

Ritualized Exchange: A Consideration of Confucian Reciprocity

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ERIC C. MULLIS*—RITUALIZED EXCHANGE: A CONSIDERATION OF
CONFUCIAN RECIPROCITY

禮尚往來，	The rules of ritual propriety value reciprocity,
往而不來，	If I give a gift and nothing is returned,
非禮也；	that is contrary to propriety；
來而不往，	If the thing come to me, and I give nothing in return,
亦非禮也。	that is also contrary to propriety.

—*Li Ji* (Book of Rites), Legge 1885:65

Elsewhere, I have discussed the etiquette, social import, and aesthetic significance of gift exchange as practiced within a Confucian ethic.¹ I would like to continue that project here by moving from a discussion of a particular practice to a discussion of the virtue that it embodies—reciprocity. It is clear that gift exchange, as an instance of ritual action or *li*^a functions reciprocally for, as discussed, the gift has the curious power to create and negate social obligation and to generally establish and maintain relationships between individuals and groups through a process of give and take. Reciprocity also unfolds in the process of social exchange however, the scope of reciprocity exceeds that of gift exchange since, in many instances, social exchange functions reciprocally and does not involve the use of gifts.

The task at hand is to analyze and clarify the relationship between reciprocity and ritual action as articulated by a relational ethic such as that espoused by Confucius. More specifically, this essay has two goals: to clarify the role that reciprocity plays in Confucian ethics and to critically assess what relevance this account has for us today. The essay will first address the relationship between reciprocity and *shu*^b (“sympathetic understanding”). It will then discuss the necessity of reciprocity for a relational ethic, for

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reciprocity is necessary for the attainment of social goods that is advocates including: social equilibrium, self-esteem, and reliable expectations concerning the actions of others. In the last section some of the difficulties that stem from a heavy emphasis on the disposition to reciprocate will be considered. These include the problems of fittingness, proportionality, and how to return ill will.

Reciprocity and Shu

It has been argued that *shu* is related to the notion of reciprocity and, indeed, the term has been translated as such by Legge.² It has also been noted that the etymology of the character along with passages in the *Analects* concerning the Golden Rule give us insight into Confucius' understanding of the term. The top portion of the graph (*ru*^c) means "like" or "similar to" and the lower portion is the heart radical (*xin*^d). This pairing, then, connotes "like heartedness" or as Hall and Ames have it, "sympathetic understanding."³ Hence, *shu* appears to be related to reciprocity in that it would entail interacting with others in a manner that balances personal interests with theirs. More specifically, this tempering of personal interests is a product of the reversibility principle that underlies the Golden Rule, for if I treat others the way I would like to be treated, then a moral common ground will be created that will preclude me from treating them unfairly. To put it another way, given that I wanted to be treated fairly, then I must likewise treat others fairly and such reciprocal treatment sets the stage for the development of fruitful relationships. In enacting the Golden Rule I will subdue the tendency to advance my own personal interests and will thereby open up the possibility of establishing a relationship that is characterized by mutual exchange and benefit.⁴

However, there are two difficulties with the pairing this notion of *shu* with the Golden Rule that are important for a consideration of reciprocity. The first concerns the reversibility principle that holds that one ought to put oneself in another's shoes by imaginatively taking their perspective and then assessing what they would value. Phillip J. Ivanhoe has rightly noted that reversibility cannot stand alone as a moral guideline since, in the process of taking another's perspective, one might simply justify "advocating the adoption of one's personal preferences."⁵ That is, if one does what one would want done to oneself, then one might very well ignore the true interests of others in lieu of advancing one's personal interests. Ivanhoe notes that this would lead "those who enjoy hamburgers and beer to offer these to their vegetarian, teetotaler friends."⁶ He goes on to conclude that the reversibility principle inherent to the Golden Rule cannot stand alone since it assumes that the person who puts it into practice is in some degree selfless. Reversibility must be enacted within the context of an objective normative standard if it is to function as a moral virtue and this standard, for Confucius, is the *li*. More will be said about this relationship in a moment.

Another difficulty with the pairing of reciprocity and reversibility is that one can quite meaningfully discuss reciprocity in contexts in which the perspective of another individual plays no role. As will be discussed further in a moment, one can participate and enter into reciprocal relationships with cultural institutions and it seems that Confucius would encourage this kind of reciprocal give and take in which, say, an artist inherits technique from her tradition and then goes on to carry on and/or develop the tradition in a significant way.⁷ The reversibility principle is clearly out of place here since "the other" is an institution that is composed by individuals, many of whom are no

longer present. Hence, the demands of reciprocity exceed those of the reversibility principle since they are relevant for relationships in which the perspective of another cannot be imaginatively taken.

To return to the previous point, the distinction between reversibility as imaginative exercise and reciprocity as disposition reveals—as Ivanhoe suggests—that rituals are the root of reciprocity and, indeed, it can be argued that ritual actions are codified forms of reciprocal behavior. As mentioned, gift exchange—as a specific instance of ritual action—enacts reciprocity in that the “rules” of gift exchange guarantee that individuals will enter into social exchanges that foster the development of personal relationships. Speaking generally, the etiquette outlined by the *li* codifies reciprocal exchanges so that positive social ends can be actualized. The rules for gift exchange, sacrifice, and the rituals that delineate social roles are essential for outlining appropriate action, action that acknowledges social status and clarifies how one can maintain and develop relationships and in doing so they facilitate and clarify the give and take of social exchange. Moreover, such rituals are essential since they provide the framework necessary for the development of the disposition to reciprocate. Indeed, reversibility hinges upon a thought experiment or form of analogical reasoning, but one must develop moral dispositions in order to mitigate the difficulties that abruptly arise in the course of everyday life.⁸

The Necessity of Reciprocity

In the *Analects*, beyond mention of the Golden Rule and *shu*, one does not find specific mention of the disposition to reciprocate per se. However, there are many instances in which Confucius discusses the necessity of reciprocal exchange within the context of

ritual action. Hence, in 6:5 Confucius' household steward Yuansi is paid well for his service, but the steward refuses, presumably since the honor of acting as the Master's steward is sufficient payment. However, Confucius stresses that Yuansi must take the payment and give it to his family, friends, and neighbors. The reason for this seems to be that Yuansi owes his social network a debt since they have supported him both socially and economically. One of the ways in which Yuansi can reciprocate is to support them by ensuring that their basic needs are sufficiently met.

Another instance of reciprocal exchange concerns Confucius' pedagogy. An often quoted passage is 7:8: "If on showing students one corner they do not come back with the other three, I will not repeat myself." This demonstrates Confucius' stance concerning the active participation of students in the learning process. There must be a give and take between teacher and student in which the teacher provides a certain degree of insight and in which the student goes on to develop it by discovering its implications and by learning how to apply it to novel subject matter/situations. Confucius holds that education must be a reciprocal exchange in which teacher and student mutually benefit one another: the teacher benefiting the student by providing insight and the student by discovering how to develop that insight further.⁹

Lastly, there are instances in which Confucius stresses that the obligation to reciprocate is often contextualized by the social roles that individuals play. This is most succinctly expressed in Confucius' concern about the obligations that pertain to the role of political advisor. Simply put, the advice of a well qualified advisor should be taken by the sovereign and the advisor is obligated by the sovereign who takes his advice and puts it into practice. The obligations are relevant when both parties benefit one another by

fulfilling the responsibilities that characterize their respective roles. We often find Confucius lamenting the fact that he is offered positions but his advice is not heeded, that is, because he cannot find a truly reciprocal relationship with a ruler he often feels like a gourd that is “strung up on the wall and not eaten” (17.7). When, in 18.3, Duke Jing of Qi admits that he is old and cannot make use of Confucius, Confucius denies any allegiance to the Duke and leaves the court. Since a relationship in which the sovereign will not allow one to affect change cannot be reciprocal, one is justified in severing any ties to him.¹⁰ Further, as Confucius states in 8.13 and 14.1, to simply hold a position but to not positively change the course of the state is shameful since to do so is to benefit from one’s post but not to perform one’s duties. This is shameful since one does not benefit the state but is benefited by the state, i.e. since the relationship is not reciprocal in nature.

Indeed, there are other points that could be made in order to support the claim that reciprocity is necessary for Confucian ethics however, it would be much more interesting and fruitful to consider why reciprocity is conducive to the social ends that Confucius espouses.¹¹ This seems to be because the goods of reciprocal exchange are necessary for a relational ethic. These include social equilibrium, self-esteem, and reliable expectations of the actions of others.¹² We will address these in turn.

(a) *Equilibrium* is necessary for human development. As John Dewey notes, experience just is the transaction of an organism with its environment and this transaction often includes phases in which the environment changes and the organism consequently falls out of step with it.¹³ When this happens changes must be made that allow the organism to adapt. Of course, this is applicable to a wide range of species, however,

human beings are distinct in that the environments that they inhabit are both physical and social and they consequently discover that finding social equilibrium necessarily entails finding balance in the midst of social exchange. One method of doing so is through the practice of reciprocity.

Indeed, our relationships with others are contingent upon exchanges that allow us to mutually benefit from and enjoy one another. The individual quickly learns that sustenance, love, respect, and freedom cannot be attained from others if something is not given in return, that is, the goods of entering into fruitful relationships cannot be attained if social exchange does not take place. More specifically, reciprocal exchange provides a common ground for individuals by bringing their interests into accord which, in turn, allows them to enjoy one another's company. The give and take of friendship, for example, entails that each friend contribute something to the relationship and that each be benefited by that contribution. Contributions may include talents, interests, knowledge, and moral goodness as well as possessions and, in sharing them, the contributors find a psychological common ground that provides the foundation for a rewarding relationship.¹⁴

Now, it should be noted that the social equilibrium that we are considering is not absolute. In friendship social equilibrium is obvious since the individuals in some sense choose one another however, there are many social relationships in which complete equilibrium is impossible. The relationship between parent and child, for example, cannot be characterized by complete equilibrium since the child owes a debt the parent (because of the gifts of life, rearing, education, etc.) that can, quite possibly, never be repaid. Nonetheless, reciprocity is still essential in such relationships and a degree of

equilibrium can be attained that is relative to the abilities of those involved. Hence, even in early childhood, infants and their parents develop a language that allows them to learn how to please one another and/or how to express their respective needs. The equilibrium of these kinds of exchanges will never be pure however, if they are—relative to the abilities of each member—mutual, then grounds will be secured for the development of a relationship that benefits both.¹⁵

(b) *Self-Esteem* is a psychologically necessary for a fulfilling life, for one must have a sense of self worth in order to avoid negative emotions such as despair and self-esteem allows one to attain and enjoy meaningful experiences. If one has no self-esteem, then the projects that one attempts will, more often than not, never get off the ground. In this self-fulfilling prophecy an individual with poor self-esteem continually fails at his or her projects since he or she assumes that they are doomed from the start. In turn, this only contributes to the individual's self-esteem problem. With this said, what is the relationship between reciprocity and self-esteem?

The sense of self worth is dependent upon at least two factors: the attitudes of others regarding the self and the beliefs of the individual regarding their personal standards of excellence. With regard to the first, it is clear that the perceptions and attitudes of others greatly influence the sense of self. Indeed, one cannot know whether one is, say, a good athlete, writer, speaker, or philosopher if one's actions are not judged by and successfully communicated to one by others. In general, the practices that one takes up and/or the roles that one plays cannot be personally assessed if the attitudes of others are not taken into account. With regard to the second factor, it is clear that the reception of such judgment can be influenced by the presuppositions held by the

individual. A common moral trope is the adept individual who (usually for psychological reasons) never feels that his achievements—no matter how high—are genuine. That is, this individual sets an unattainable standard of excellence that negates the value of his successes.¹⁶

The disposition to reciprocate is essential in this context, for acting out the disposition in various social situations affects one's self-esteem since reciprocity is often used as a criterion for the judgment of moral worth. One learns that others expect one to act reciprocally and to do otherwise often leads to censure and feelings of guilt. That is, if one denies the obligations of exchange, the social equilibrium that such exchange makes possible is quashed and one is censured since such equilibrium is essential for any community.¹⁷ To return to gift-giving, many cultures are similar in that they outline how to appropriately perform gift exchange for, their norms of reciprocity disclose when to present gifts, what to give, how to accept, how long to wait before reciprocating, what to give in return, and so on. To ignore these norms is to disregard the form of social exchange that they instantiate. This is important for one's self-esteem since the norms of reciprocity both disclose how one can express social sentiments in different settings and they give one insight into how one's actions will be perceived by others. Reciprocity, then, is a disposition that is necessary for the development of a social self since the disposition must be enacted within the context of a set of moral norms that also act as the standards upon which one's actions will be judged.¹⁸

(c) The norms of reciprocity just mentioned are important not only for one's self-esteem but also since they provide one with *reliable expectations* concerning the actions of others. For growth to occur, social life must in some sense be predictable, for social

chaos hinders or bars any developmental advance. This does not mean that the actions of others must be completely predictable, but it is to say that one needs to know the general range of possible outcomes that any given situation will produce. Of course, cultures tend to accomplish this by codifying laws however, this is also accomplished on through the enactment and preservation of customs and social norms. The norms advocated by Confucius perform this function by prescribing which actions will allow one to fulfill the obligations of one's social roles. The *li* provide the context for social exchange and increase the significance of individual exchanges since they function not as external rules but as internal dispositions that are—ideally—shared by all. Hence, there are guidelines that must be taken into account when one gives a gift to a friend, guidelines that are different from those that are relevant for those occasions in which one wants to give a gift to a superior or inferior. The relevant norm will provide guidelines for action that are understood and practiced by both parties and they consequently give one the ability to express one's intentions effortlessly.

This returns us to the capacity of the *li* to engender reciprocal action. It is clear that some rituals—such as gift exchange and sacrifice—explicitly involve exchanges that capitalize upon and strengthen the disposition to reciprocate, however, generally speaking, the *li* make the enactment of reciprocity possible in the course of daily life. That is, the individual will expect that others will act in accordance with the *li* and will be aware that others too have similar expectations. By providing a common social framework for action and, more specifically, by providing guidelines for the development of common dispositions, the rituals act as the foundation for the give and take of social exchange.

For these reasons it is clear why a relational ethic will prize the disposition to reciprocate. Once instilled, the disposition allows the individual to develop and maintain relationships that are characterized by social equilibrium and/or co-operation. This ensures that all parties in any given relationship benefit from it and that their interests are respected and advanced. Reciprocity is also essential for the development of self-esteem since others expect that we will act in concert with them and since we require their assessment of our actions, interests, and projects. Finally, reciprocity lies at the root of the social norms that render social life predictable and otherwise increase the social significance of one's actions.

Practical Difficulties of Acting Reciprocally

Our next step is to consider the difficulties that arise when one stresses the importance of reciprocal action. This will both illuminate more concerning the relational ethic that stresses it and will make advances in assessing whether or not this understanding of reciprocity is still relevant in modern contexts. Of course, these considerations will not be comprehensive since the ramifications of the disposition to reciprocate would require a lengthy treatment. For this reason, I will select those that are important for Confucian ethics. These include: the fittingness and proportionality of returns, the extent and nature of obligation, and the appropriate return of ill will. Indeed, each of these issues deserves extended treatment, but a brief analysis will aid in the broader consideration of the Confucian understanding of reciprocity.

(a) As mentioned above, returns must be proportional if the good of social equilibrium is to be actualized. A balanced exchange relative to the abilities of the participants is necessary for fruitful social life however, this raises a difficulty regarding

the manner in which one finds commensurable goods in various situations. If, for example, a friend helps me move, it would be inappropriate of me to give him something in return that he does not need or want (say, a copy of my favorite band's new CD, a band that he dislikes or is indifferent to). Of course, in some instances moral luck is on one's side and it will be easy to give a commensurable return. Hence, it might be the case that, some time later, my friend will himself need to move and will need my help. This is difficult to predict, however, and one is usually left with the task of weighing goods that are different in nature such as time, service, material objects, money, and so on.

Of course, social norms assist in mitigating this difficulty as they outline which goods should be given on which occasion and which goods are appropriate to give to which individuals. The *li* perform this function and the *Book of Rites* or *LiJi*^c details the specificities of the reciprocal exchanges that aid in maintaining social equilibrium.¹⁹ However, the details outlined in the *LiJi* are largely irrelevant for moderns and one is consequently left with the task of investigating the principles that underlie them, that is, the general principles that characterize any specific prescription of commensurable action: fittingness and proportionality.²⁰

(§) As a condition of reciprocity *fittingness* entails that, in reciprocating, the good that one returns be good for the receiver, that is, the return must reflect the receiver's needs and interests. Finding a fitting return, of course, entails an understanding of the other, but, in addition, an appropriate gift, on the Confucian account, must reflect the receiver's position in a social hierarchy. What is fitting or appropriate does not solely concern the character of the receiver but also concerns the social roles that he or she plays.

Further, there are goods that correspond to the roles of friend, colleague, brother, sister, father, mother, teacher, and student and these are the goods that aid the receiver in the fulfillment of his or her role. Hence, on the Confucian account, one can ensure that a return is fitting either by personalizing the return so that it may reflect the character of the receiver or by ensuring that it corresponds with and is conducive to the roles the he or she plays. In turn, this approach provides a standard for judging the returns that one is encouraged to accept. Mencius argues that the gifts of money given by a sovereign to an advisor are merely bribes if the sovereign either ignores the advisor's suggestions or if the gifts are not intended by the giver to meet a specific need of the receiver.²¹ In either case the return is not fitting since it ignores the role, interests, and needs of the receiver.

It also provides grounds for answering a question regarding the distastefulness of making returns in kind, that is, in returning the same kind of object or service that one was originally given. Of course, one cannot say that this will always be inappropriate since it might be the case that a return in kind is necessitated by the needs of the original giver (the example of moving given above is a case in point). Nevertheless, such exchanges come close to trades—exchanges that ignore the social goods of reciprocal exchange. Returns in kind—more often than not—ignore the needs or roles of the receiver and, contrary to this, in reciprocating one must consider what will benefit the other and, more generally, consider what will express one's concern for his welfare. Reciprocating in kind hinders one's ability to personalize the return.²²

(§) *Proportionality* was mentioned in our discussion of social equilibrium and it was noted that difficulties arise when exchange takes place among unequals, say, fathers and sons. The chief difficulty concerns the inability to strike a balanced exchange since a

debt has been created that—in most instances—cannot be fully discharged. Further, it is often the case that the giver makes a negligible sacrifice in giving but the gift has disproportionate value for the receiver. To take an example, imagine the case of a wealthy individual who gives twenty dollars to a beggar whose life is saved by the “gift”. On one hand, the money is an insignificant amount and, on the other, a debt that can never be fully repaid. How can reciprocity be preserved when an exchange is contextualized by extreme social difference? This is an important question since, if it remains unanswered, it is quite possible that givers will be disinclined to give (since to give is to exacerbate socio-economic difference) and receivers disinclined to receive (since to do so is to accrue debts that cannot be repaid). This state of affairs would produce reciprocal guilt, not reciprocal benefit.

In many respects Confucian ethics emphasizes disproportional exchange in that it encourages the individual to remain aware of his or her familial and cultural debts. One’s debt to one’s family cannot be overstated since one’s parents go through the trials and tribulations of child-rearing and often continue to offer social support in adult life. *Xiao*^f or “filial piety” is rooted in reciprocity, for supporting one’s parents is necessary if one is to repay the debt that one owes to them. However, the *Analects* intimates that there are limits to the enactment of filial piety, for if one’s parent act inappropriately, then one is allowed to “gently remonstrate” with them (4:18).²³ Indeed, Confucius is faced with a dilemma here for, on one hand, familial relationships should be grounded in reciprocity, that is, both parties should mutually benefit each other since this is what allows them to grow and go on to live meaningful lives that are enriched by sustained relationships that are characterized by shared experience. However, on the other hand, Confucius must

have been aware that family life could, contrary to this, harm the young when it is grounded not on reciprocity but upon narrow self-interest. In cases where parents do not benefit their children or otherwise contribute to their development there is little or no ground for reciprocal action on the part of the child.²⁴

I raise this issue not only because it illustrates the connection between reciprocity and *xiao* but also because it gives us insight into the disproportionality problem mentioned a moment ago. Since one of the social goods of reciprocal action is the social equilibrium that makes personal development possible, one must consider disproportional exchanges in light of the benefits accrued and sacrifices made by those involved. Proportionality can only be achieved when the abilities of all parties are taken into account. Hence, assuming that they are good, a child may not be able to fully repay the debt that he owes to his parents, but proportional exchange is possible if it is understood that the sacrifice that he makes is relative to his abilities. As he matures he will acquire new abilities that will change the ratio of the return. At the same time, Confucius' insight pertaining to filial obligation is that it should not be perceived as burdensome since proportionality will always, in some sense, be relative. That is, one may perceive such a debt as extremely burdensome since it cannot be fully discharged, regardless of how hard one tries. However, if this relationship is understood in light of reciprocity, then the debt that one owes will seem less burdensome, for it will become clear that one is involved in an enriching exchange that has direct bearing upon one's sense of self or self-esteem. Indeed, one's family provides the material for the self as this is the group that is most aware of the individual's development and that consequently provides the feedback necessary for the development of a coherent self at an influential age.²⁵

A second point to consider here is the disproportional relationship between individual and cultural tradition. Indeed, as opposed to the family, one cannot clearly calculate this debt since there are too many elements to take into account that stretch across a large expanse of time. The obligations of filiality can be understood since one can gradually realize the labor that one's parents underwent (especially if one goes on to start a family) however, a cultural tradition is largely a faceless entity since it is ultimately a generalization that is drawn from one's relationships with various individuals. Further, one's debt to "culture" is difficult to conceive since it is composed of an array of traditions including art, religion, morality, science, political ideology, and so on. In order to address this issue I will consider a specific cultural institution—art.

One could point out that the relationship between teacher and student is disproportional in nature since the teacher has a wealth of experience that can be shared with the student so that she may be given insight into the depths of a particular art-form. In doing so, the teacher gives the student the opportunity to attain the goods of self-expression. The relationship is disproportional in that the student must rely upon and trust the teacher's experience and advice if she is to advance. However, proportionality can be reached if the student goes on to advance the art in question, for in doing so, she carries on a tradition that her teacher dedicated her life to. One can reciprocate the teacher's efforts by giving something in return (perhaps by dedicating a work to her), but since her interest centers on and is furthered by participating in a particular cultural institution, it is best to make a return by giving back to the institution itself. This can be done either by ensuring that the tradition continues into the future (by teaching) or by developing the art itself through innovation. Doing this will allow one to give a

proportional return to the teacher, however, it is likely that, in doing so, one will realize the disproportional relationship that one has with the institution itself. That is, as one penetrates into the art and begins to benefit from the goods that it offers (enjoyment, an outlet for creativity, a context for artistic problem solving, peace of mind, etc.) one will likely realize that one's work is contingent upon the work (both pedagogical and practical) of many others. Participation in a cultural institution can be reciprocal since the institution is composed of and represented by specific individuals and since it makes possible relationships of mutual benefit. Here again, returns can be made by the individual, but a debt will remain. This is because, before one could understand the goods both filial and institutional relationships, others worked in such a way that allowed one to benefit from them.

To be sure, in becoming aware of the scope of the cultural institutions that one participates in, accruing the benefits of such relationships, and in becoming aware of the possibilities that they make possible, one attains inspiration and develops a desire to make a significant and appropriate return. However, as mentioned above, a word of caution must be spoken regarding the ever-present possibility of instituting disproportional relationships so that they become beneficial only to those in superior positions. An ethic that stresses disproportional relationships and a social self lends itself to abuse by authorities who do not take into account the development and interest of those below them. Of course, Confucian ethics cannot appeal to a categorical imperative in criticizing the use of another in advancing one's own self-interest, however, it can emphasize that the interests of the inferior need to be taken into account if cultural institutions and the individuals that constitute them are to flourish. As Confucius states:

“The young should be held in high esteem. After all, how do we know that those yet to come will not surpass our contemporaries? It is only when one reaches forty or fifty years of age and yet has done nothing of note that we should withhold our esteem” (9.23).²⁶

Reciprocity and Ill Will

Thus far we have focused our attention primarily on reciprocal exchanges in which both parties mutually benefit one another and, as discussed, such exchanges allow those involved to find a point of social equilibrium, to cultivate self-esteem, and to develop within a predictable social framework. Reciprocal relationships are ideal since they allow individuals to attain the social goods espoused by a relational ethic. I have argued that such an approach also entails developing an awareness and appreciation of disproportional relationships both between individuals and institutions. Such relationships are consistent with the ends of a relational ethic: lasting and fulfilling relationships, social harmony (*he^g*) and a broad understanding of one’s situatedness in and dependence on one’s culture. However, with regard to reciprocity, relationships can be neutral or antithetical and something more needs to be said regarding how one should respond to them.

We have seen that non-reciprocal exchanges do not create obligations. If a gift is given, then, in order to maintain social equilibrium, a gift must be returned. Indeed, if social etiquette dictates that a gift be given on a certain occasion (say, a wedding or a graduation) but none is given, then this interferes with the equilibrium made possible by the exchange and otherwise expresses the intention to dissolve the relationship.²⁷ Likewise, if a gift is given but no return is made the receiver denies the obligations that

accrue from the exchange and in doing so denies the obligations of the relationship itself. This does not mean that one cannot act generously toward those who cannot or choose not to reciprocate. Giving alms to a beggar, for example, is an instance in which reciprocity plays no part since the beggar cannot and may never be able to reciprocate. Giving in such circumstances enacts a different moral disposition: altruism or sacrifice.²⁸

We have seen both Confucius and Mencius denying obligations that entail ignoring the duties that characterize one's social position. In the case of the lazy ruler, Confucius takes his leave since the Duke will not heed his advice and otherwise will not respect his position. Confucius responds to the Duke's act of omission however, now that we are considering what Confucius would do if he were intentionally harmed and the question becomes: would reciprocity demand that he retaliate? On the Confucian account, how should one return ill will?

It would seem that Confucius would condemn the return of harm for harm since such a return would be inconsistent with the social harmony that he envisions. That is, returns of that sort would tend to breed more harmful returns. This stance is based on the conviction that wide-spread enactment of ritual will bring about social harmony by clearly delineating morally appropriate behavior however, because it is based on an ideal, it does not specify what should be done when one is living in morally and politically turbulent times such as those that Confucius found himself in. If ritual action is not firmly instituted, then how should one reciprocate personal harm?

In 14.34 when he is asked for his thoughts on the saying "pay ill will (*yuan*^h) with virtue (*de*ⁱ)". He replies with the question "Then how should one repay virtue (*de*)?" and concludes by drawing a distinction: in response to ill will one must "remain true (*zhen*^j)"

and one must repay virtue with virtue (*de*).²⁹ The distinction is important since it entails tailoring one's response to the intentions of the other and since it discloses how one should react to ill will. "Remaining true" entails acting in accord with one's social obligations. Hence, Confucius remains consistent with his emphasis on ritual propriety in the sense that he advises that if one finds oneself in any situation in which one will not be respected or deferred to (either by being ignored or by being faced with ill will) the best thing to do is not to reciprocate in kind but to remain firm in one's allegiance to ritual propriety. In many instances, the best course of action will be to retire and to wait for more favorable circumstances to arise.

This is supported both by his praise of Bo Yi and Shu Qi and by his emphasis on not holding grudges. With regard to the first, the two royal brothers were seen as exemplary since they refused to recognize the new (and, in their eyes, illegitimate) Zhou dynasty and who chose to live in isolation and to ultimately starve to death at the foot of Mount Shou Yang.³⁰ That is, instead of participating in a government that they did not respect, they retired and lived in isolation. With regard to the second, we find that Bo Yi and Shu Qi are often cited as the exemplars in the sense that they harbored no ill will and consequently were loved by all. Confucius similarly praises his deceased disciple Yan Hui for paying no notice to those who transgressed him.³¹ Hence, these passages suggest that one should respond to ill will by remaining firm in one's position (which, for Confucius, is dedicated to social harmony) and show that one should not hold grudges against those who act inappropriately.³²

However, at the same time, we find Confucius criticizing the inappropriate use of rituals in which those in power either perform them incorrectly or use them for

questionable purposes: he does not remain silent when the rituals are slighted. Hence, in 3.6 he criticizes the Ji clan for their inappropriate sacrifice on Mount Tai, in 18.4 he leaves after Ji Huanzi accepts a gift of singing and dancing girls and then does not hold court for three days, and in several instances he criticizes the court's inappropriate use of traditional music.³³ In all of these cases, criticism is warranted since the rituals are being used incorrectly or, more specifically, they are being used to advance personal interests. Hence, it appears that "remaining true" does not necessarily entail responding to ill will by retiring and by letting grudges go, for criticism may be an appropriate return for those who explicitly use the rituals in purely egoistic fashion.³⁴

More important for our purposes, there are a few instances where we find Confucius "remaining true" in situations in which he is intentionally pulled into reciprocal ritual exchanges by superiors that he does not approve of. In doing this they confront him with a dilemma: either heed their requests or ignore them and disregard the dictates of ritual propriety. For example, we learn in 17.1 that Yang Huo, a steward of the Ji clan wanted Confucius to see him, but when Confucius did not oblige him, Yang tried to indebt him with a gift. According to ritual propriety, Confucius would need to reciprocate by acknowledging and expressing thanks for the gift however, not wanting to defer to someone he did not respect, Confucius chose to do so during a time in which Yang Huo would be away from home. In this way Confucius strove to uphold the *li* but also attempted to avoid taking an unflattering position.³⁵ Likewise, in 17.20, a Ru Bei seeks a meeting with Confucius but Confucius declined by feigning illness. However, as Ru Bei's envoy is departing, Confucius takes out his lute and begins to play and sing thereby demonstrating his ruse: he has acted appropriately but has not let the rituals

render him subservient to those whom he does not respect. In these instances, the Master employs the rituals by using them to express his disdain for unqualified authorities.

Hence, Confucius' stance on the return of ill will is subtle. On one hand, it is clear that if one is faced with ill will, the best course is to avoid retaliation and to respond by remaining true to one's social convictions. Of course, since, for Confucius, these convictions include cultivating the self, avoiding personal disgrace, and ultimately promoting social harmony one's response to ill will must simultaneously express ritual propriety and yet make it clear to the offender that his actions are inappropriate. On the other hand, it may be the case that a superior will express ill will by playing a subtle game with the obligations of ritual propriety and in such cases, the task will be make a return by finding a way to uphold the rituals but to avoid deferring to one who harbors such intentions.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by briefly considering the contemporary relevance of the account of reciprocity outlined above. As mentioned, many of the particular rituals of social exchange espoused by Confucius are largely irrelevant for moderns, however, the general form of the exchange that Confucius advocates can still be applied and the social goods that such form makes possible can also be actualized. The disposition to reciprocate is essential in any context since it allows individuals to attain the goods of social equilibrium, self-esteem, and reliable expectations concerning the actions of others. Such goods are necessary for meaningful social experience and consequently the disposition that they are contingent upon is also necessary in any social context.

Further, the practice of reciprocity entails deft consideration of a wide array of factors including the status of the other, the nature of the thing exchanged, and the ends of the relationship in question. One must consider the fittingness and proportionality of one's returns as well as the extent of one's obligations and sacrifices in order to ensure that the relationship is reciprocal in nature. Again, one need not follow the specific prescriptions of the *LiJi* however, one may actualize the form of the exchange described therein by giving ongoing consideration to what kind of exchange is most conducive to enriching and lasting relationships of mutual benefit. This entails ensuring that social exchange reflect the character, ability, and status of those involved.

The remaining point concerns Confucius' stance on the return of ill will. Indeed, this stance resounds with other Chinese philosophers who were disturbed by the prevalence of war and political intrigue in ancient China. We saw that Confucius advocates returning ill will with an example, that is, the way to reciprocate is not to do so in kind but to do so by remaining true to one's position and, more specifically, to remain true in one's dedication to ritual propriety and ultimately to the end of social harmony. This kind of return simultaneously negates the will of the offender, demonstrates one's social commitment, and hinders the human tendencies to be easily slighted, to hold grudges, and to return ill will with ill will.

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Notes

- 1 – “Toward a Confucian Ethic of Gift Exchange” forthcoming in *International Philosophical Quarterly*.
- 2 – Legge translates *Analects* 15.23 as such: “Tsze-kung asked, ‘Is there one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one’s life?’ The Master said, ‘Is not reciprocity (*shu*) such a word?’ ‘What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others.’” *Confucius: Confucian Analects, The Great Learning, and The Doctrine of the Mean* (New York: Dover, 1971), p. 301. This is reiterated in his translation of *The Doctrine Of the Mean* 13.3- “When one cultivates to the utmost the principles of his nature, and exercises them on the principle of reciprocity, he is not far from the path. What you do not like when done to yourself, do not do to others.” Ibid, p. 394. For a discussion on the centrality of reciprocity to Confucian and Rabbinic ethics see Joseph P. Schultz, “Reciprocity in Confucian and Rabbinic ethics”, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 2 (1974): 143-150.
- 3 – For their discussion see *Thinking Through Confucius* (New York, State University of New York Press, 1987) pp. 283-296. On page 289 they write: “It is because *shu* is bi-directional that it can be defined as reciprocity and described in terms of excellence and deference. *Shu* is not simply taking oneself as the model and projecting it onto others; rather, it is first clarifying oneself or deferring to the excellence of others in personal relations. *Shu*, then, is both the act of deferring and the demand for deference.”
- 4 – This is consistent with the Confucian criticism of narrow self-interest (for example, see *Analects* 4.11 and 6.12) and also characterizes the practice of *ren*. In 6.28

Confucius notes that “The man of *ren* is one who, desiring to sustain himself, sustains others, and desiring to develop himself, develops others. To be able from one’s own self to draw a parallel from the treatment of others, that may be called the way to practice *ren*.” All translations of the *Analects* (unless otherwise indicated) are taken from Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont, Jr., *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998).

5 – “Reweaving the ‘One Thread’ of the Analects” in *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 40, Number 1 (January, 1990): 8.

6 – Ibid, pp. 8-9.

7 – I discuss this further in “The Ethics of Confucian Artistry” forthcoming in the Global Theories of the Arts and the Aesthetic special edition of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Winter, 2006).

8 – For more on the analogical thinking characteristic of *shu* see Sin Yee Chan, “Can *Shu* be the One Word that Serves as the Guiding Principle of Caring Actions?” in *Philosophy East and West*, Volume 50, Number 4 (October 2000): 507-524.

9 – This can be supported by citing Confucius’ emphasis on not becoming a “mere vessel” or instrument (2.12) and his praise of Zigong (1.15) who cleverly utilizes a passage from the *Book of Songs* in answering a question.

10 – This point can be supported by Mencius’ consistent criticism of unjust rulers who do not heed the advice of their ministers. For example, see 1B8, 4A10, 7A9, and 7A37.

11 – Indeed, one could argue that Confucius’ relationship with Heaven (*Tian*) is troubling since heaven does not seem to reciprocate his efforts. For example, see *Analects*

6.28, 7.23, 9.5, 9.9, 11.9, and 14.35.

12 – I am indebted to Lawrence C. Becker’s *Reciprocity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986) and its analysis of the goods of reciprocity and the difficulties of fittingness and proportionality.

13 – See *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958) Chapter Two, “Existence as Precarious and Stable”.

14 – Space does not allow a full consideration of the Confucian understanding of friendship. I refer the reader to *Analects* 1.8, 4.26, 12.23, 16.4, and 16.5. A difficulty concerns Confucius’ emphasis on having friends who are morally much better than one and this emphasis goes against the Western notion that friendships should be characterized by equality. For a thorough discussion of this issue see David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking from the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 257-269.

15 – Indeed, Confucius emphasizes the value of disproportional relationships. This will be discussed in more detail in a moment.

16 – For a review and references to the relevant social psychological literature on self-esteem see Victor Gecas, “The Self Concept” in Ralph H. Turner and James F. Short, Jr. (ed.), *Annual Review of Sociology* 8 (1982): 1-33.

17 – For some empirical evidence on the social norm of reciprocity see Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge, 1950), Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: W.W. Norton, 1990), Ruth Benedict, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns*

of Japanese Culture (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1946), and Alvin Goulder, “The Norm of Reciprocity” in *American Sociological Review*, 25 (1960): 161-178.

18 – For more on this topic see Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York: Aldine, 1972), “On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange,” pp. 185-276.

19 – James Legge (trans.), *The Sacred Books of China Part III: The Sacred Books of the East* (Whitefish: Kessinger, 2004.), part Twenty Seven.

20 – Becker’s discussion of fittingness and proportionality can be found in *Reciprocity*, pp. 105-113.

21 – See *Mencius* 2B3.

22 – I find no instance of returning in kind in the *Analects* however, in 5.24, Confucius argues that a Weisheng Gao is “untrue” since, after someone begged vinegar from him, he begged it from one of his neighbors and then gave it to the original beggar. This does not involve a true return in kind, but it instantiates the same logic that ignores the social value of exchange. Presumably, Confucius criticized Gao for not being willing to assume a debt and/or for being willing to pass it on to someone else. Gao schemed to avoid a social exchange and missed the chance to benefit and to be benefited by someone in need.

23 – Likewise, in 4.1, Confucius stresses that enacting *ren*, one should not yield even to one’s teacher.

24 – Hence, in order to remain consistent with his criticism of narrow self-interest, Confucius must hold that good parents must in some sense be selfless and otherwise avoid the tendency to use children as means to their own ends.

25 – I refer the reader to George Herbert Mead’s work on the genesis of the social self.

See *George Herbert Mead on Social Psychology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), Part VI.

26 – Before closing this section I should note an important difficulty for enacting fittingness and proportionality. That is, in order to make a fitting and proportional return, the individual that one makes the return to must be somewhat clear both on the nature of the debt and upon what, for them, is a valuable return. Consequently, the problem concerns those with whom one exchanges who are unclear or deluded about what is valuable for them and/or how one must sacrifice in making a return to them. I do not think Confucius takes this into account since he assumes that the practice of ritual will solve such difficulties, but this seems quite optimistic. Indeed, in many instances, one will have to make returns to individuals who do not understand the complexities of reciprocity and in such cases, one’s efforts to make a return may be futile.

27 – Of course, this is assuming that the giver didn’t make an honest mistake, but if no ill will was intended, then he or she can fix the problem by following the relevant rituals (possibly an apology and the presentation of a gift whose value exceeds that of which was originally expected).

28 – I hope to conclude this series of essays on Confucian social economy with a consideration of religious and moral sacrifice.

29 – Ames and Rosemont render *de* as “beneficence” in order to distinguish it from ill will. For their justification see note 244 on p. 261.

30 – See *Analects* 16.12.

- 31 – See *Analects* 8.5 and with regard to Bo Yi and Shu Qi’s unwillingness to hold grudges see 5.23 and 7.12.
- 32 – In 4B28, Mencius argues that, in response to ill will, one should reflect on one’s behavior. If one has been benevolent, proper, and loyal, then any rebuke will be pointless since there is no point in “rebuking an animal”.
- 33 – See *Analects* 15.11 and 17.18.
- 34 – One could argue that the Ji clan’s inappropriate use of ritual is not an intentional direction of ill will toward Confucius however, I discuss the matter in this context since Confucius does take the affair quite personally and since, in his eyes, such an egregious error on the part of the government must not go un-criticized. This demonstrates that Confucius’ stance on reciprocity is not necessarily quietist in nature
- 35 – Mencius discusses this exchange further in *Mencius* 3B7.

Chinese Glossary

- | | |
|-------------------|------------------|
| a) <i>li</i> 禮 | f) <i>xiao</i> 孝 |
| b) <i>shu</i> 恕 | g) <i>he</i> 和 |
| c) <i>ru</i> 如 | h) <i>yuan</i> 怨 |
| d) <i>xin</i> 心 | i) <i>de</i> 德 |
| e) <i>LiJi</i> 禮記 | j) <i>zhen</i> 真 |