with *shu*, and there is a “logical difference” between the positive and negative statements of the principle of reversibility that if realized, as Feng does, affects how *zhong* is understood.

Feng’s definition of *zhong* as “conscientiousness to others” is inspired by his interpretation of *Analects* 6.30: “Authoritative persons establish others in seeking to establish themselves and promote others in seeking to get there themselves. Correlating one’s conduct with those near at hand can be said to be the method of becoming an authoritative person [*ren*].”²⁰⁶ On the surface, this passage expresses a variant of the positive principle of reversibility in that if you want to improve yourself, you must first try to help others improve themselves—i.e., treat others as you want to be treated (Golden Rule). Under the surface it promotes an other-focused disposition that suggests one must be *sincerely* and dutifully (*zhong*) attentive and responsive to others’ emotions and concerns (*shu*), not just say that one is (one must be *xin*

²⁰⁴ Ivanhoe, “Reweaving,” 17.

²⁰⁵ Ivanhoe, “Reweaving,” 18.

²⁰⁶ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 6.30.

信).²⁰⁷ Let me explain how I inferred this from the passage. First, it is significant that the addressee of Kongzi's words is Zigong, a student who has a bad habit of looking "good" because he rigidly adheres to *li* but does not actually act good because he fails to temper his behavior with *shu*. That is, he does not make good on his word (*xin* 信), such as in *Analects* 5.12 where he says he practices *shu*, but Kongzi exclaims that it is "quite beyond" his reach.²⁰⁸ It is also telling that Kongzi reminds Zigong that "exemplary persons" (*junzi* 君子) "first accomplish what they are going to say, and only then say it."²⁰⁹ Zigong claims he correlates his conduct with those near him, but in reality he believes himself an exemplary model that others should learn from. Thus, he is not actually attentive or responsive to others.

Second, *xin* 信 is implicit in passage 6.30 because only one who "makes good on their word" is able to help other people grow and improve themselves. A person who lacks *xin* 信 lacks the ability to "establish" or "promote" others. Ames explains that *xin* 信 "as a habit of making good on one's word is a specific and concrete way to promote the credibility and trust that must ground all personal growth."²¹⁰ A person without *xin* 信 will thus struggle to help others:

The Master said, "I am not sure that anyone who does not make good on their word (*xin* 信) is viable as a person. If a large carriage does not have the pin for its yoke, or a small carriage does not have the pin for its crossbar, how can you drive them anywhere?"²¹¹

²⁰⁷ As Slingerland explains: "Many commentators see this exchange as an attempt to rein in excessive speculation on the part of Zigong and bring him back to the fundamentals of self-cultivation." Zigong has a bad habit of talking about things well beyond his reach – i.e., things he could never make good on. Slingerland, *Analects*, 63.

²⁰⁸ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 5.12. Leys explains that the passage can be read as Kongzi berating Zigong "for exaggerating his own moral attainment." In other words, in claiming that he wants to be *shu*, Zigong is suggesting that he actually is. Kongzi's response is basically that Zigong cannot make good on his word that he wants to be *shu* or is *shu*. Leys, *The Analects of Confucius*, 91.

²⁰⁹ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 2.13.

²¹⁰ Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 206.

²¹¹ Rosemont Jr., and Ames, *Analects* 2.22.

Xin 信 is the “linchpin of social relations and mutual support.”²¹² We can see why Feng associates 6.30 with *zhong* and the golden rule because one is only able to actively establish and promote others, to help others improve themselves, if one tries to become a better person by being “honest with oneself when dealing with others” (*zhong*), through “making good on one’s words” (*xin* 信).²¹³ That is, only a person who is *zhong-xin* 信 will be honest in their self-analysis about whether they are being *shu* or not. If one is not honest with oneself and believes one is *shu* when one is not, one will not be able to help others because one does not truly understand others and does not really have their best interests in mind. One may say one does, but one does not. To be fair, *shu* is exceedingly difficult to achieve, and many people striving to be “better” people do care and have others’ interests at heart, but just do so incompletely and unreliably. One must continually strive to *be shu* before one can legitimately claim that one reliably and consistently cares about others and has their interests at heart, and *zhong* helps keep one in check so that *shu* can be instantiated. Enacting the golden rule relies primarily on *zhong*, hence Feng’s association.

Feng provides no argument regarding why it matters that *zhong* is interpreted as a positive principle of reversibility (Golden Rule), but I here provide one. In *Analects* 6.30 *zhong* is implicitly aligned with being reliable and trustworthy, and being dedicated to *li*—do these things you want others to do to you and you will become established and promoted because you helped others become so first, and thereby influenced them to try to establish and promote

²¹² Slingerland, *Analects*, 15.

²¹³ In counterpoint to Feng, Jinhua Jia argues that “the entire 6.30 passage mentions *ren* four times and focuses on how to practice it without mentioning *zhong* at all, either explicitly or implicitly. Thus, the interpretation of this passage by Feng Youlan and others as referring to *zhong* is strange and unsold.” I might agree it is strange in that it needs a bit of interpretive work, but I think “unsold” goes too far. Jinhua Jia, “*Shu*-Considerateness and *Ren*-Humaneness: The Confucian Silver Rule and Golden Rule,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 58 (2024): 264, doi:10.1007/s10790-021-09879-x.

you.²¹⁴ Not doing what you do not want others to do to you restricts behavior, but it is a passive influence, and establishment and promotion especially require activity, a conscientious effort toward others. The reason this matters is because if *zhong* is only understood negatively, it severely restricts its ability to moderate *shu*, to prevent one's emotions from having free rein. There is a "logical difference" between the silver-rule and golden rule that must be understood in order to understand how *zhong* and *shu* function. *Zhong* represents positive analogical thinking (gold) that is necessary to moderate *shu*, and *shu* represents negative analogical thinking (silver) that is necessary to moderate *zhong*. Invoking both kinds of thinking ensures a harmonious practice of the virtues.²¹⁵

Feng's understanding of *zhong* is that it pushes one towards positive behaviors that might not be practiced otherwise if one only focuses on what kinds of behaviors one thinks should be restricted. The silver-rule of *shu* restricts behavior, but it does not strongly encourage positive changes to behavior, to go beyond the baseline requirements of moral behavior, unless it is paired with *zhong*. As Fingarette phrases it, *zhong* fills "the gap left by *shu* alone."²¹⁶ *Zhong* instills a mindset to seek out positive behaviors, and particularly ones that one would like if others did them – thus it is like the golden rule and is "logically" different than *shu*. Ivanhoe's assessment

²¹⁴ This interpretation admittedly sounds too transactional, but it must be remembered that for the Confucians, self-cultivation is also social-cultivation. The concern is not making sure one gets what one wants, but that the only way to improve oneself is to improve others. The Confucian conception of self is relational, meaning one's sense of self is irreducibly social—that one cannot understand one's self separate from one's roles and relationships. So again, 6.30 sounds transactional, but it is not if it is understood that self-cultivation is a social practice where one cannot improve oneself without improving the individuals one interacts with. And the intent to improve oneself is not driven by self-interest but by the desire to improve social relations.

²¹⁵ In contrast to my interpretation, Ivanhoe says *shu* is the "governor of *zhong*," which is much too strong of a way to characterize the relationship. Ivanhoe is right that *together zhong* and *shu* can function as the golden rule, but in conceptualizing *zhong* and *shu* as only the "negative golden rule" (negative principle of reversibility) he leaves little room for *zhong* to moderate *shu*, which conflicts with my interpretation of relationship between *zhong* and *shu*. Ivanhoe, "Reweaving," 26.

²¹⁶ Fingarette, "Following the 'One Thread' of the *Analects*," 388.

of Feng misses the real upshot of Feng's model that *zhong* and *shu* are similar in aim but different in method and result. This can be understood by analyzing Ivanhoe's example of how the golden rule and silver rule supposedly get at the same thing: "Any action I might recommend that one do would, under an alternative description, be something I would recommend that one avoid doing. For example, the imperative 'One should keep one's promises' goes over without remainder to the prohibition 'Do not break one's promises.'"²¹⁷ Both recommendations *aim* at the same behavioral result, but how they might affect one's actions and the consequences differ. To understand these differences, we have to study impressions.²¹⁸

Ivanhoe gets lost in the details by looking at the logical connection between what kinds of recommendations one would make as formatted through the golden rule or silver rule and fails to see the big picture: that it is the impression the golden rule gives off that makes it different from the silver rule. *Zhong* gives off a positive impression that one is concerned about others through upholding one's loyalty to them through a loyalty to *li* and, in its connection to *xin*, that one is reliable and trustworthy. *Shu*, if conceptualized as Ivanhoe does to predominately involve the silver rule, gives off a much more subtle impression that takes time for an audience member to notice because only after frequent interaction with an individual will you really notice what behaviors they refrain from. In certain situations, a quick positive impression caused by refraining from a behavior can be made, such as when an individual is insulted online yet they do not respond with hostility and insults in return. They are then perceived as patient, honorable, or

²¹⁷ Ivanhoe, "Reweaving," 18. Chan says positive and negative analogical thinking "philosophically speaking, express the same basic ideas..." Chan, "Can *Shu* Be the One Word," 508. I agree, they express the same "basic" ideas but when moving beyond the basic, they do not. I note some reservation in Chan's tone, but for the sake of her arguments she did not need to flesh it out.

²¹⁸ Jia agrees with me that "the negative formulation differs from the positive one in both content and dimension under the classical Confucian context..." but I provide a different strategy to defend this claim. Jia argues that *shu* only promotes the silver rule while *ren* promotes the golden rule. Jia does not like attempts such as mine to "elevate" the status of *Zhong*. Jia, "*Shu*-Considerateness and *Ren*-Humaneness," 258.

kind, to some extent. But the impression will still be much softer, less noticeable and impactful, than an individual who responds with noticeably kind, civil, words after being insulted.

Ivanhoe's promises example is clever because it is hard to see how they differ. Nonetheless, based on impressions, they are. Think about an individual who tells another, "I kept my promise." This gives off an impression of care, consideration, reliability, trustworthiness, and loyalty both to the individual and to the *li*, the social ritual of keeping promises. If someone says, "I didn't break my promise," this gives off a subtle, but different impression. It seems slightly more self-centered, that one's own emotional concerns were clearly a significant factor in the decision and that one was possibly struggling to keep the promise. Of course, both individuals could have felt exactly the same way but their method of communicating the upholding of a promise was different, their performance was different, and this has an effect on the consequences of their behavior, even though the *actual* result was technically the same (they both kept their promise). The recipient of the promise kept feels respected and cared for, while the recipient of the promise not broken feels less respected and less cared for, possibly even offended, depending on the context. The former gives off the impression of loyalty *to the other* where the latter gives off the impression of merely upholding *one's own* principles.²¹⁹

Ivanhoe's failure to understand Feng inhibits him from seeing how *zhong* can be interpreted as like the golden rule, that it can function to inspire and produce positive behavior that the silver-rule, the "negative principle of reversibility," alone does not. But something is not right here for how could practicing *shu* ever leave someone feeling less respected and less cared

²¹⁹ This seems like an odd result with respect to traditional, full conceptions of *shu*, but what I am trying to illuminate is that if *shu* is understood as *just* the silver-rule without emphasizing the role of empathy and without the moderating force of *zhong*, one is vulnerable to impressing on others as more concerned about one's own feelings than that of others. The point is that *zhong* and *shu* can only be fully understood and function properly when there is a balanced interplay between all aspects of the virtues. I shall elaborate on this point and explicate these aspects in the following pages.

for? It will not, as long as one works on being empathetic and moderates *shu* with *zhong*. *Shu*'s empathy aspect provides a necessary resource to aid the silver rule, and it needs *zhong* to keep both practices in check. Without *zhong*'s positive ability, *shu* cannot *reliably* function positively—i.e., one is vulnerable to committing behaviors others do not like although one was *trying* to treat others as one wants to be treated.

It is important to note before moving forward that I do not equate *shu* with the silver rule, nor *zhong* with the golden rule. Because Feng did not elaborate further, he is vulnerable to being read as equating them, but what I think he was doing was emphasizing the high degree of association each term has with either rule. *Zhong* and *shu* are the strands that work in interplay to become “one-thread,” and it is up to a moral practitioner to weave them together through a balancing act of practicing *zhong* and *shu* as an individual and a situation requires. One person's thread will not necessarily look like another's because we all stand in different positions in our moral development, have different behaviors we need to work on, and have different roles and relationships that require different strategies. We all must practice *zhong* and *shu* nonetheless, but how we moderate *zhong* with *shu* and moderate *shu* with *zhong* will differ.

Analogical Reasoning Needs Empathy, and Empathy Needs *Zhong*

The silver-rule is the foundation of *shu* because it is a clear and simple “principle”²²⁰ that can be used effectively in the early stages of one's moral development. An individual who lacks the skills to “read the room” well, and lacks the self-discipline to manage impressions well, can

²²⁰ Ames and Rosemont Jr. do not think “principle” is a good way to define any of Kongzi's ideas because, by definition, principles can exist “independent of situation.” *Analects*, 59. There are, they argue, no “absolute” truths or propositions in the *Analects*, or at least the Classical Chinese language makes their expression impossible. Avoiding making comment on those claims, I am inclined to agree that context and situation are so central to Confucian teachings that “principle” is an unfortunate word to use here, but I do think in the early stages of one's moral development, the silver-rule functions like a principle, or that it should, until one becomes more skillful and able to “read” one's audience well.

use their own feelings and standards as a baseline for the kinds of behaviors they find acceptable and permissible in social interactions. Sin Yee Chan calls this a “kind of *analogical thinking*: taking oneself as a measure when one decides how one should treat others.”²²¹ Focusing just on emotions for the moment, the silver-rule can be a powerful tool preventing one from committing various kinds of rude and anti-social behavior if one reflects on the fact that it does not feel good when others act towards oneself in those ways. If one reflects on this, one might realize that it is not only wrong to treat others in a way one does not like to be treated, but also hypocritical. The silver-rule helps one realize that it is not acceptable to make an exemption for oneself when it comes to anti-social behavior because it helps one think about how bad we feel when people act that way towards ourselves. The problem here is that attention still seems to be on how I feel more than on how others feel. The silver-rule needs empathetic understanding if *shu* is to function well as an “other-regarding” generosity, a “thoughtful and heartfelt deference to others in what we do.”²²²

D.C. Lau explains how the analogical thinking of the silver-rule combined with empathy works:

From this we can see that *shu* is the method of discovering what other people wish or do not wish done to them. The method consists in taking oneself—‘what is near at hand’—as an analogy and asking oneself what one would like or dislike were one in the position of the person at the receiving end.²²³

Here we see how we use our own feelings as a guide, but the attention is directed towards how others feel and their interests. Trying to “put oneself in the other’s place,” will increase the likelihood that one will enact the silver-rule properly and prevent one from making an exception

²²¹ Sin Yee Chan, “Can *Shu* be the One Word,” 507.

²²² Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 195.

²²³ D.C. Lau, *Confucius: The Analects* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 15-16.

for oneself by prioritizing one's own feelings. If one focuses more on how others feel than oneself, it can help one learn to be more attentive, receptive, and caring of others. *Shu* involves the emotional capacity to try to feel what others feel, as well as intellectual reasoning to try to understand *why* others feel as they do by analyzing their situation and social positioning—e.g., how do their roles and relations and the *li* involved affect the way they feel and think? The goal of *shu* is to become more sympathetic and receptive to others, both more compassionate and caring about how others feel, as well as better able to act in ways that are responsive and appropriate to others' interests and concerns. To accomplish this requires *zhong* because, as D.C. Lau argues, "having found out what the other person wants or does not want, whether we go on to do to him what we believe he wants and refrain from doing to him what we believe he does not want must depend on something other than *shu*."²²⁴ Being sympathetic and receptive entails not presuming that "one already knows what is most appropriate for someone else" in order to avoid impressing on others as "disrespectful and condescending."²²⁵ One "needs to be open and provisional, and to assume that deliberation on how to best grow a relationship can only be pursued through a careful consideration of the needs of this specific person and the possibilities of these specific circumstances."²²⁶ One must practice "being honest with oneself in dealing with others," and be loyal or dedicated to others through the practice of *li*. The empathetic capacity of *shu* is limited and potentially problematic if unmoderated by *zhong*.

For example, imagine a white man who has never had any close black friends, has never taken classes on race or on women's studies, but finds himself reading conversations on the

²²⁴ Lau, 16.

²²⁵ Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 198.

²²⁶ Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 198.

subreddit r/blackgirls.²²⁷ How much can this individual reasonably know about the women talking, and how well is he likely to be able to relate to them on discourses about living as a black woman, particularly in the United States? There are many things being discussed that he has never experienced before, and there are probably many behaviors the women dislike and complain about that, *to him*, do not sound that bad, such that he would not think of them as applicable to the silver-rule. Because he cannot relate to or empathize well with many of the things the women discuss, the women's descriptions of their experiences would not register in his mind the same way and he could easily misunderstand and misinterpret them— e.g., experiencing racism on social media,²²⁸ someone claiming “black women are kinda mean,”²²⁹ a discussion about black women in media being portrayed in stereotypes,²³⁰ etc. Because of his epistemological ignorance due to his identity and background, trying to be empathetic through analogical thinking in this situation would not be a dependable guide for moderating his words, should he want to join the discussion as a participant. We can imagine a situation where he might even try to be supportive or complimentary but ends up giving off impressions he did not intend to that result in the conversation going badly.

This example illuminates the shortcoming of the empathy aspect of *shu*. This individual is simply unable to *sufficiently* “put himself in their place” on many topics. He could spend weeks silently reading threads on this subreddit and still not be able to empathize very well with

²²⁷ This subreddit at the time of writing this has 33,081 members and describes itself as a “safe community for all Black girls on Reddit.” Accessed October 2024.

²²⁸ U/chaemolke, “I’m tired of this shit,” starts a discussion about experiencing racism on social media and feels that the companies who own the platforms are doing nothing to address it.

²²⁹ This is an actual post made on the subreddit. Posted by u/lonelyzo, “Black women are kinda mean?”

²³⁰ U/nobodysperfect285, “I’m Sick of Black Women in Media Being Portrayed in Stereotypical Ways.” It is not hard to imagine him wanting to be encouraging by saying “I’ve seen many newer shows that have portrayed black women very positively, and it’s great!” Some users might find that positive, but likely responses would be quite critical of his remark.

many of the women because he has never experienced much of what they have and never will, making it difficult, although not necessarily impossible, for him to use himself as a measure for how best to treat them. He must be honest with himself about his position in relation to them. What this means is that the emotional aspects of *shu*, the silver-rule and empathy, are not *alone* sufficient if one is to fully cultivate the virtue of *shu*. One must invoke *zhong* to be observant of one's environment, one's audience, and the etiquettes (*li*) around both, reflect on those factors and one's position in relation to them, and use this learned information to try to be as attentive, careful, and appropriate as possible in what one says and does (with additional concern for thinking about the impressions one might give off). In this case above, the reddit reader would have to use both emotional and intellectual reasoning to try to understand why the women posting feel the way they do, but he would be less reliant on emotion to guide his behavior because he cannot "feel" what they do. Ideally, he would have the situational awareness not to post on this subreddit in the first place because it is probably not the most appropriate place for him to make comments. But if he did want to comment on a post, he would need to engage a balancing act of emotional reflection and intellectual reasoning using the interplay of *zhong* and *shu* where, depending on the topic, he might be able to rely more on emotional insights that he can share—e.g., raising children, marriage, paying taxes—but he must reason about putting too much faith in his ability to emotionally understand and relate with the audience. He must be incredibly careful with what he says and how he says it—i.e., be sympathetic, receptive, and attentive to *li*.

Moderating *Shu* with *Zhong*

On its own, *shu* is vulnerable to enabling one to prioritize their own emotions and "personal preferences" through a misapplication of the silver-rule and "reversibility" (imagining

how one would feel in the place of another). Without tempering *shu* with *zhong*, one is at risk of thinking, in Ivanhoe's words, "What I like is right, and you should like it too."²³¹ One may truly believe that what one feels is "good" and therefore believe it good for others, or one may lack the ability to sufficiently understand one's audience because of some epistemic issue, such as I described above. Unlike those who use "being authentic" to justify being careless and self-centered, this is an error caused by "taking ourselves as an analogy, by placing ourselves in the position of our comrades" to try to relate to others.²³² Without being "vigilantly self-aware," we are at risk of coming to "pretend that what is immediately and unreflectively advantageous to *us* is somehow advantageous to those whom we deal with."²³³ We must frequently self-reflect and question our emotions and reasoning that are used in enacting *shu* in order to see if we are being honest in our assessment that what we want to say or do actually prioritizes concern for others and not just ourselves. We want to avoid our own emotions from causing us to inaccurately represent others' interests in our minds. *Zhong* helps prevent this from happening by pushing us to think more about positive behaviors we should be doing—i.e., *li*— more than merely behaviors we do not like and should not be doing.

For example, a parent disciplines their child not to merely make them obedient but ultimately for the child's benefit such that they they develop the necessary skills and self-respect to grow into well-behaved, properly functioning members of society. Simply put, genuine discipline, not mere punishment, is good for children. The parent believes this and usually enacts discipline for this reason, but sometimes a parent may incorrectly employ discipline because of misguided *shu*—e.g., being so concerned about the child's development they become too strict,

²³¹ Ivanhoe, "Reweaving," 23.

²³² Goldin, "When *Zhong* Does Not Mean 'Loyalty'," 170.

²³³ Goldin, 170.

harsh, and controlling (helicopter parent). In such cases of misapplied “discipline,” it is not *actually* discipline because the child gains no benefit from it, just emotional injury, but the parent may at the time believe it was truly discipline and beneficial to the child. We can imagine one’s parental comrade saying, “that was not necessary” or “what was that for?” But because of the misguided emotions of the acting parent, they may respond “they gotta learn” or simply get defensive when challenged because their emotions and reasoning are telling them that the “discipline” was appropriate. In this case, the parent failed to moderate *shu* with *zhong*. Unless the parent takes a moment to self-analyze and realize their mistake and make amends with the child, the parent has failed to be *zhong*, to be “honest with oneself in dealing with others,” and thus, failed to be *shu*.

Goldin asks us to consider *Analects* passage 5.19 to illuminate this understanding of *zhong* and how it moderates *shu*:

Zizhang inquired, “On the three occasions the Prime Minister Ziwen was made prime minister, there was no happiness in his face; on the three occasions when he was dismissed from office, there was no sense of loss in his face. As the outgoing prime minister, he made every effort to bring the incoming prime minister up to date on the affairs of the state. What do you think of him?” The Master replied, “He certainly did his utmost (*zhong* 忠) [though not anything more than that.]”²³⁴

Goldin explains that the “usual explanation is that Ziwen is a man who serves his ruler loyally [*zhong*], caring little about his personal fortunes,” but Goldin argues that Ziwen is *zhong* “because he does not allow his concern for his own welfare to affect his behavior toward others”—i.e., he thinks less about his own feelings and more about how others feel.²³⁵ Because Ziwen is *zhong* and can be fairly certain that he is not prioritizing his own emotions and allowing

²³⁴ Translation is by Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects*, and the bracketed words are by Goldin, “When *Zhong* Does Not Mean ‘Loyalty’,” 170.

²³⁵ Goldin, 170.

them to interfere with doing what is proper (*li*), he can definitively be *shu* and “treat his successor as he himself would want to be treated by the former prime minister, were he in his successor’s position.”²³⁶

Another passage that reflects this same narrative about *zhong* moderating *shu* is found in the *Mengzi*:

Mengzi said, “I heard your attendant Hu He say, While the king was sitting up in his hall, an ox was led past below. The king saw it and said, “Where is the ox going?” Hu He replied, “We are about to ritually anoint a bell with its blood.” The king said, “Spare it. I cannot bear its frightened appearance, like an innocent going to the execution ground.” Hu He replied, “So should we dispense with the anointing of the bell?” The king said, “How can that be dispensed with? Exchange it for a sheep.”²³⁷

Right away we see a tension between the King’s emotions and *li*, where the King empathizes (*shu*) with the Ox but his duty to *li* (*zhong*) means he cannot dispense with the ritual sacrifice. Mengzi praises the king for his feelings of benevolence and advises him to extend such feeling to his subjects, but he subtly challenges the King about why he thought it appropriate to exchange the Ox for a sheep. Mengzi answers for him by explaining that compassionate, moral people cannot bear seeing things suffer, and since the King did not see the sheep, he was fine letting it go to slaughter. Mengzi then advises that benevolent people should “stay out of the kitchen”—a sort of quip to remind the King who infrequently shows benevolence to his subjects that his rare tender-hearted feeling is a frequent feeling in exemplary people. We see how *zhong* moderates *shu* when Hu He gets nervous thinking the King might violate *li* and dispense with the ritual sacrifice altogether, but the King catches himself and realizes he cannot do that. And Mengzi advises him to stay away from the kitchen so that the *li* are not vulnerable in the future to being overridden by the King’s emotions. The King was quick to *zhong* and switched to a sheep, but

²³⁶ Goldin, 170.

²³⁷ Van Norden, *Mengzi* 1A7.4.

there was a moment where Hu He observed that the King was potentially going to allow his empathic emotions to interfere with doing what was ritually prescribed by the *li*—i.e., to fail to moderate *shu* with *zhong*. As Xunzi says: “If there is someone who shows respect [*shu*], and yet is not found agreeable by those he serves, it is because he is someone who does not display loyalty [*zhong*].”²³⁸

Mengzi’s advice to stay out the kitchen produces a challenging question though: If one’s emotional reactions to certain situations put one at risk of violating *li*, is it a realistic or ideal suggestion to avoid those situations altogether? For instance, because Social Media Networks (SMN) put one in emotionally charged conversations where one frequently feels anger and outrage, and cannot help but express it because one feels a moral obligation to defend one’s in-group, must one stay off SMN entirely? Or because it makes me sad seeing my child unhappy, and it is easy to keep her behaving well by giving her candy, should I always give her candy whenever I think I see bad behavior brewing? The answer is obviously no, but we must be creative and mindful about situations where we know that we are likely to lose emotional self-control and be inclined to eschew concern for *li*. In each case, one’s emotions, whether positive or negative, are produced by empathizing with others and motivate actions that are committed with good intentions, but the actions are not what is best for others or oneself. The King has others slaughter the animals because it must be done according to the beliefs and norms of the

²³⁸ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 137. Brackets are my own. The word here for respect is *jing* 敬. As I explain below, *jing* 敬 is connected with *zhong* in the *Shuowen* lexicon and means something like “respectfully attentive” referring to appropriately practicing *shu* by being *zhong*. But this would make the passage contradictory because one cannot be *zhong* and not *zhong*. Therefore, I have rendered “respect” here as *shu* because being “respectfully attentive” entails practicing *shu* in that one is attentive to another’s feelings and situation. And, as the Pleco dictionary notes, it refers mainly to “internally held sentiments.” Thus, the passage reads: If there is a ruler who is considerate of his or her subjects’ feelings and concerns (*shu*), yet is not found to be receptive to them and does not act appropriately, it is because the ruler failed to uphold the proper *li* and was not honest with him or herself in assessment of what he or she discovered through *shu* (not *zhong*).

time, he just needs to avoid seeing the animal beforehand. If one knows that certain SMN like X or Threads have many users and norms of behavior that enrage oneself, one should try to use other platforms or consciously remind oneself of what one is likely to see, try to stay calm, and avoid stooping down to the level of other nasty users. With my child, I must try not to take the easy way out with bribes, and I ought to let her bad behavior express itself so that I can work with her to find a solution that is beneficial for her mental and physical health.

Li and etiquette are standards one can reflect on to gauge whether one's emotions are interfering with one's ability to act in accordance with the demands of a particular situation. That is, if one's desire to commit an action is not in accordance with the appropriate *li* of a given situation (not *zhong*), it is a red flag that the behavior *might* not be in accordance with *shu* either. I emphasize "might" because, as I will explain below, *li* are not definitive guides—sometimes they need adjustment or creative reimagining. It is possible for one to self-analyze without thinking about *li* yet still come to the realization that one is failing to be *shu*, but close attention and dedication to *li* is usually quite a reliable guide to aid one in self-reflection. That said, a strong loyalty or dedication to the practice of *li* is not without risk. Without *shu* moderating *zhong*, one is vulnerable to becoming arrogant in thinking one is "trustworthy" because "I always do what's right" and over-confident in one's ability to treat others how they like to be treated because "I always follow the *li*."

Moderating *Zhong* with *Shu*

Being too emphatically dedicated and loyal to the practice of *li* puts one at risk of becoming like a "tool" or "vessel," "one of limited capacity or ability," such that one is unable to fully understand or practice *li* in a manner that is most beneficial to social relations. *Analects* 5.4 expresses this issue:

Zigong inquired, “And what do you think of me?” The Master replied, “You are a vessel.” Zigong asked, “What kind of a vessel?” The master replied, “You are a most precious and sacred kind of vessel.”

While it sounds like Kongzi is complimenting Zigong, he is not. Kongzi explicitly states that exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) are not “merely vessels,” and the vessels he refers to above are the *hu* and *lian*, “both archaic curiosities (no longer used in the *Zhou* rites [in Kongzi’s day and age] and extremely specialized (thus seldom used even during the *Xia* and *Shang* times); thus of “limited capacity.”²³⁹ As Ivanhoe explains, Zigong “could serve another in performing his duties according to ritual [*zhong*], but he lacked the moral sensitivity [*shu*] necessary for fine-tuning their application. He employed a kind of ‘cook book’ approach to the *li*.”²⁴⁰ The silver-rule and empathy aspects of *shu* help keep *zhong* in check so that one does not become rigid and insensitive to situations when one might need to modify *li* in creative ways. If one’s loyalty and commitment to *li* is tempered with *shu*, one will not treat *li* as inflexible rules one must have a strict fidelity to.²⁴¹ *Shu* enables one to be *zhong* to the “spirit of *li*,” to the “true” socio-ethical purpose of *li*.

For example, in *Analects* 15.42 Kongzi is “flexible” with *li* because of a larger concern for *shu*, to show care and consideration to another:

The blind Master of Music, Mian, had an interview with Confucius, and, on reaching the steps, the Master said, “Here are the steps,” and on reaching the mat, the Master said, “Here is the mat.” When they had all sat down together, the Master informed him who was present: “So-and-so is here, and so-and-so is there.” When Master of Music Mian had departed, Zizhang asked Confucius, “Is this the way (*dao* 道) that one should speak with a blind music master?” Confucius replied, “Indeed, this has been the traditional way of assisting a music master.”²⁴²

²³⁹ Slingerland, *Analects*, 40.

²⁴⁰ Ivanhoe, 27.

²⁴¹ As Slingerland translates *Analects* 4.15: “Master Zeng said, ‘All that the Master teaches amounts to nothing more than dutifulness (*zhong* 忠) tempered by understanding (*shu* 恕).”

²⁴² Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 15.42.

Slingerland explains that reading this passage as a pair with 15.41 where Kongzi says, “In expressing oneself, it is simply a matter of getting the point across,” the point is “no doubt the economy of expression of the Master [Kongzi], who puts aside the normal ritual behavior of a host in order to deftly and respectfully serve as a guide for the blind Music Master, without being overly fussy or condescending.”²⁴³ The keyword here is “normal” because Kongzi defends himself by saying his behavior is in accordance with the “traditional way.” While he did not technically commit to the “normal” way people behave in this situation, he accomplished what the *li* in general traditionally aim to accomplish, which is deference and care for the Music Master. Crudely put, there are two ways to skin a cat. Kongzi did not violate *li*, he simply modified it with *shu* in order to accomplish the real purpose of *li*, to help produce and maintain positive social relations and interactions—i.e., Kongzi acted in accordance with the “spirit of *li*.”

One way to further illuminate the importance of moderating *zhong* with *shu* and *shu* with *zhong* is to look at what kinds of impressions individuals who do and do not moderate look like. Taking 15.41 as an example again, what kind of impression would Kongzi have given off if he did not act as he did? Although historically unlikely, if Kongzi were to rigidly adhere to the by-the-book *li* that required the status hierarchies to be observed, no one in the room would have found Kongzi rude or inhospitable, but we can imagine that emotionally they could feel sympathy for the Music Master, and in their hearts “feel” that someone should probably help orientate the Music Master to the environment. In this case, Kongzi might impress on them as formally correct, but also cold-hearted. Hypothetically, Kongzi could impress on them as self-righteous and arrogant if we imagine Kongzi thinking to himself “These are the rules. If the

²⁴³ Slingerland, *Analects*, 190.

Music Master doesn't like it and my students think I'm stuffy and cold, so be it. They are wrong if they think it's ok to break the *li*. I know what's best for them." This would be failing to moderate *zhong* with *shu*. But what Kongzi actually did in the passage could have offended the Music Master and made him feel embarrassed because Kongzi technically gave him special treatment. He might feel that Kongzi disrespects him because he did not follow the *li* that the Music Master, and the students in the room, adhere to, that his blindness is not a good excuse to change the *li*. Kongzi appears to have avoided these negative outcomes because he skillfully read the room and knew his audience well enough from previous interactions to figure out how to act in a way that balanced *zhong* and *shu* most appropriately to the situation. Presumably, even if he were to offend the Music Master, Kongzi would have used *zhong* and *shu* to make amends and preserve positive relationships with everyone involved.

One who practices *shu* but moderates it with *zhong*, and practices *zhong* but moderates it with *shu*, is well primed to have positive social interactions. That said, the degree to which one needs to moderate the other is situational and dependent on one's current disposition—e.g., an individual who prioritizes authenticity will benefit more from giving more attention *li* and *shu* before they are able to effectively self-analyze and be “honest with oneself in dealing with others [*zhong*].” There is no clear-cut formula for one to implement, and therefore I emphasize *shu* as the predominant virtue one should try to cultivate. One should start with the silver-rule and trying to put oneself in another's place. The *li* aspect of *zhong* is essential in the early stages of one's moral development, but the self-analysis of “being honest with oneself” is more applicable to individuals further along. The ultimate goal is for one to balance one's approach to a given social interaction, using the emotional and intellectual abilities of *zhong* and *shu* as required. One must try to find middle way, a path that will enable one to act and impress on others as caring,

considerate, modest, and civil.²⁴⁴ One should aim to be like Sage King Shun, the master of the “middle way.” He was “‘ready to fall into line with others, giving up his way for theirs [when necessary and appropriate],’ because he knew that his cultivation and his learning would be ‘incomplete’ if he ‘could not connect with others’ and let ‘a single thread run through their humanity.’”²⁴⁵ By trying to cultivate the virtues of *shu* and *zhong* through the use of one’s emotions and intellect (heart *xin* 心) in a balanced, yet harmonized, way as Shun did, one has a “mindful” disposition.

Above I focused on *zhong* and *shu* behaviors and gave a few examples about impressions, but now I would like to discuss the kinds of impressions *zhong* and *shu* behavior give off explicitly. *Zhong* has two aspects that give off unique impressions: loyalty to *li* and being honest with oneself in dealing with others. *Shu* also has two aspects that give off unique impressions: the silver rule and empathy. I will address all four aspects, noting how they work together and where they need moderation. By focusing on impressions, it becomes all the clearer how essential it is to balance *zhong* and *shu*, and how both harmonize together to form a mindful disposition.

Impressions of *Zhong* and *Shu*

In being loyal and dedicated to the practice of *li* (*zhong*), one gives off an impression that one respects rules and the social rituals of one’s relationships and communities. It makes one come off as being concerned about civility, that one is primed to have an orderly and productive

²⁴⁴ Kongzi associated the “great” sage king Shun with *shu* by referring to his habit of “trying to find the middle [*zhong*], a balanced approach [to all kinds of human predicament].” Simon Leys, *The Analects of Confucius*, 74.

²⁴⁵ Leys, *Analects*, 73. It sounds like Shun was willing to easily give up his autonomy, but I will explain below that that is not what the Confucians are insisting upon. The point is that one needs to be more receptive to, and flexible with, others and not prioritize oneself.

discourse with another. But the significance of showing loyalty to *li* is that it makes one impress on others as being dedicated to them, to the relationship between oneself and another. For instance, the *li* moderating my relationship with my mother differ from the *li* of my friendships, and the *li* of my classroom differ from the *li* of the venue I haunt to see musicians perform, and different genres of musical performance will change the *li* dynamics at the venue as well—e.g., pushing and hitting each other is considered appropriate when a metal band performs but not so much when an acoustic indie rock band is performing. Being *zhong* entails that I am attentive to how these situational differences have socially prescribed behaviors that we all uphold together, but the empathy aspect of *shu* moderates *zhong* further such that I adjust my behavior according to the needs of the persons involved as individuals. *Shu* prevents my loyalty to *zhong* from impressing on others as self-righteous, inflexible, and robotic. *Shu* enables me to impress on others as human, as a sympathetic, receptive, caring individual who understands that what matters most about *li* is how it produces pro-social feeling and camaraderie, not how it creates order, although it of course does. Being *zhong* will make me impress on others as *xin* 信, as someone others can trust to be consistently well-behaved; I am perceived as reliable and as someone others can feel comfortable around because they know what to expect from me. If I violate *li* but do not apologize and make amends, this trust will be broken, my relationships will suffer, and I will impress on others as a “loose-cannon,” selfish and rude, or both. Being *zhong* can produce positive impressions itself, but it must be moderated with the empathy aspect of *shu* to keep it in check and be most effective at producing pro-social impressions.

For example, the being honest with oneself aspect of *zhong* makes one more attentive to how others respond to the impressions oneself gives off, but because we all have emotional and intellectual biases, it is often difficult to judge whether we are prioritizing our own emotions over

others' or simply "misreading" others such that what we think about what they feel or think is not accurate. Hence the impressions we think we are giving are often quite different than the ones we actually give off. Being honest with oneself requires *shu*—a heightened sensitivity to how others respond to our words and behaviors and using this attention to judge whether what we were originally thinking and feeling about others is accurate. Being honest with oneself is often only realized in retrospect, but if done properly with the help of *shu*, one will make the necessary adjustments to make amends and act accordingly to repair any error of judgment. Sometimes the silver rule can prevent one from erring in the first place, but if one is effective in empathizing (a challenge of its own), one can know before acting whether what one wants to say or do is honestly what is in the other's best interest and not prioritizing oneself.

The empathy aspect of *shu*, "putting oneself in the other's place," most clearly involves impression management. Ames explains that *shu* is a "fundamentally aesthetic disposition" where "one's 'person' emerges in the process of striving to optimize concrete roles and relations...."²⁴⁶ An individual who is sympathetic and receptive to another's feelings, concerns, and interests gives off the impressions of care, respect, and humaneness. By acknowledging and respecting another's unique individual existence, one shows others what kind of person oneself is. *Shu* "entails a recognition of the importance of 'deference' both in the sense of deferring action until we overcome uncertainty in our moral inquiry, and in the sense of taking under consideration the interests of others in that process."²⁴⁷ Because the ability to imaginatively put oneself in another's place is a difficult task that requires years of carefully examining others and studying *li*, one must be cautious and "slow to speak" so that one's words do not exceed one's

²⁴⁶ Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 196.

²⁴⁷ Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 196.

actions (*xin*).²⁴⁸ One who has such a disposition will impress on others as a “good listener” and as considerate, effectively impressing on others as “trustworthy” (*xin*) in that one’s empathy will be felt as sincere. For example, in an online debate, if I am slow to speak, am not quick to judge others, and carefully choose my words to reflect concern for how others feel and think, I will impress on others as sympathetic and empathetic. It will become known to others that I am trying my hardest to feel and understand what they do. This is an incredibly powerful pro-social impression because even when I err and misunderstand someone, they will not be inclined to feel disrespected and attack me but will likely correct me and continue to work with me. They believe that I am sympathetic to whatever they feel, and as long as I continue to be receptive and correct myself when I err, the discourse will remain civil and productive, both of us learning from one another and becoming better people in the process.

Ames explains that *shu* is “prompted by uncertainty—a perplexity in how to respond in a particular situation [to another]. It then requires a conjuring forth of how the alternative possibilities one can imaginatively construct might play themselves out.”²⁴⁹ Doing one’s utmost to respect the appropriate etiquette of an interaction and being attentive to the rules of behavior that apply to one’s role and relation to another are a method for aiding this imaginative process. But because *shu* also involves “affective inquiry—knowing through feeling—that requires a weighing of the circumstances with empathy and concern,” one must carefully analyze oneself, one’s own feelings, to make sure that one’s imaginings of how a social interaction might “play out” do not prioritize one’s own feelings and judgments about another. That is, is my assessment of a particular individual and what I think is best for them based on my own biases and interests, or have I “truly” taken their feelings and interests into account? It is quite easy to simply assume

²⁴⁸ Slingerland, *Analects*, 126.

²⁴⁹ Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics*, 196.

that “what is best for me is what is best for them” or “what I don’t like they won’t like either,” but we must be resistant to this quick thinking, slow down, and “assume that deliberation on how to best grow a relationship [and cultivate a positive social interaction] can only be pursued through careful consideration of the needs of this specific person and the possibilities of these specific circumstances.”²⁵⁰ Using *zhong* behavior to uphold the integrity of *shu* is required to act properly and give off the impressions that one is empathetic, sympathetic, and receptive.

The Heart (*xin* 心) Affects Style

Internalizing *zhong* and *shu* should alter our feelings and disposition deeply enough that the *style* of our moral performances express genuine consideration for others. The moral significance of style is reflected indirectly in what Xunzi means when he emphasizes that the “heart must know the Way, and only then will it approve of the Way.”²⁵¹ What Xunzi means is that morality is not merely *acting* in the right way, but that one must sincerely “feel” the social power of *shu* behavior and intellectually understand and value acting in a way that “conforms to the proper patterns [*li*]”—i.e., *zhong*.²⁵² One’s emotional and mental convictions can easily affect the style of how one behaves, so only one whose heart-and-mind (*xin*) approves of *zhong* and *shu* will act properly. For example, sometimes people can tell when someone is acting “insincerely.” This is especially the case when there is a known and acknowledged hostility between two individuals, yet they “act nice” by following the socially prescribed rules of etiquette that they

²⁵⁰ Ames, 198-199.

²⁵¹ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 228. “I say: the heart must know the Way, and only then will it approve of the Way. Only after it approves of the Way will it be able to keep to the Way and reject what is not the Way.”

²⁵² Hutton, *Xunzi*, 244. Bracket my own. I discussed above how this is not easy to do, nor is it reasonable to expect when one is just starting the process of moral self-cultivation. For the sake of civility, it is best that most of us at least attempt to practice the *li* and etiquettes of our communities even if our internal feelings do not necessarily match up with our expressions of self. As one becomes more mindful and *feels* the significance of following *li* and etiquette then one becomes even less likely to slip up and prioritize oneself over the needs of others and the social discourses we hold with them.

both approve of. Their internal feelings will affect the style of their performance such that they make it known to each other that they really do not want to be acting civilly and appropriately, but for social reasons, they go through with it anyway. Our internal states can strongly “flavor” our performances and affect how one impresses on others. We are not always aware or conscious of how our thoughts and feelings affect our body language, facial expressions, word choice, or tone of voice. It is for this reason that it matters whether one’s *xin* 心 strongly approves of *li* and etiquette or one just “goes with the flow,” such as *only* trying to avoid conflict or merely because of trained habit. The person who tries to be mindful by trying to cultivate the virtues of *zhong* and *shu* knows that one must truly approve of *li* with their *xin* 心 to produce the most positive social consequences. Even the most careful of us will sometimes err, but the more awareness one has of one’s feelings, and the more attention and concern one has for the context of an interaction, the less likely one is, even in error, to give off impressions that harm relationships and lead to conflicts. Through close attention to the aesthetics of one’s performances of *li*, one can continue to work on refining and improving oneself while simultaneously working to improve one’s relationships and society.²⁵³

When one practices a given social ritual or follows a proper rule of etiquette is highly dependent on situation, and so is *how* one performs. For example, if one’s body language or words project carelessness or a lack of seriousness, the intended effect of practicing a social ritual or form of etiquette is diminished. Built into CMIM is a heightened concern for style,

²⁵³ I can articulate two potential objections here that I will address more thoroughly in future work: (1) that a concern about style illuminates precisely why people value and prioritize authenticity because what Xunzi and I are proposing is to “act” and be “fake;” (2) if the goal is to *sincerely* approve of and practice *li*, how does one achieve this if their internal states are pushing them in the opposite direction because others are being rude and repulsive? I have addressed these concerns to some extent in this thesis, but they are worth extended responses.

because *how* one performs determines whether ritual and etiquette will improve social interaction and relations with others as they are designed to do. As Olberding explains:

It is *shu* that enables us to measure our responses to others in imaginative acts of analogical extension wherein the formal abstract demands of a circumstance are tempered by, and adjusted to, the particular features of those to whom we would respond. We imagine ourselves in the place of the other and thereby discover how to fit our behavior and demeanor to best address her particular needs. This capacity to fit ourselves to the particular features of others and the circumstances in which we act is what vouchsafes ritual as an effective mechanism for achieving accord with others. In the *li* we have a guide, but it is *shu* that saves the *li* from empty formalism, from operating as rigid, insensate rules.²⁵⁴

Zigong is an example of failing to be *shu* because he was so preoccupied with *appearing* moral by rigidly and stuffily practicing *li* that he failed to adapt *how* (the style) he performs *li* to the needs of others. He failed to temper *zhong* with *shu*. Style is extremely important but one must be careful not to misappropriate it merely to “look good” as Zigong does. Impressing on others as moral might improve social interactions and relations in the short-term, but unless one has genuine concern for others and is responsive to their needs, that impression will eventually dissipate in the long-term.

So, while attention to appearances can cause problems if misguided, one’s appearance and the impressions that appearance give off are an undeniably powerful social communicator that one can consciously or unconsciously utilize to produce pro-social or anti-social consequences. For example, even when an individual uses rude and hostile language to defend others, they are acting carelessly because they do not think about the *style* of their performance and what kind of impressions their behavior gives off—namely that it is permissible to use rude and hostile behavior when one thinks it justified. They lose the long game by focusing on the

²⁵⁴ Amy Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects: The Good Person is That*, 165-166.

short game. They fail to realize they are functioning as an example to other allies which might inspire them to act the same, and that their opponent will feel justified in acting rude and hostile in return. And while they may be trying to defend the thoughts and feelings of others, in using a rude or hostile style to do so, they can be perceived as prioritizing their own thoughts and feelings because they were unable or unwilling to practice self-restraint, to moderate themselves for the sake of others.²⁵⁵

The *Analects* shows Kongzi *usually* moderating his behavior and style of self-expression based on the needs of the individual he is speaking to.²⁵⁶ He is reliably mindful of his audience and adjusts his behavior as needed to achieve a positive interaction with enduring, positive social effects, never prioritizing his own emotions or interests besides in a few rare instances of exceptional circumstance—e.g., grieving the death of his beloved student Yan Hui.²⁵⁷ In this way

²⁵⁵ See Arash Azizi's opinion piece and analysis on the college campus protests about the Israeli Palestine conflict for thoughts in spirit with my own. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/protect-the-student-protesters-dont-idealize-them>. I am not suggesting that it is categorically wrong to use more aggressive tactics to combat social injustices, nor am I denying that there are times and places where such tactics may be necessary or the last resort. Generally, in political and social discourses where civility ought to be a goal, increasingly inflammatory language has not proven to be effective beyond fanning the flames of anger and resentment. Both sides of any debate must strive to be careful and considerate, and it is especially difficult to maintain composure when only one side is trying to be. This is why it is more important than ever that society as a whole must move towards concerns for convention, etiquette, and impression management, and move away from values, such as authenticity, that prime individuals for confrontation. As identity-based politics has become predominant, values like authenticity and "telling it like it is" have become commonplace, and every side to a debate seem to become more deeply entrenched in believing they are "right" because everything is interpreted as extremely personal. The attention is less on what is best for society and more on what is best for me. This makes having civil discourse difficult because every criticism or differing opinion is taken as a personal affront. Identity politics is not the issue per se, but as it has become the norm it is increasingly important that civility, etiquette, and impression management are focused on and practiced to help referee social and political debate.

²⁵⁶ I emphasize "usually" because there are passages in the *Analects* where Kongzi arguably comes off as a bit rude. It is nice that the text includes such examples because even Kongzi, who is treated by later generations of scholars as "moral sage," is presented as imperfect and prone to making mistakes, just like the rest of us. For example, in *Analects* 17.1 Kongzi is invited by Yang Huo to visit him but Kongzi does not oblige. This alone is not necessarily rude, but then Yang Huo sends a gift and Kongzi waits until Yang Huo is not home to go acknowledge it! While it is the case that Yang Huo is not someone Kongzi wants to associate with because of Huo's disreputable attempts to usurp the power of his masters, Kongzi's behavior is arguably a bit rude, nonetheless. 17.20 is similar in that Kongzi receives a messenger from Ru Bei informing Kongzi that he is invited to visit and Kongzi declines by saying he is ill. Totally fine, but when the messenger actually visits Kongzi's door, Kongzi purposefully plays music making sure the messenger can hear him. This is a *polite* insult making sure Ru Bei knows how Kongzi feels, but it is still a bit rude, although purposefully so.

²⁵⁷ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 11.10.

he functions as a moral exemplar, and we should be looking to moral exemplars to model ourselves after in our own communities. We should look to those who mindfully manage the impressions they give off such that they communicate genuine pro-social signals—i.e., those who practice CMIM. They have a kind of socially powerful *style*, a *de* (德), to influence others towards moral dispositions and behavior. As Kongzi says: “The exemplary person (*junzi* 君子) helps to bring out the best in others, but does not help to bring out the worst. The petty person [*xiaoren* 小人] does just the opposite.”²⁵⁸ *De* is the power to bring out the best in others.

***De* 德 and Moral Impression Management Exemplars**

Eric Hutton explains *de*, sufficiently generalized, as follows:

The term *de* refers primarily to a kind of power to sway others, win them over to one’s side, and have them do one’s bidding. In the *Xunzi*, as in many other Confucian texts, this power is conceived as arising (almost) exclusively from being a good person, and so *de* comes, by extension, to refer as well to those good traits that give rise to this power, which is why *de* is translated here as “virtue.”²⁵⁹

I say this definition is “sufficiently generalized” because it presents *de* in a direct manner that is accurate to the texts, highlighting that the prioritized audience of the Confucian classics were rulers. Although the language of trying to get people to “do one’s bidding” is more appropriate when thinking about those with political power, everyone manages impressions to try to influence others’ thoughts and emotions, and to get them to perceive oneself as one wishes to be perceived. While Goffman emphasized how this relates to one’s sense of self and identity, implicit in the practice of impression management are the goals of trying to sway others to one’s side and encourage them to act how we want them to act. For example, if I want someone to see

²⁵⁸ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 12.16.

²⁵⁹ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 345.

me as a trustworthy person, I try to impress on them as such so that I can use that trust for various reasons, whether it be to borrow money, get them to be a reliable source of aid when I need it, or even to gather more secretive information about others that I can then exploit. One who is skilled at getting individuals to perceive oneself as one wants has *de*, but it is a *de* that can be used for moral and immoral reasons. Therefore, the Confucians adopted *de* to refer to people who exclusively *act* “good.” One does not have *moral de* just because one appears good and is able to convince people that one is good. One has *de* if one is mindful, striving to cultivate the virtue of *shu*, and is *zhong* in practicing *li*. Such an individual is truly attentive to the needs and concerns of others, and through this, is able to influence others towards moral behavior. This is why in the Confucian texts, individuals who appear good, but really are not, are called “thieves of *de*” because they abuse and exploit their skilled ability to appear “good” as a power to manipulate others for selfish reasons.²⁶⁰

This is where things get tricky, though, because the Confucian texts acknowledge the importance of appearance, style, and impressions, but they must be backed up with sincere moral feeling and behavior. As *li* function as the guidelines for how we are to act, it becomes difficult to see how in the early stages of learning and development one will not at some point be a “thief of *de*” because one might not “sincerely” feel the emotions that are supposed to be expressed in the practice of *li*. Sometimes Kongzi seems to suggest that if one does not feel appropriately, it might be better for one not participate in a given social ritual,²⁶¹ but Xunzi hammers the

²⁶⁰ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 17.13.

²⁶¹ In Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 3.4 Kongzi claims it is “better to express real grief than to worry over formal details,” which could be interpreted to mean that one’s emotions and disposition matter more than *li* itself. He is not saying that *li* are irrelevant or can be circumvented, but that there is some flexibility in how they are practiced. We can imagine Kongzi being annoyed with someone who shows up to a funeral wearing informal attire but is heard saying comforting things to others and seems genuinely upset. Kongzi would likely say to them, “I’m glad you came,” because their being there to support the community is what matters most. If they show up in formal attire but

importance of *li*, suggesting that practicing *li* should be a priority no matter how one feels.

However, both Kongzi and Xunzi are hopeful that if one strongly commits to the practice of *li*, one will eventually understand and *feel* the social importance of why they are doing it.²⁶²

Slingerland describes Kongzi's and Xunzi's strategies as follows: "Confucius's strategy seems to be an injunction to just keep plugging away; try to pay attention and see the point, and eventually the love [for *li*] will come. Xunzi makes this even more explicit—he doesn't even require the initial enthusiasm. Just grind away, he says, and the love for learning will be born, trust me. Really."²⁶³ Slingerland thinks it potentially dangerous to suggest one just keep "plugging away" because it is "going to result in a world full of hypocritical poseurs, pretending to be committed to public values but really just after their own private gain."²⁶⁴ This dangerous consequence can be averted, though, if one is dedicated to *li* in a *zhong* way yet is careful to moderate *zhong* with *shu*. The strategy of "plugging away" in practicing *li* illuminates the power of balancing the emotional and intellectual aspects of *shu* because if one's emotions are unreliable at first, one's ability to reason and adapt to social situations through attention to *li* (*zhong*) can help guide one's behavior until the appropriate emotions are felt, until *shu* can be fully realized and be in harmony with *zhong*. One must keep "plugging away" not just at *zhong*, but also *shu*. This is what it means to be "mindful."

The reason this worry about sincerity and wanting to avoid being a "thief of *de*" matters is because CMIM is ultimately about appearances and style. I do not mean merely physical

are heard talking loudly and laughing in the back and do not seem to feel anything towards the lost one or their community, Kongzi would probably prefer that they never came. They failed to understand or respect what the funeral rituals mean, so it would be better if they did not even try to participate.

²⁶² Slingerland notes how some passages of the *Analects* emphasize "substance over cultural form" while others have "form being stressed over substance." Slingerland, *Analects*, 18.

²⁶³ Edward Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try* (New York: Broadway Books, 2014), 81.

²⁶⁴ Slingerland, *Trying Not to Try*, 81.

appearance, such as how one dresses and composes oneself, although this is a relevant part, but how one “comes off.”²⁶⁵ One who *truly* acts morally gives off impressions that one is “good,” so good in fact that others believe it, granting one the power (*de*) to influence others to act good. A “thief of *de*,” on the other hand, consciously and actively tries to manipulate others to thinking one is “good” in order to gain the power that *de* wields, but for selfish reasons. Taking Zigong for example again, he is not a thief, although he is overly concerned with appearing good more so than actually being good, because his intent is *not* to manipulate others, not to trick them so that he can have power over them. He also does not seem actively or consciously aware that his prioritizing appearance is distracting him from acting properly. Intent does matter to some extent for the Confucians, it seems, although it is one’s actions that matter more. One is a “thief of *de*” if one *purposefully* manipulates others through impression management to gain the same social power that true moral wielders of *de* have. *Moral* impression management entails that one attempts to be mindful in the impressions given and given off with the goal that one comes off as a respectful, attentive, and caring individual to inspire others to do the same. The way these genuine impressions are produced is through sincerely *acting* morally, not just “glib speech” and “insinuating appearances.”²⁶⁶

On one side of the spectrum are individuals who purposefully curate an “insinuating appearance” and try to use it to exploit others, and on the other side are those who are careful and attentive to how they might make others feel and aim to influence them towards pro-social feeling. Zigong (and really all of us) fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, as do people who prioritize authenticity. They are not necessarily manipulative like “thieves of *de*,” but their

²⁶⁵ The contemporary idiom, used frequently online, is one’s “vibe.”

²⁶⁶ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 1.3

carelessness has made them unable to fully realize and respect the power of *de* and CMIM. The concern for “being true” to oneself and prioritizing one’s own feelings makes one more likely to not fully acknowledge or see how one’s actions makes others feel. Or one might realize how one makes others feel, but because authenticity is so culturally prized, one feels justified in putting one’s own feelings ahead of others. For example, the “fuck your feelings” crowd frame themselves as “authentic” in claiming they prioritize “facts over feelings,” and they exploit this framing to try to garner credibility, but in “fact” they just believe what they feel is more legitimate than what others feel and therefore should take priority.²⁶⁷ I am not claiming it is never permissible to prioritize oneself or that there are no situations where self-prioritization is necessary for self-defense, but that having a general disposition to do so is dangerous for it makes it more likely that one will act or speak carelessly. Prioritizing authenticity creates “blind spots” where one might not see when and how one’s behavior hurts others and one’s relationships, or produces bad social discourses, or it makes one simply not care if this happens.

A person who has *de* practices CMIM well because they have fully cultivated *zhong* and *shu*, a mindful disposition, and are therefore able to cultivate healthy relations with others. An individual with this power becomes a moral exemplar that others *want* to try to emulate. A person who is highly skilled at CMIM is not only someone we *ought* to try to emulate, but is so attractive that we will *want* to be like them, so long as our values are not skewed by individualistic goals, such as authenticity, that make it difficult for us to see the beauty of someone who is able cultivate positive social interactions. As Olberding explains: “While

²⁶⁷ Sun-ha Hong refers to this phenomenon as the “affective weaponization of facts and reason.” She analyzes the “techniques of authentication” the “fuck your feelings” influencers “are helping pioneer and normalize: specifically, fact signaling as a vocal and performative commitment to the *idea of Facts and Reason* as a reliable source of credibility.” Sun-ha Hong, “Fuck Your Feelings’: The Affective Weaponization of Facts and Reason,” in *Affective Politics of Digital Media*, ed. Megan Boler and Elizabeth Davis (New York London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 87, eBook ISBN: 9781003052272.

interpretations of “*de*” vary, its use as a moral term in the *Analects* unambiguously suggests the charismatic power of the good person to attract and inspire others, to influence them without coercion to follow the model the good person offers.”²⁶⁸

The attractiveness and influential power (*de*) of a skilled practitioner of moral impression management is made apparent in *Analects* 2.3 with a little interpretive work: “The Master said: “Lead the people with administrative injunctions (*zheng* 政) and keep them orderly with penal law (*xing* 刑), and they will avoid punishments but will be without a sense of shame. Lead them with excellence (*de* 德) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves.”²⁶⁹ The first part straightforwardly explains that if a ruler uses law and punishments to keep people in order they will do so just because they want to avoid getting in trouble, but they will not *feel* bad for their misbehavior and would still likely act badly if they could get away with it. The second part is generally interpreted as condoning a subtle style of ruling and praising the power of *li* to shape people’s behavior through a communal process of regulating each other. The passage does not explicitly flesh out the “ethico-aesthetic” sensibilities of this exemplary ruler’s *de*, so I will try to.²⁷⁰ The key to my understanding of the passage is *feeling shame*.

A mindful person who is attentive and careful with the impressions they give off will feel ashamed when they make a mistake and offend someone, cause a conflict, or unnecessarily hurt someone’s feelings. One who is mindful about how they make others feel inevitably feels

²⁶⁸ Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects*, 86.

²⁶⁹ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 2.3.

²⁷⁰ “On my reading, the *li* do not explain the *Analects*’ commitment to an ethico-aesthetic sensibility, but instead are the principal product of this sensibility. That is, there exists some prior union of the moral and aesthetic that the *li* aim to capture, and this prior union is reflective of immediate and brute experience of exemplars.” Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects*, 93.

ashamed more often than those who are careless. Most people *do* notice when they make someone feel ashamed, though, and if the original impression management error was not severe, one might feel ashamed for making another person feel ashamed. At the very least, when one registers shame on the face or body language of one's interlocutor, even if it does not make oneself feel ashamed, it is likely to at least make one feel some degree of sympathy or compassion compared to if one's interlocutor showed no shame. So, if a ruler leads with *de* and observes *li*, how does this make the ruler appear or "come off" to his or her subjects? Ultimately it shows the subjects that the ruler not only respects them, but also cares about how he or she makes them feel. This described ruler would feel ashamed with themselves when they make an error and practice *li* incorrectly and would feel ashamed for making their subjects feel negative. Built into *li* is the concern for others and for positive social interaction, so in their dedication to *li* (*zhong*), the ruler has already given off quite a powerful pro-social impression. When a "good" ruler errs, they will quickly feel ashamed and make that evident to their subjects, which helps generate respect and concern for the ruler because it is evident to the subjects that the ruler cares about them. When the ruler gives off the impression of being ashamed and remorseful for doing wrong, the subjects will more likely feel ashamed and "bad" when they do wrong themselves because we generally feel that way when we hurt, offend, or wrong a person we believe cares about us. And the ruler being an exemplar, the subjects will also feel ashamed when they wrong anyone, not just the ruler, because they have violated the ruler's norms of behavior, a figure they look up to and try to model themselves after. Hence Xunzi says exemplary persons are "mother and father to the people."²⁷¹ Assuming one has "good" parents, if one has proper respect for them

²⁷¹ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 75.

(*xiao* 孝), one will feel ashamed and bad when failing to live up to their standards, and parents will feel the same will they fail to uphold the standards of being a good parent.²⁷²

This big picture between ruler and subjects might appear improbable to contemporary audiences, but we can still apply this model on a smaller scale to think about the interplay in everyday social interactions where individuals feel that they care about each other. The only way this care can be expressed is through the kinds of impressions given and given off. One who respects etiquette and practices *li* in a *zhong* manner such that one feels ashamed when making an error because of bad mood or accident, is more likely to have friendly interactions and healthy relationships. There is great social power (*de*) in being a caring, mindful, person who makes that care apparent through practicing CMIM. A mindful person makes friends with like-minded people, and in a harmonious relationship where individuals care about each other, the relationship functions beautifully and even functions as a model for others, as its beauty is hard to ignore.²⁷³ This might sound mawkish, but we all know this beautiful feeling with our close friends, and we even feel it when we observe those kinds of friendships in film and shows. The Confucians would say the feeling is observed in proper musical performance when the instruments and their notes harmonize: “The Master said of the *shao* music [beautifully harmonized music played in the ancient state of Qi] that it is both superbly beautiful (*mei* 美) and

²⁷² *Xiao* is a Confucian term that explicitly refers to “filial piety” not just proper respect in general. That said, *xiao* is the starting model one learns from in one’s journey to learn how to respect and treat others properly. Once understood, it is to be “extended” outwardly to all members of one’s community such that we treat all members of our community as family members to some extent. A remnant of this lesson still exists today in China and in cultures where Confucianism had historical influence, such that in those places it is respectful to refer to non-family members in familial terms, even if strangers – e.g., a stranger that appears too old to be like a brother but young enough that they are not like a grandfather can be called “uncle.” A girl or boy much younger than oneself can be called “little sister” and “little brother” respectively.

²⁷³ *Analects* 12.24: “Master Zeng said, “The gentleman acquires friends by means of cultural refinement, and then relies upon his friends for support in becoming Good.” Slingerland translation.

superbly felicitous (*shan* 善) [‘productive of good relationships’].”²⁷⁴ That is the *music* we ought to want to play or at least listen to. But like good music, finding harmony requires balancing the play of instruments and vocals such that one does not dominate the sonic field and overpower the others. One may have superb playing skills or an incredible voice, but one must be restrained so that harmonization can be made possible.

The conception of personhood in the Confucian tradition is radically social, such that there is no moment where one is not influencing others, or being influenced by others, in “good” and “bad” ways. Hence Kongzi recommends to “not have as a friend anyone who is not as good as you are.”²⁷⁵ As Xunzi says: “In learning, nothing is more expedient than to draw near to the right person.”²⁷⁶ Morally exemplary persons (*junzi* 君子) are who we should be drawn to, but because they can expediently influence our behavior, they have a responsibility to not “overstep the boundaries.”²⁷⁷ That is, an exemplary person must be extremely careful to monitor how their “goodness” is expressed outwardly to others such that one does not “come off” as arrogant or self-righteous—that is, not giving off a poor impression. A moral exemplar, like anyone else, must continually manage the impressions they give off while simultaneously being attentive and responsive to the impressions others give off so that they remain flexible and adaptive to the always changing needs of others. If one becomes too confident in one’s ability as a “moral exemplar,” one runs the risk of failing to moderate *shu* and *zhong* or *zhong* with *shu*. The goal is

²⁷⁴ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 3.25. Brackets are my own, but the latter contains how Ames and Rosemont Jr., define what *shan* means in the passage. *Analects*, 236.

²⁷⁵ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 1.8

²⁷⁶ Hutton, *Xunzi*, 6.

²⁷⁷ It was not until Kongzi was the ripe old age of seventy that he developed the ability to trust himself enough to allow his emotions to safely guide his behavior. By this point he had habitually practiced *li* so much, and so well understood the *li*, that his emotions were always attuned to *li* and the concerns of others. But this passage assumes the reader conceives of Kongzi as not just a moral exemplar, but as like a “sage.” Most of us, sadly, will never reach this level of skill, but we can still strive to be like Kongzi.

to become like the “North Star”: “The Master said: ‘Governing with excellence (*de*) can be compared to being the North Star: the North Star dwells in its place, and the multitude of stars pay it tribute.’”²⁷⁸

A person who practices CMIM is like the North Star, and by simply being considerate, attentive, and respectful towards others, one is able to garner their respect and function as a role model and guide. The North Star does not even have to *do* much but “remain in its place” to achieve the homage of others. The meaning of this is apparent in *Analects* 1.10:

Ziqin asked Zigong: “When the Master arrives in a particular state and needs to learn how it is being governed, does he seek out this information or is it offered to him?” Zigong replied: “The Master gets all he needs by being cordial, proper, deferential, frugal [restrained], and unassuming. Perhaps this way of seeking information is somewhat different from how others go about it.”²⁷⁹

All Kongzi had to do to gain information (which was no little feat) was be unimposing and polite—to be mindful. It is not that he did nothing, or that what he did was insignificant, but that he gave off the impression of restraint and effortless receptivity. Not only does Kongzi give off a pro-social impression by practicing good etiquette in the first place, the restrained *style* of his performance enhances the impression even more. One attains a radical social power (*de*) in being mindful and restrained in practicing CMIM, but holding onto this power is extremely difficult to do. The positive consequences of being mindful and practicing CMIM are instant but maintaining such a disposition is quite difficult, even for a moral exemplar.

Becoming a CMIM exemplar is mostly an ideal, but it is still a goal we should aim for by working on being mindful through *zhong* and *shu*, and practicing CMIM in stages. For most individuals, the beginning stage involves practicing the silver-rule and showing loyalty and

²⁷⁸ Rosemont and Ames, *Analects* 2.1.

²⁷⁹ Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 1.10. Brackets are mine.

trustworthiness to others through the social prescriptions of *li*. The next stage involves trying to be more empathetic to others and being honest with oneself in one's dealings with others. These four practices require a balanced approach where one practice can moderate the other, and when done so properly, one will become a harmonious member of society. Every individual has a unique temperament and disposition, so which behaviors one needs to focus on and moderate will differ depending on that and one's social situation. These stages are not absolute, but reflect a general guideline—e.g., some individuals are already quite empathetic but fail to effectively self-reflect and thus fail to notice when appropriately practicing *li* should be the priority (failing to moderate *shu* with *zhong*). Some individuals are too rigid in their adherence to *li*, and may practice the silver-rule well, but lack the necessary empathy to moderate their behavior to the needs of the situation and others (failing to moderate the honesty with oneself aspect of *zhong* with the empathy aspect of *shu*.) Careful attention to how one impresses on others, and being receptive to this input, is how one can figure out what one needs to improve on to become increasingly mindful, but only an individual *trying* to be mindful will practice CMIM.

Mindfulness and CMIM go hand in hand and reinforce each other through the conscious effort to morally improve oneself and improve one's social relations and interactions. The final stage of CMIM involves attaining *de*. Only the most skilled at CMIM attain this power, and if they consistently and reliably practice it, they become a moral exemplar for the rest of us to learn from and try to emulate. Most of us will never achieve this stage, but it does not ultimately matter so long as we try to be mindful and practice CMIM anyway. By doing so, we can temporarily become *like* moral exemplars, and our everyday social interactions from the most mundane to the most important will dramatically improve, as will our relationships with everyone in our lives.

Conclusion

The importance of CMIM for cultivating fruitful relationships cannot be overstated. I have acknowledged how we all manage impressions, but we must move beyond the mere concern for how people “see” us and become more attentive to how our self-presentations and expressions of self affect other people. When one becomes more concerned and attentive to how one impresses on others and how one makes others feel, as well as receptive to the responses of others to one’s impressions, one is practicing normative impression management. I then expanded upon this model, showing how the development of a mindful disposition through the cultivation of the virtues of *zhong* and *shu* entails a heightened concern for the social consequences of the impressions one gives and gives off—this is practicing Confucian Moral Impression Management (CMIM). CMIM is moral because it entails a conscious and purposeful effort to impress on others as a “good” person, as someone who respects the social norms, rituals, and etiquettes (*li*) of one’s communities, cares about how others feel, and has the desire to cultivate and maintain positive social relations. The goal of CMIM is not to merely appear “good,” but to impress on others as someone ready and willing to have civil discourses with the mindset to improve society through each and every social interaction one partakes in. By being mindful and practicing CMIM one prioritizes concern for others over oneself, not to the extent that one loses autonomy and self-respect, but to avoid impressing on others as rude, self-centered, and individualistic—all traits that are not conducive to the betterment of oneself, one’s relationships, or society. It is particularly this concern for autonomy and individualistic values that makes the widespread practice of normative impression management difficult to achieve. The cultural over-valuing and over-prioritization of “authenticity” in the United States strongly conflicts with the values and practices entailed in the mindful practice of CMIM.

Impressing on others as “authentic” is a predominant concern in U.S. culture. The consequences of this concern are numerous, but the predominant issues are that some use claims to authenticity to try to justify rude and nasty behavior, and authenticity is often held as a standard to judge others, where being criticized as “inauthentic” is socially damning. Because of this over-valuing and over-prioritization of authenticity, concern for etiquette is often eschewed because it is perceived as “inauthentic,” and being blunt, “brutally honest,” and brash are praised regardless of the negative social consequences such behavior may create. In such a culture, normative impression management is not likely to be practiced, especially since non-normative impression management itself is questioned and challenged as entailing acting “fake” and inauthentic. In a culture where one gains social capital by impressing on others as authentic, concerns for etiquette, civility, and kindness are under-valued and under-prioritized, resulting in detrimental social consequences where rudeness and aggressive or hostile behavior are normalized. This is particularly a problem in online spaces, which is a significant problem because our social lives are increasingly lived online. Normatively managing impressions is already difficult enough offline, but it is even more difficult online. This is why a key area for my future research is how to incorporate CMIM into online spaces. I now offer a short discussion of the problems social media networks (SMN) pose to CMIM and how CMIM can possibly help improve online social interactions. This analysis serves to encapsulate the overall thesis of this dissertation while presenting a preview of how CMIM can apply to our everyday social lives and hopefully improve them.

There are certain structural elements of social media networks (SMN) scholars have targeted for making the application of Confucian ethical practice difficult, and by extension, pose threats

to the practice of CMIM.²⁸⁰ These structural elements *do* create some challenges for implementing Confucian ideals into online social interaction, and for the ability to have positive interactions generally. Like most social problems, solutions can be achieved through changing the institutionalized and structural conditions of an environment but, as Confucian teachings emphasize, real social change and improvement can also be achieved through individual self-cultivation. A significant literature on the negative aspects of social media networks (SMN) focuses on the addictive nature of these networks, observing that individuals, particularly adolescents, spend too much time online and not enough time offline.²⁸¹ Much is written about negative and aggressive behaviors online like trolling and cyber-bullying,²⁸² and there is an abundance of articles and books about social media etiquette in relation to business and medical ethics, but there is much less scholarship explicitly discussing social ritual and etiquette in everyday online social discourse from a philosophical, psychological, or sociological

²⁸⁰ Mary I. Bockover, "Confucian Values and the Internet: A Potential Conflict," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 30, no. 2 (2003): 159-179, doi:10.1111/1540-6253.00112. Sarah Mattice, "Perspectives from China: Social Media and Living Well in a Chinese Context," in *Social Media and Living Well* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 121-140. Pak-hang Wong, "Confucian Social Media: An Oxymoron?" *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 12 (2013): 283-296, doi:10.1007/s11712-013-9329-y. Tom Wang, "Designing Confucian Conscience into Social Networks," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 51, no. 2 (2016): 239-256, <https://doi.org/10.1111/zygo.12254>. The structural issues in question are context collapse, invisible audiences, and the line between public and private. I discuss these more below.

²⁸¹ Silvia Casale, Gulia Fiovaranti, and Scott Caplin, "Online Disinhibition: Precursors and Outcomes," *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications* 27, no. 4 (2015): 170-177, <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1027/1864-1105/a000136>.

²⁸² E.g., Justin Chong et al., "Anyone Can Become a Troll: Causes of Trolling Behavior in Online Discussions." Sara Polak and Daniel Trotter, eds. *Violence and Trolling on Social Media: History, Affect, and Effects of Online Vitriol* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1b0fvrm>.

perspective.²⁸³ There is even less literature making normative claims about the topic.²⁸⁴ In the surprisingly little literature on Confucianism and SMN the two phenomena most blamed for making it difficult if not impossible to implement Confucian ethical standards of social interaction into online spaces are the perception of anonymity with invisible audiences and “context collapse.”²⁸⁵

Jennifer (M.I) Loh and Micheal James Walsh nicely summarize what invisible audiences and context collapse are, and what they entail:

According to David and Jurgenson, individuals communicating online can adopt multiple identities which ‘exist within a network of others who hold particular expectations about who the actor is’ (p. 477), what he or she ought to think and how he or she should behave. Importantly, the overlapping of these role identities through distinct networks can lead to collapsed contexts (boyd, 2008, 2010; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, 2012). Broadly speaking, context collapse refers to how people, information, and norms from different settings all converge into one context. As early as 1985, Meyrowitz, 1985 noted that broadcast media can speak to multiple invisible audiences who exist in different time zones, different places, and who possess different norms. Consequently, context collapse can flatten multiple audiences into a single context, making the management of the self

²⁸³ Maxi Heitmayer and Robin Schimmelpfennig explain that there is a growing sector of scholarship on what is called “netiquette,” what they conceptualize as the “digital social norms, the general rules of conduct and a tacit understanding of what is adequate behavior in online interaction.” Heitmayer and Schimmelpfennig, “Netiquette as Digital Social Norms,” *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction* 40, no. 13 (2024): 3334, doi:10.1080/10447318.2023.2188534.

They even provide a graph showing the number of publications on netiquette between 2000 and 2022 where the average number of publications is only nine or ten per year, based on my rough calculations. But amongst these publications, the “majority of theoretical work on netiquette aims to detail proper conduct, for example, when writing Emails, or engaging in digitally mediated Business to Business exchanges.” Their amazing work is the only I have found that thoroughly discusses online norms and etiquette using a scientific approach, although I am sure a few other papers or books exist. That said, they only provide a short discussion of the normative implications of their research and say more work needs to be done.

²⁸⁴ There are papers written on issues of incivility accompanied by experiments to try to understand the phenomena and how experienced incivility online breeds more incivility—e.g., Bryan T. Gervais, “Incivility Online: Affective and Behavioral Reactions to Uncivil Political Posts in a Web-based Experiment,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 12 (2015): 167-185, doi: 10.1080/19331681.2014.997416. Xunzi would appreciate this paper I cite below for it argues how “negatively toned discussions [online] induced more negative valence and higher arousal ratings than the other conditions. Positive discussions had the opposite effect. Emotionally toned online comments evidently affect the quality and the intensity of the readers’ subjective emotions.” Aleksi H. Syrjämäki et al., “Emotionally Toned Online Discussions Evoke Subjectively Experienced Emotional Responses,” *Journal of Media Psychology* 35, no. 1 (2022): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000341>. But again, none of these papers aim to make normative arguments.

²⁸⁵ Sarah Mattice, “Perspectives from China.” Pak-hang Wong, “Confucian Social Media.” Tom Wang, “Designing Confucian Conscience,” is the exception and thinks Confucianism provides resources for overcoming these issues and can actually contribute to improving SMN, but he acknowledges the challenges invisible audiences and context collapse pose.

and our online identities across varied settings increasingly complicated (boyd, 2002; Meyrowitz, 1985).²⁸⁶

Loh and Walsh explain that Jenny L. Davis and Nathan Jurgenson²⁸⁷ then posit that “context collapse can occur in two distinct ways, namely, *context collusion* and *context collision*. Context collusion occurs when individuals ‘intentionally collapse, blur, and flatten contexts,’ while context collision occurs when ‘different social environments unintentionally and unexpectedly come crashing into each other.’”²⁸⁸ The reality of invisible audiences enables both forms context collapse to occur. Invisible audiences and context collapse together make practicing normative impression management difficult because the practice requires significant information about one’s audience and the context of an interaction. Without this information one will struggle to figure out what *li* are relevant and how to adjust one’s behavior to the needs of the audience. In other words, *zhong* and *shu* become difficult to practice. As Sarah Mattice explains: “Not knowing whom one is addressing makes it extremely difficult to know how to act well, from a Confucian perspective: we speak and act differently when with family, friends, employers, strangers, and so on.”²⁸⁹ The unavoidable existence of invisible audiences online makes context collapse dangerous if one is concerned about how one impresses on others. The problem is that it often seems that individuals are not concerned, precisely because the audience is invisible or anonymous, or the chances of the audience containing one’s acquaintances are low enough that one feels “safe” saying whatever they feel like.

²⁸⁶ Jennifer (M.I) Loh and Michael James Walsh, “Social Media Context Collapse: The Consequential Differences Between Context Collusion Versus Context Collision,” *Social Media + Society* 7, no. 3 (2021): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211041646>.

²⁸⁷ Jenny L. Davis and Nathan Jurgenson, “Context Collapse: Theorizing Context Collusions and Collisions,” *Information, Communication & Society* 17, no. 4 (2014): 476-485, doi:10.1080/1369118X.2014.888458.

²⁸⁸ Loh and Walsh, 1.

²⁸⁹ Mattice, “Perspectives from China,” 124.

What commonly happens on SMN, such as in comment sections of Reddit or Instagram posts that are not posted by one's acquaintances, and when one perceives the audience of one's comments as largely invisible, one eschews concern about the context and may believe only certain people one knows are likely see the comment or none at all—making oneself feel anonymous or invisible.²⁹⁰ For example, if I were to tell someone in an online competitive video game to go kill their self, I do not expect that my mother or boss will see this. I expect the audience is only the friends with whom I am playing and the invisible, anonymous audience.²⁹¹ Or, an individual who comments on a news media post on the Israel-Palestine conflict that “all the women supporting Palestine should go over there and get raped by Hamas” believes that their friends, family, and co-workers will *not* see that comment.²⁹² The same individual is less likely to offer such comments on Facebook where it is more likely that a known audience, their friends and family, will see it.²⁹³ There are also instances where one does not say anything obscene or

²⁹⁰ My conception of the concept of “invisible audiences” differs from how it is usually defined. It usually refers to the audience one does not perceive and typically is unaware of, or at least is less thoughtful about. Many SMN users think about the “imaginary audience,” the audience they believe will see their online activity, but there will almost always be an “invisible audience” that users less frequently think about. An audience can be visible to some extent but still anonymous, while an invisible audience can sometimes include known individuals, but their presence nonetheless is anonymous, in a sense, if they are invisible. So, while anonymity and invisibility refer to two different things, my concern is with audiences that are “invisible” in the sense that one either knows very little about them or they are not “perceivable,” either because of anonymity, invisibility, or both. What I mean is that an anonymous audience is still “invisible” in the sense that their identity is largely unknowable.

²⁹¹ It is possible to ascertain some information about a visible, anonymous, user's identity, but the amount of knowledge is minimal without making many assumptions and judgments based on avatars, bios, photos, and comments they make or having prolonged interaction with them. And on most SMN, there are so many users engaged in commentary on any given post that it is simply infeasible to research every single individual—thus, anonymous audiences are in many cases practically invisible and are treated as such.

²⁹² I unfortunately did not record a specific example, but I remember seeing sentiments such as this online when (now disputed) media reports came out in March 2024 that the UN had evidence that sexual violence including rape was committed by Hamas when they attacked Israel on October 7th, 2023.

²⁹³ Of course, some might still say it such as this pro-Israel protestor who tells a pro-Palestine protestor, offline, that “I think we should torture you and your family. Let's cut open your stomach, take out your fetus and throw it in an oven and then smell it while they torture you, and cut off your body parts...and rape you. Make you naked and drag you through the street.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYGESaDvb-4&si=Jt5jfrBZ2AGIO1yo> timestamp 1:26 minutes. Although she knows there are cameras on her, she probably assumed no one she knows would see the video, or because she was “in the heat of the moment,” she did not stop to think about who would possibly see the recording. Then again, someone this hateful and violent probably does not care to practice self-restraint whatever the situation or context. She clearly has no concern for moral impression management.

violent but simply argues extensively with others, using insults and name-calling that would provoke embarrassment if certain people witnessed this interaction.

The perception of an audience being “invisible” in the way I described above, makes individuals feel that they can be “authentic” and say what they feel. They do not expect their friends, family, or neighbors to be among the audience, and the audience is treated as “invisible”—as a collection of anonymous, “faceless,” entities. In most cases they are probably right that the words and interactions will go unnoticed by a known acquaintance, but this invites us to ask: why does the absence of known observers make them feel that any kind of behavior is justified? Why so little concern for how one impresses on members of the invisible audience and how it makes them feel? I hypothesize that if an individual has a strong desire to have a place where they can “be authentic” and less restrained, online spaces where an audience is perceived as anonymous or it is invisible, and context collapse is perceived as no threat, individuals feel that *there* is where they can finally “truly” speak their mind and express themselves without limit.²⁹⁴ This proves detrimental to moral impression management because careful attentiveness to context and receptivity to one’s audience are essential to its practice. This reality introduces two problems: If one’s audience is more often than not invisible, how can one properly orientate themselves to a situation if the persons one needs to be attentive and receptive to are largely hidden? And how can we expect people to even care about doing this in order to practice moral impression management in the first place?

²⁹⁴ As Gaia Vince explains, based on research and experiments committed by Yale University’s Human Cooperation Lab directed by David Rand: “there may be something about online social media culture that can encourage mean behaviour. Unlike hunter-gatherer societies, which rely on cooperation to survive and have rules for sharing food, for example, social media has weak institutions. It offers physical distance, relative anonymity and little reputational or punitive risk for bad behaviour. If you’re mean, no-one you know is going to see.” Gaia Vince, “Evolution Explains Why We Act Differently Online,” BBC, April 3, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20180403-why-do-people-become-trolls-online-and-in-social-media>.

I suggest that one can actually take advantage of an intentional practice of context *collusion* through the practice of *zhong*, while the possibility of context collision emphasizes the need for individuals to be cautious in implementing the emotional aspects of *shu*, the silver-rule and “empathy.” Regarding the practicing of *zhong*, even if an audience is invisible, there are still observable *li* one can learn by observing the norms and etiquette of an online space.²⁹⁵ The more knowledge one obtains about a particular forum, the better one can adjust and act appropriately, but where one is lacking that information, a generally polite, mindful, disposition with attention to the silver-rule is a good foundation. But one should try to be *zhong* and learn as much about the context and *li* of a given forum as is possible. Even when an audience is anonymous and invisible from an identity perspective, there is still information available one can use to speculate about who the audience is if one is attentive and receptive to the actively engaged audience such that one listens more before speaking and takes seriously what others say to try to understand them better.²⁹⁶ In doing this, one gives off pro-social impressions that the visible and truly invisible audience will observe, making both audiences feel respected. Since we cannot learn much from the invisible audience that is not actively engaging with others (“lurkers”), the best

²⁹⁵ For instance, one posts and talks differently on Facebook because one generally has more friends and family as a potential audience where in a comment section of a YouTube video or Instagram post the audience is mostly all strangers and quite invisible.

²⁹⁶ *Analects* 10.24 explains that even when home alone, Kongzi “did not kneel in a formal posture as though entertaining guests.” That is, he made sure to practice proper etiquette/*li* even when alone as a way to develop proper habits. My good friend and excellent scholar, Wenhui Xie, brought to my attention a passage in the Confucian *daxue* that he interpreted as follows: “When alone, act as if one is surrounded and pointed at by ten people.” The main point of the passage is that one must work to develop “sincere thought” or “appropriate thought” because whatever one thinks or feels is likely to be expressed outwardly whether purposefully or not. Whatever one’s beliefs, attitudes, and values happen to be will be expressed to others consciously or not, so it is central that one’s disposition is primed towards concerns for civility and positive social interaction. By habitually trying to orientate one’s mind towards pro-social values, even when alone, one is likely to develop a disposition that is less likely to commit faux-pas or offense when interacting with others, one is less likely to “slip-up.” The ability to cultivate “sincere thoughts” is an ability only “superior” individuals (*junzi*) have and is certainly not an expectation for those of us just starting to try to improve ourselves, but it is a goal one can orientate themselves towards. If one’s goal is to be “authentic” then a pro-social disposition is not going to develop as I have argued repeatedly.

we can do is keep in mind that they exist and give them pro-social signals by being mindful towards any audience members we can see.

One could argue that the work around to the problem of invisible audiences and the related problem of authenticity is to get individuals to start treating others like family or friends, or to use scare-tactics that are used by employers and in ethics-training programs and point out that many of one's online interactions are viewed by one's employer and co-workers. But neither possibility seems viable with the current state of how SMN are designed and structured and with the current cultural prioritization with being authentic. One viable solution then is to make evident to individuals the personal and social harm done to one another in being un-filtered and "authentic," and to emphasize the overlooked positive consequences to one's own mental health, society, and daily life when individuals take seriously normative impression management. We can reimagine the golden rule to be "treat others online the way you like to be treated offline." In general, in offline daily disagreements, it is not normal to be aggressively insulted or told to go kill yourself, so why should that be allowed to be a norm online? This is not to say offline disagreements and arguments are always civil, polite, and courteous—they are far from it. But concern for etiquette and following social rituals is a stronger concern and more widely practiced offline than it is online. While there are possible structural changes that could improve SMN, it is up to the users of SMN to implement personal changes and encourage others to do the same. The presence of more normative impression management exemplars would help others see the positive effects of their contributions to online discourses, and we see people acknowledge this "power" (*de*) when they comment about how nice it is to have a civil discussion and praise others for being civil. Although far from a perfect model, offline behaviors are currently a somewhat realistic standard online users should be trying to meet because at least in many

offline social spaces people are generally more courteous and respectful and seem to care about how they impress on others.²⁹⁷

Final Remarks

Because of the nature of SMN, I would advocate a fairly strong notion of mindfulness that needs be exercised online to combat the cultural pre-occupation with “authentic” self-expression and mitigate the negative effects of interacting in an environment where audiences are perceived as invisible and abusing moral talk gains one social purchase. What ultimately is needed online is more individuals with moral *de* to serve as moral impression management exemplars from others to learn from and emulate. These individuals are highly skilled at being mindful, practicing self-restraint, and studying and adapting to their audience, however visible it may or may not be. If we all tried to be like them, we can only imagine how much different, and peaceful, the online world would be. We should simply try to be our “better selves”:

The rules of polite behavior require that I do my best to cover up the worst impulses of my nature. They ask me to behave courteously to people I find annoying, help people whether or not I feel like it, express gratitude for favors that I didn’t much want, and act pleased when things go well for people I can’t stand. These behaviors do not reflect my actual attitudes; rather, they reflect the attitudes of what we might call my “better self,” the self I should be. In acting like this better self, I express my commitment to my own self-improvement and to the dignity of humanity itself.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁷ There is much more I want to research and write about in regard to CMIM and SMN that I plan to continue working on. For instance, “meme” culture is a fascinating phenomenon that has its own, odd, norms and etiquettes that appear to have a strong influence both online and in offline culture. The internet is not entirely a “lawless” space, it is just particularly vulnerable to enabling bad behavior because of issues of anonymity and invisibility. I also plan to analyze how users interact on various particular SMN—e.g., X, Instagram, Threads, Facebook, YouTube, Reddit. There are differing norms, behaviors, trends, and kinds of interactions on each that can be documented and evaluated from a sociological and normative perspective. Studying these differences may give us more insight into how the structure of each platform affects discourse and how each may or may not be influencing offline behavior as well. There is surprisingly little scholarship discussing the online world from a Confucian perspective, which is extremely odd considering how much SMN have become a part of our social lives and culture. My discussion here in on the topic barely even scratches the surface.

²⁹⁸ Karen Stohr, *On Manners*, 85-86.

Although the ideal end-goal might be to have one's "actual attitudes" be reflected in one's actions, for most of us, striving to be better by trying to cultivate a mindful disposition and being committed to practicing CMIM is the best we can do. That is not easy to do, but *trying* is a good place to start.²⁹⁹

Practicing CMIM is difficult to do consistently because of our own personal inclinations, external pressures such as fewer pro-social norms and conventions, or because we witness others' nasty and repulsive behavior, making it difficult to offer civility in return. One only needs to spend a few hours online to feel a careless lack of *zhong* and *shu* and see how rude and unfiltered behavior starts influencing oneself to the point that one begins feeling negatively and wanting to start acting the same. And if one acknowledges and embraces claims about authenticity and "being yourself," it is not hard to imagine someone saying to oneself "why not fight back and say what I want when others are being so nasty in the first place?" There is a paradox in the authenticity narrative that laments how difficult it can be to be authentic and "true to oneself" because of social pressures to conform and "be someone you are not," but for many, especially online, it is much easier to be unfiltered and disregard etiquette and convention, to say whatever quickly comes to mind with more concern about expressing one's thoughts and feelings than considering how it might make others feel.

There exists an uncredited quote that floats around online that states "The best part of being authentic is that there is no image to maintain. You will delight some and disturb others,

²⁹⁹ "The word 'better' is the term Dewey uses to summarize his ethical theory. It is the duty of humans to ameliorate situations. And this excellence is brought about by experiencing deeper, wider, and more intense connections within the associated life of the persons involved. To be environmentally relevant is to be a constructive force within the biological and cultural values that makeup one's region of experience. *De* names this achievement. What should be experienced when such excellence is had is an intense feeling of growth." Joseph Grange, *John Dewey, Confucius, and Global Philosophy* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2004): 26.

and none of it will concern the truth of your being.”³⁰⁰ Not only is it mythical to believe one can live with no image to maintain, as one has multiple “images” to maintain in numerous relationships, this quote implies a more carefree and simple existence where one no longer worries too much about how one affects others. It does not say this is easy to accomplish, but once accomplished, supposedly one’s life will be “easier” to some extent, and also more “fulfilling” and “happy.” As one comment replies: “it feels so good to be okay with who I am. I don’t feel drained of energy putting on a show to others.” Another says: “Authenticity is a shortcut to a more fulfilling life.” Another: “You’ll find out whose really on your team or who’s a cry baby that can’t handle the whole not beating around the bush type interaction...I found out real quick and I’m happier now.” Lastly: “When you’re your authentic self you will never fail.” While I cannot attest to the validity of these claims, and they do in fact make achieving “authentic” living sound wonderful, what this post and comments on it indirectly illuminate is the real difficulty in prioritizing moral impression management and prioritizing *li* and etiquette over one’s own inclinations. The alternative to their “authentic” living is the reality where one has “images” to maintain, rules to follow, rituals to participate in, conventions to navigate, and forms of etiquette to follow and sometimes shape. It is a lot of work, and one can do it well and in a moral fashion, or one cannot. The supposed “authentic” way of life wishes to circumvent parts of the burden of social existence but all it results in is a kind of carelessness where one is likely to “stumble into bad behavior.” There is a reason Kongzi laments that he has “yet to meet people who are truly fond of authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁) and who truly abhor behavior contrary to it,” and that is because it is a lifelong extremely difficult, task to practice impression

³⁰⁰ I was unable to find the supposed original author, but the quote is used all over SMN from LinkedIn and X to Instagram and Facebook, particularly by self-proclaimed “leadership” or “life” “coaches.” E.g., https://www.linkedin.com/posts/%E2%80%8Ebrad-s-b489656_%C3%A7tg-authenticity-activity-7074010881591758849-99d7/ and <https://www.instagram.com/reel/C6aNouLrW-h/?igsh=azJ1bjhtamV5NGtw>.

management in a moral manner, to live *ren*-like.³⁰¹ *Ren* is not an achievement, it is not a virtue one gets to claim they have just for being “good” or “nice” sometimes, or even most of the time. Being *ren* is a practice, a way of being in the world that only “exists” while one is being caring and considerate of others, and these online commentators have made it abundantly clear that they no longer wish to *try* to be *ren* and would rather live within themselves and try to shun the unavoidable moral demands of social existence.

I do not directly equate *ren* with CMIM, but by embracing *zhong* and *shu* in being mindful and practicing CMIM, one is acting in a *ren*-like manner. And anytime one is acting as such, the real-world consequences are dramatic and easily perceivable by all observing, hence one becomes *like* a moral exemplar when being caring and considerate of others’ feelings and has a powerfully positive impact on others both in the short-term and, hopefully, long term. I say “like” because one does not even need to be habitually a “good” person to have a powerful effect on others. Sometimes just one moment of niceness can have a major impact on how others feel and influence them to self-reflect and think about their own behavior and whether it is nice or not. This is nicely illustrated in *Analects* 12.1: “Yan Hui inquired about authoritative conduct (*ren* 仁). The Master replied, “Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety (*li* 禮) one becomes authoritative in one’s conduct. If for the space of a day one were able to accomplish this, the whole empire would defer to this authoritative model.”³⁰²

There is a lot to unload to fully understand what being “authoritative in one’s conduct” (*ren*) entails, but we can at least see and feel in our daily lives how socially beneficial it is when

³⁰¹ This quote makes me wonder why so many scholars think Mengzi’s *xing shan* (性善) is closer to Kongzi’s conception of social reality than Xunzi’s *xing e* (性惡).

³⁰² Ames and Rosemont Jr., *Analects* 12.1.

people are caring, considerate, and polite. Although moral exemplars are difficult, if not impossible, to find, we must keep the *ideal* of a moral exemplar in our minds to help inspire and guide us. And we must keep an eye open for those moments where individuals do what moral exemplars *do* so we can learn from them. Moments where we feel and say “[aha!] a good person is *that*, where *that* refers to a person in our acquaintance.”³⁰³ Since most of us are struggling to practice moral impression management well on a daily basis, or at all, the resources I have produced from the Confucian texts provides enough insight to help us recognize the power and beauty in just one moment of respect, kindness, and courtesy between individuals. I think of moments as when a car on the highway in front of me lets another car merge when they really did not have to or when someone is *actually* civil in their online comments on a controversial and heated topic. Those kinds of quotidian moments seem trivial but are in fact quite the opposite. They can have a profound effect on us by highlighting how even the simplest of gestures or behaviors give off impressions that are pro-social, and just feel good, that we can learn from and try to emulate. Unfortunately, those moments are less common than we would like, especially in the online world. On there, “authenticity,” competition, and unfiltered expression reign and mindfulness takes a back seat. We must work as hard as we can to change this by trying to cultivate a mindful disposition through practicing *zhong* and *shu* and practicing Confucian Moral Impression Management.

³⁰³ Olberding, *Moral Exemplars in the Analects*, 25.

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