

Confucian Role Ethics: A Critical Survey

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Abstract

This article surveys recent scholarship on Confucian role ethics, examines some of its fundamental commitments, and suggests future directions for scholarship. Role ethics interprets early Confucianism as promoting a relational conception of persons and employs this conception to emphasize how a person's roles and relationships are the source of her ethical obligations and ethical growth. While there is much consensus among role ethic scholars, they disagree over the role of theory in further explicating the view and about the metaphysical basis of relational persons. Strong and moderate versions of role ethics emerge, and the article explores the strengths and weaknesses of both.

'Confucian Role Ethics' denotes a constellation of views (including the prominent work of Roger Ames and his collaborators) that interprets Confucian literature and thought of the Warring States period as promoting a relational conception of persons and employs this conception to emphasize how a person's roles and relationships are the source of her ethical obligations and ethical growth.¹ The interpretation explicates the goal of ethical development, *ren* 仁 (authoritative conduct, humaneness), in terms of *li* 禮 (social rituals, observing ritual propriety).² Following their Confucian predecessors, role ethicists focus on ordinary contexts and human experience rather than the extraordinary – transcendent reason, the authority of reason, or the divine. Whereas deontologists and consequentialists theorize abstract principles and rules that moral agents deliberate about in determining how to act, role ethicists privilege lived human experience in and through our relationships as a guide to action. Any rules or principles that *could* be articulated are particular to one's situated roles and relations. This particularism does not deny abstraction but emphasizes that generalizations are derived from acting in certain ways in one's roles and relations. Although both role ethics and virtue ethics privilege lived experience and the particularity of a person's circumstances, role ethics considers roles and the *li* that constitute them as the source of moral normativity; virtuous dispositions are secondary for role ethicists.

In this article, I examine some fundamental commitments of Confucian role ethics and, in doing so, distinguish between moderate and strong versions. Many Western philosophers may prefer a moderate Confucian role ethics in part because of the difficulty of defending the strong version's metaphysically substantive thesis about persons. Although the debate between advocates of virtue ethic and role ethic readings of early Confucian texts is interesting and deserves attention on its own accord, I will focus primarily here on articulating Confucian role ethics. In the first section, I provide an overview of role ethics and some of its methodological concerns. Then, in the next two sections, I examine key fundamental theses in detail. Compared with Confucian virtue ethics, role ethics is rather novel and, theoretically speaking, an uncharted frontier. So, in the final section, I raise suggestions for future scholarship that will help augment a moderate role ethics, so it may better contribute to contemporary ethical debates.

1. An Overview of Confucian Role Ethics

Recently, with the publication of Ames's *Confucian Role Ethics*, role ethics has received increased attention by proponents and critics alike.³ For the most part, its proponents maintain that a role ethic interpretation surpasses the long-standing virtue ethic readings of early Confucianism in part because the latter imposes too much of a Western philosophical perspective on the Chinese texts. Role ethics aims to make visible philosophical assumptions and views that differ from and even challenge dominant trends within the Western philosophical canon.⁴

One such assumption is a relational conception of personhood, which challenges the individualistic, atomistic conception assumed in liberal political philosophies and many ethical theories. Roles are significant for relational personhood. Following Nuyen, we may understand social roles as social relationships defined in terms of obligations, which are encoded in *li*; a set of obligations constitute a role ('Confucian Ethics' 317).⁵ Moreover, the relational conception of personhood is grounded in three central theses of Confucian role ethics, which are (i) the constitutive-thesis: persons are constituted by their roles and relationships; (ii) the achievement-thesis: full personhood is an achievement of *ren*; and (iii) the determinative-thesis: obligations and duties encoded in one's roles and relationships determine *ren*. Theses (ii) and (iii) imply that we become *ren* – become persons – by cultivating our roles and relations. Role ethicists, however, disagree over how to interpret the constitutive-thesis. Ames maintains a substantive metaphysical thesis about persons – roles fully determine one's personhood – whereas proponents of a moderate role ethics read the constitutive-thesis as providing necessary social conditions for personal identity.

Role ethicists also typically share two methodological goals. The first is that early Confucianism ought to speak for itself and in its own terms as often and as authentically as possible.⁶ As comparative philosophers, role ethicists work hard against the Western philosophical canon's tendency to colonize and appropriate non-Western philosophies. A natural starting point for the role ethicist, then, is the Confucian emphasis on human experience and its practical and concrete aspects rather than the universal and abstract. Consequently, some role ethicists (e.g. Ames and Rosemont) avoid the concept-cluster of rights-talk – liberty, equality, autonomy, principles, rationality – so to uncover and develop a vocabulary that better maps the historical and philosophical context of the Confucian texts. However, just as the early Confucian texts disagree on particular points, so do role ethicists. A role ethicist's operative concept-cluster depends on their preferences in supplementing one of the core texts (i.e. the *Analects*, *Mengzi*, *Xunzi*) with other works, such as the *Xiaojing*, *Liji*, or various *Yijing* commentaries. A role ethic that appeals to, say, the *Analects* and *Yijing* will privilege a more substantive metaphysical reading of the constitutive-thesis because the *Yijing*'s relational cosmologic passages complement Kongzi's silence about human nature throughout the *Analects*. A role ethic that privileges the *Xunzi* or *Mengzi* will not, however, endorse such a strong reading because each text's view of human nature constrains to what extent our natures are considered thoroughly relational.⁷

A second methodological goal is to explore and develop this Confucian vocabulary so that Confucian thought may engage contemporary philosophical issues and questions. Role ethicists review the old to realize the new (*Analects* 2.11) and so do not aim solely at a historical reconstruction of early Confucianism. A difficulty with this aspiration is that early Confucians did not theorize – in the sense that contemporary philosophy does – but focused on practice. For instance, no early Confucian text I am aware of discusses a theory of social roles or the relationality of persons directly as do contemporary role ethicists. *Mengzi* speaks of the *renlun* 人倫 (human relationships) – ruler–subject, husband–wife, father–son, elder and younger brothers, and friends – and the importance of these relationships in becoming *ren*. However, compared with his discussions of human nature, reflection, and the moral sprout analogy, his treatment

of the *renlun* is underdeveloped and sparse.⁸ There is very little in the texts that offer an explanation or conceptual analysis of social roles. So, role ethicists must supplement their interpretations to fill in various philosophical and explanatory lacunae left by the texts.

Unsurprisingly, role ethicists disagree about how to accomplish this supplementation. On the one hand, Mary Bockover, A. T. Nuyen, and John Ramsey appeal to various literatures in contemporary Western philosophy – feminism, relational ethics, and social practice theory – as ways to further develop role ethics. On the other, Ames is reluctant to theorize because he thinks not doing so is a necessary corrective for particular trends in contemporary philosophy. As May Sim has noted, Ames considers role ethics to be anti-essentialist and anti-universalist (617–68) and seems to think that concern with essences and universals are pre-conditions for theorizing. Ames looks to contemporary non-Western sources and process philosophy as sources of supplementation.

2. A Relational Conception of Persons

The constitutive- and achievement-theses explicitly ground the Confucian conception of personhood, which conceives of persons as relational entities.⁹ Bockover writes that ‘the role-ethic of Confucianism entails an assumption that to be a person is to be a relation – or to embody a nexus of roles and attending responsibilities’ (‘Confucian Ritual’ 180). Early Confucians recognize five *renlun* that structure the nexus of roles that constitute each person, though role ethicists often recognize a more liberal range of roles, noting especially the lack of roles accorded to women in the traditional *renlun*. Persons are not defined in terms of what they are (essentially), e.g. rational animals or deliberators, but by what they become through interaction with others. For Ames, each perspective is its own ‘unique way of construing the entire cosmos’ (*Confucian Role Ethics* 72). We are each unique as a configuration of specific roles and relations, which form the background of *li* against which a dynamic social pattern emerges (73). Thus, personhood is *interdependent* and is ‘created through her relationships and how (well) she carries out her responsibilities for them’ (Bockover ‘Confucian Ritual’ 185). Nuyen, a moderate role ethicist, concurs with Bockover that the Confucian conception of persons is radically different from those Western conceptions that understand a person as a ‘self-sufficient, autonomous individual who understands himself...as separate from and independent of others and who chooses to form relationships with others that are purely contingent’ (‘Confucian Ethics’ 316).¹⁰ And, whereas the Enlightenment conception of person is given and rather static, the Confucian person is dynamic and developed over a lifetime (*Analects* 2.4). After all, personhood is an achievement: ‘One’s “self” is the product of cultivating the humanity [*ren*] that embeds one in community’ (Bockover ‘Confucian Ritual’ 183).

Those who favor liberal conceptions of personhood usually have two concerns about relational persons. First, which roles are constitutive and which are contingent? Furthermore, as Daniel Bell worries, any attempt to distinguish between the two seems unprincipled (606). Clearly, immediate family relations ought to be constitutive, but it is not immediately clear whether and why the second-cousin relationship would be contingent. Ames admits to being unsure what to make of the distinction and responds that ‘while all roles are constitutive of whom we become...some are more important and thus more defining of personal identity than others’ (‘Author’s Reflections’ 644). Ames’s answer, however, is not very satisfying because he neither provides a determinant criterion for distinguishing between constitutive and contingent roles nor further explains the constitutes-relationship. Nonetheless, Ames’s response is understandable given that he does not wish to theorize and would likely prefer to resolve the question on a case-by-case basis. It is possible to offer a different response to Bell’s worry: the *renlun* (including mother/daughter and other female sibling relations) are core, constitutive roles. With

the exception of the ruler/subject roles, these roles involve family and intimacy and are long-term. But importantly, as Kongzi stressed, they are the root of *ren* insofar as each of us learns, practices, and acquires a sense of morality through these roles, and these lessons can be extended to other roles (*Analects* 1.2, 1.6; *Mengzi* 1A7). These roles and the lessons we learn through them, then, are the grounds of moral personalities.¹¹

Those who are more skeptical of relational persons might worry that the conception amounts to a denial of the self. This worry often plays into various stereotypes about Confucian (or, more broadly, Asian) subordination of the individual to the collective – similar stereotypes about a lack of agency are proffered when feminists discuss their conception of relational autonomy.¹² Such skepticism is likely rooted in myopically privileging an entrenched conception of personhood or, perhaps worse, in ethnocentric cognitive biases. Conceiving of persons as relational is not a denial of personal identity but, as the role ethicist argues, a reconfiguration or re-centering of personal identity conditions. That is, rather than look for identity conditions in one's immaterial soul, psychological continuity, or material constitution, the role ethicist appeals to the social roles one occupies: Our roles constitute our identity in the sense that they specify who we are. The specification is two-fold. First, there are the roles we occupy – I am a father, a son, an eldest brother, a teacher, and a husband. However, just on my hall, three others occupy the same set of roles, so the appropriate identity conditions must also include the persons to whom I am related through my roles. I am a father to Micah, a son to John, a husband to Sarah, and so on. As such, I am uniquely identified. Moreover, as I enter into new relationships with others, say in becoming a father to Micah, my identity changes: As we come to accept new obligations and identify with new roles, we are undeniably altered. Obviously, more ought to be said in defense of a social role criterion of identity, but the general idea is far from counterintuitive and seems to characterize typical human experience.¹³

The strong and moderate versions of role ethics emerge over different readings of the constitutive-thesis. My discussion so far has been of a thoroughly moderate sort. The strong version asserts a substantive metaphysical claim: Persons are *no more*, or nothing above, the nexus of their roles. Ames argues that this relational conception is based on the correlative cosmology of the *Yijing* and other Confucian-oriented, cosmogenic writings, and Bockover writes 'to be a person is to be a relation' and that the Confucian self is interdependent and 'created through her relationships' ('Confucian Ritual' 180 & 185). This is a particularly difficult thesis to defend. For one, when offered in dialogue with many Western philosophers, it challenges long-standing assumptions and well-worked out positions on personal identity. These Western conceptions can offer seemingly straightforward counterexamples that involve memory, bodily constitution, or some other criterion of personal identity. At best, the strong constitutive-thesis seems to stake out as extreme a position as does the atomistic, Enlightenment person that the thesis challenges.

Nonetheless, the constitutive-thesis need not imply that personhood is *fully* determined by one's roles. A moderate reading of the thesis maintains that personal identity is constituted by a person's roles and relationships in addition to other criteria of personal identity. This reading stresses the Confucian insight that social roles are formative to who we are. Or, as David Wong (who is arguably a critic of role ethics) has noted, the constitutive-thesis recognizes an undeniable fact of our lived experiences – human beings, especially if we are to develop as (moral) agents, need the help of others, and so the thesis ought to be understood as, in part, a developmental claim ('Relational Selves'). For Wong, the constitutive-thesis cannot be foundational or metaphysical since he thinks that *junzi* 君子 (exemplary persons) develop virtues that have a global character that manifest themselves across a wide range of contexts. The moral personhood of the *junzi* is not constituted by relations because, as Wong argues, *junzi* do what is right in all contexts regardless of the relationship (425).

Moreover, Confucian conceptions of human nature suggest another reason the constitutive-thesis may be too strong. Outside of the cosmological texts, early Confucian works do not discuss the person as relational except through metaphor – filial piety is the root (本 *ben*) of our ethical lives – and human nature is thoroughly biological (Bloom ‘Biology and Culture’). Both Mengzi and Xunzi argue that human nature includes the desires for sex and food, operations of the sense organs, and cognitive and affective faculties and abilities. Given these conceptions of human nature, ontologically speaking, we might be biological entities who are further constituted by social roles: Confucian rituals and social norms – civilization in general – enhances our personhood. Nonetheless, these roles and the norms that govern them are fundamental to our ethical development and ethical commitments.

3. Role Ethics and Normativity

The determinative-thesis maintains that roles, or more specifically the *li* that govern them, ground the moral core of *ren*. Given the achievement-thesis, one’s ethical development involves practicing, internalizing, and authoring the social norms and rituals that govern one’s particular roles. That is, as one achieves relational personhood, one becomes *ren*. Here, however, I will not discuss Confucian ethical development in any detail – because the three major early Confucians provide significantly different accounts and operative metaphors. Instead, I will focus on the most pressing question for role ethics: How do *li*, which clearly possess social normativity, ground ethical, or moral normativity? Answers to this question seem beset with further problems. For instance, the resulting account may imply a form of relativism or collapse into virtue ethics or deontology. In this section, I explore possible answers that address how role ethics is not relativistic and does not reduce to another ethical theory.¹⁴

As mentioned, the early Confucians recognized five human relationships of father–son, husband–wife, elder–younger, ruler–minister, and friends. We do not need to treat this list as exhaustive but as a mnemonic for a wider range of roles, especially if we take a cue from Ames and understand that all other roles ought to be seen as radials of familial roles (*Confucian Role Ethics* 261). Kongzi and his disciples cared a lot for the teacher–student relationship and later-generation Confucians similarly focused on this relationship. Moreover, the *Liji* mentions and discusses a variety of familial relations, a multitude of bureaucratic positions, and other occupational roles.¹⁵ Even in the *Analekts*, Kongzi himself is concerned with his role as neighbor (9.10), political consultant (12.18), and scholar official (15.1). Needless to say, the role ethicist needs to do more to elucidate and specify the relevant range of social roles.

However, expanding the range of roles does not explain how relationships ground an ethic. In the first place, social roles possess social normativity. Recall that social roles – in both the Confucian and Eurocentric traditions – are governed by a set of social norms and obligations that define the roles such that ‘to be in a social relationship...is to stand under certain obligations’ (Nuyen ‘Confucian Ethics’ 317).¹⁶ In the Confucian tradition, these norms may be *li* associated with a role whether explicitly articulated in the *Liji* or another liturgical manual or implicitly understood through rote practice. Nuyen sums this up: ‘What one ought to do and how one ought to behave in a certain relationship are all set out in *li*’ (317). Ames articulates the social normativity of roles this way:

those family roles and the extended relations we associate with community...are themselves a normative vocabulary more compelling than abstract injunctions. Such roles recommend in the most concrete of terms an existentially informed disposition and the search for a course of conduct that is the ground of family and community life...‘to mother’ and ‘to neighbor’ are not merely descriptive; they

serve as ethical injunctions, and unlike abstract principles, they serve as concrete guidelines that help us to determine what to do next. (*Confucian Role Ethics* 168)

Moreover, the normative structure of roles goes beyond the Confucian context. The role of, say, a mother or teacher is governed by rules that are specific to a particular social context, which depends on historical era and various socioeconomic factors. For Confucians, though, these rules take on additional significance because, in many cases, actions that accord with *li* are *yi* 義 ('appropriate' or 'basic morality') and enable one to relate to and cooperate with others.¹⁷ Bockover argues that *li* 'is a relational process with participants who recognize and respond to each other in ways appropriate [*yi*] to the relationship.'

Still, one might worry, as Bell does, that the socially normative grounding of role ethics cannot determine the content of moral norms (606–609). Bell understands moral norms to be obligations we owe other people, and, presumably, these obligations involve how we ought to treat others we are not in relationships with.¹⁸ Following Bell, we may again identify strong and weak claims. The strong claim is the determinative-thesis, which is a necessary thesis for role ethics. The weak claim, which Bell favors, holds that roles and their relevant social norms *constrain* what we ought to do. Bell argues that the strong determinative-thesis cannot be true because (a) given that roles change over time, moral norms must also change and (b) role-obligations entail conflicting obligations with other roles. Thus, Bell concludes that moral standards are external to role-obligations. Ramsey has posed a similar worry to Bell's, which he calls the 'role dilemma', that tracks the inevitable conflict between the demands of *ren* and obligations of one's roles ('Mengzi's Solution'). To take a well-known example from Mengzi, should one save a drowning woman (a demand of *ren*) or observe ritual and not touch her because she is one's sister-in-law (4A17)? For most ethical theories, including virtue ethic interpretations of Confucianism, this is not really a dilemma because according to these theories, moral obligations always trump role-obligations. Yet the dilemma seems intractable for strong versions of role ethics.

Clearly, the weak formulation is a truism – no one would contest, for instance, that the norms that parents ought to care for their children or teachers ought to grade fairly do constrain parents' and teachers' actions. While not addressing Bell's concerns directly, role ethicists have attempted to address similar worries either through a commitment to ethical particularism or by appealing to strategies employed by early Confucians that distinguish between norms that advance *ren* and those that do not. For instance, Bockover's strategy, which I will discuss below, involves recognizing that not all social norms are *li* that determine *ren* ('Confucian Ritual'). Alternatively, Sarah Mattice ('On "Rectifying"') and Nuyen ('Confucian Ethics') separately argue that *zhengming* 正名 (rectification of names, attuning names) resolves the purported conflict among roles and purported conflicts with moral norms. Mattice argues that *zhengming* involves constant revision of roles and relationships such that the *ren* person acts to create a new normative response to the peculiarities of a given situation. Nuyen contends that the reflective process of *zhengming* is learning to recognize and accept our role-obligations and corrects our tendency to misunderstand what obligations actually are in particular situations.

Common to many of these strategies is a commitment to ethical particularism so to explicate how role-obligations are moral obligations. Role ethics requires a specific form of particularism to distinguish it from Confucian virtue ethics, which also often appeals to particularism. Recall that personhood is relationally two-fold: I am a person not only in virtue of my roles of father, son, and so on, but also in virtue of the specific people to whom I am related. So, a subset of my role-obligations includes not only those of the father-role but also those of fathering Micah. Both moderate and strong role ethicists think that role ethics offers an alternative to Western ethical theories insofar as they emphasize generalities in ethical principles and virtues that are

then applied to particular cases. Role ethicists contend that Confucianism reverses the priority: Roles are the ultimate source of ethical principles (Ames 'Author's Response' 645). Nuyen also accepts this vision, explaining that Confucianism is an 'ethics in which virtues and rules derive from an understanding of the self as constituted by the roles that are determined by the relationships in which a person stands' ('Confucian Ethics' 315).

Granted, Kongzi and his ilk discuss virtues and ethical concepts – it would be hard for them to do otherwise – but such talk ought to be understood as referring to generalizations derived from acting courageously, honestly, and so on within relationships. For instance, Ames argues that virtue-talk functions

primarily as a generalization that is derived from acting courageously or justly within our family and community roles and relations. Courage is an abstracted characterization of the unrelenting tenacity of this mother protecting her child from this danger....such principles point most concretely to the unfolding of complex configurations of always-unique, always-specific relations as they are informed by analogy with past experience. ('Author's Response' 646)

Moreover, principles are not applied to cases.¹⁹ Instead, 'we discover a phenomenology of experience that serves as a resource for determining what it would mean to act in such a way as to enhance our relations' (Ames *Confucian Role Ethics* 258). Roles and role-obligations do change over time as do the people in roles. Yet such change is unproblematic because one is dutiful (*zhong* 忠) to the changing context. In short, our roles, rather than abstract principles, provide the better guide for ethical action.

One might worry that such a unique particularism – or even a role-particularism – may suffer from moral relativism. In their review of Ames's monograph, Craig Ihara and Ryan Nichols raise the question of whether Ames's interpretation of role ethics implies – even presupposes – a moral relativism. Ames, as well as other role ethicists, maintains role ethics is inconsistent with moral relativism. Of course, the various obligations that one inherits in one's roles are culturally specific, but these are just the cultural clothing, so to say, covering the basics of relationships.²⁰ Cultural difference among role-obligations does not necessarily imply relativism – no one escapes the five relationships or, at least, familial relationships. Moreover, if one favors Mengzi's version of Confucianism as Bockover and Ramsey do, then both *ren* and *li* – the goal and source of role-obligations – are grounded in human nature and the four *duan* 端 (beginnings) are our moral faculties, which are shared among all people.

As Bockover notes, role ethics also avoids relativism because not all social norms (i.e. not all purported *li*) express *ren*, our humanity. She calls this the 'indeterminacy of the human way' ('Confucian Ritual' 187). This indeterminacy allows for a distinction between norms that enable one to achieve *ren* and those that actually work to undermine *ren*. It is a different task to determine which *li* – either early Confucian or modern social norms – contribute to or undermine our achievement of personhood through *ren*; nonetheless, it is a task that future work might more fully address. For instance, Ramsey argues, in further support of Bockover's indeterminacy claim, that Mengzi's employment of *zhi* 知 (wisdom) serves as a Confucian sense of autonomy that is thoroughly relational and competency-based such that individuals who have sufficiently developed their moral capacities begin to investigate (on their own) which *li* and role commitments further hone their development as persons ('Confucian Role Ethics').

The Amesian-styled account of role ethics maintains strong versions of the constitutive- and determinative-theses and, at least for Ames and Henry Rosemont, is committed to anti-essentialism and anti-universalism. Ames's *Confucian Role Ethics* has so far received most of the critical attention given to role ethics. His strong anti-theoretical stance may be the instigating force behind many of the criticisms. Nonetheless, a moderate Confucian role ethic also accepts

the strong determinative-thesis – the hallmark of role ethics. Yet a moderate role ethic remains agnostic about any substantive metaphysical commitments about personhood, accepts a weak version of the constitutive-thesis, and seeks to develop role ethics through theory.

4. *Some Final Thoughts*

In the previous sections, I spelled out basic commitments of as well as differences between versions of Confucian role ethics. Both versions envision role ethics as an interlocutor in contemporary philosophical and ethical debates. Strong versions, at least as represented in Ames's work, are anti-essentialist and anti-universalist and refrain from theorizing. Strong versions of role ethics, then, serve as a critique of contemporary ethical theories and debates. A moderate role ethic aims to engage contemporary Anglo-American philosophy in a more constructive way and is open to supplementing and refining the theoretical backbone of the role ethics interpretation in ways that resemble how philosophy is typically done in the academy. A moderate role ethics aims to supplement and develop the Confucian perspective in at least two ways. First, it is, or ought to be, willing to develop Confucian conceptions of concepts that currently occupy much of philosophy. These conceptions ought to be grounded in the philosophical context of original texts as much as possible. Ramsey, for example, has specified Confucian conceptions of agency and autonomy that strive to be faithful to Confucian concerns and consistent with other commitments of role ethics, particularly the relationality of persons ('Confucian Role Ethics'). And Bockover has articulated a Confucian conception of freedom ('Virtue of Freedom') and written about same-sex marriages and modernizing Confucian roles for gender-parity ('Confucian Ritual'). Addressing explanatory problems and tensions within role ethics is a second way one can bring role ethics into dialogue with contemporary positions. As I have already noted, some role ethicists are and must continue to work on solutions to the role dilemma and role-to-role conflicts as well as explain how these solutions bear on the overall commitments of the interpretation. Additionally, more work is needed to explain how and why role ethics does not presuppose moral relativism.

By way of a conclusion, let me suggest a few issues that future work on role ethics ought to address. First, it needs a stronger argument distancing itself from virtue ethic interpretations, with which it already shares much – both are concerned with the ethical development of persons in and through their roles and both appeal to forms of particularism. However, virtue ethic interpretations appear to have a trump: When role ethicists discuss how roles ground obligations, they often appeal to virtue-talk. Earlier, I explained that Ames thinks honesty, courage, and other virtues are generalizations from actions-in-roles. Yet, as the criticism maintains, virtues still seem to have explanatory priority over roles because the virtues, or dispositions, are the moral component of one's personality and roles the means of developing those dispositions.²¹

Second, and most importantly, we need a Confucian theory of social practices.²² Actually, regardless of one's interpretative allegiances, early Confucian scholars ought to conduct more research on a theory of social practices since ritual and other social concepts are so significant in Confucianism. This theory must not only provide an explanatory account of how roles and their norms generate obligations but also seek to address a number of related concerns. How does revision of *li* occur? The common answer, one not limited to role ethicists, is that *junzi* or Confucian sages author their own *li* and create new norms that the rest of us follow. However, this answer seems disingenuous when we think about how widespread norms actually work: Rarely does one enact a social norm via fiat. More often, large swaths of the community must reproduce the action before it becomes a prescriptive norm. Additionally, the Confucian theory of social practices should also explain how to expand the *renlun* relationships

as well as how an emphasis on roles could be relevant in contemporary society – at least the portions of it that are concerned with political liberalism, feminism, and other equality movements. How or why should we accept roles that naturalize hierarchies that often oppress (or may be conducive to oppression) and institutionalize difference? Addressing these and other related issues would go a long way in helping early Confucian insights on human experience reach contemporary ears.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ Throughout the article, I use 'role ethics' and 'role ethicist' to refer to Confucian role ethics and its proponents, respectively. Ames's two long-standing collaborators are Henry Rosemont and David Hall. See, for instance, Rosemont and Ames, Ames and Rosemont, and Hall and Ames. Indeed, Rosemont is responsible for coining 'Confucian Role Ethics'. Here I focus on Ames's work over his collaborators because, until recently, his had been the sole monograph on the subject; this year, Rosemont published, *Against Individualism*, the second monograph to take up role ethics.

² 'Ren' is polysemous, referring to either a specific virtue, which is approximate to benevolence, or the ethical ideal or goal of Confucian moral development. Throughout this article, I consider 'ren' in the latter sense. Ames and Rosemont gloss *li* as 'those meaning-invested roles, relationships, and institutions which facilitate communication, and which foster a sense of community' (*Analects of Confucius* 51).

³ For contributions from other role ethicists, see Bockover 'Confucian Ritual' and 'Confucianism and Ethics', Cottine, Mattice, Nuyen 'Confucian Ethics' and 'Moral Obligation', and Ramsey 'Confucian Role Ethics' and 'Mengzi's Solution'.

⁴ When I (and other role ethicists) speak of the Western tradition, I have in mind the dominant and currently vogue positions of the Western philosophical canon in moral and social-political philosophy, viz. the emphasis on analytic methodology, liberal political theories, and three ethical theories – Kantianism, Utilitarianism, and virtue ethics. Nonetheless, the so-called Western tradition is, in actuality, rather pluralistic and incorporates a number of competing traditions – e.g. American Pragmatism, all sorts of feminisms, Continental philosophy, existentialism, and the like.

⁵ One shortcoming of the role ethics literature is its relative silence on the nature of social roles and other social practices. See Section 4 of this paper, which calls for more work in a Confucian theory of social practices.

⁶ Obviously this is a hermeneutic ideal – any act of interpretation depends on some other tradition as the metalanguage for the interpretation. Indeed, much of Ames's explication of role ethics employs an early American pragmatist, specifically a Deweyan, vocabulary to explicate the notion of relational persons.

⁷ I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for helping me clarify key points in this paragraph.

⁸ As one of the reviewers correctly points out, Xunzi does describe a state without *li* and roles as chaotic. Xunzi spends more time developing a non-teleological conception of heaven and an account of deliberate effort than he does discussing the nature of roles. As with Mengzi, Xunzi clearly emphasizes the importance and significance of roles but lacks a sustained discussion of the concept of social roles.

⁹ Role ethicists are not alone in calling attention to the Confucian person and agency as relational. See, for example, Fraser, Lee, Li, and Wong 'If We' and 'Relational Selves'. Moreover, the Confucian relational conception of persons bears much in

common with the Anglo-American feminist conception of relational autonomy and agency. For more on relational autonomy, see Meyers, and Mackenzie and Stoljar; and, for the comparison between Confucianism and relational autonomy, see Kupperman, and Ramsey 'Confucian Role Ethics'.

¹⁰ It is important to note that Nuyen recognizes that within the Western tradition, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, there are quite a few thinkers who offer a relational ethics ('Moral Obligation').

¹¹ Of course, in recognition of a plurality of family-structures, the roles should be understood functionally and not literally. A biological grandparent may be a mother of her grandchild if she assumes and adheres to the various obligations and duties of motherhood.

¹² 'Relational autonomy' does not single out a particular conception of autonomy but refers to a range of views that share a central conviction that 'persons are socially embedded and that agents' identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting determinants, such as race, class, gender, and ethnicity' (Mackenzie and Stoljar 4).

¹³ Tu has long argued for a similar position – that one's social roles are transformative of one's identity – see, for instance chapter three of his *Confucian Thought*. For a more detailed discussion of relational identity conditions, see Nuyen 'Confucian Ethics' 317–321.

¹⁴ In the next and final section, I discuss some lines of inquiry for role ethics, and addressing these questions also belongs among future work.

¹⁵ For instance, in the first chapter of the *Liji*, *Quli*, sections 99–104, we find a discussion of bureaucratic positions under the Son of Heaven.

¹⁶ For more on social roles in the Western tradition, see Hardimon and Sciaraffa, although both tend to focus on the voluntary and contractual aspects of roles.

¹⁷ As one reviewer points out, 'yi' may refer to the process of amending and improving *li* when *li* fail to accord with *yi*. Role ethicists have not opted for this strategy and instead appeal to the moral person's competency with ritual by relying on *zhengming* (Mattice and Nuyen) or *li* and *zhi* (Bockover and Ramsey). I discuss these strategies later in the article.

¹⁸ Bell also seems to think that moral norms involve moral rules we can apply to particular situations. This assumption runs contrary to the role ethicists' prioritizing roles as the sources of moral normativity and the insistence that rules and principles are abstractions from actions in particular scenarios.

¹⁹ To a certain extent, this is true of *li*, which often are understood as Confucian stand-ins for ethical rules and principles. Kongzi, Mengzi, and Xunzi spend a lot of time discussing whether and how some action or another accords with *li* or is *li* despite appearances to the contrary. Though brothers- and sisters-in-law should not touch during gift giving, they may to save the other's life.

²⁰ An alternative metaphor for this relationship is that *li* is the body language of *ren* and different cultures' social norms are different expressions of *ren*. For an extended meditation on this metaphor, see Bockover 'Confucian Ritual'.

²¹ See Ivanhoe for a detailed account of the problem. Although P. J. Ivanhoe directs criticism towards Rosemont's version of role ethics, the issue can be generalized to other forms of role ethics.

²² For an insightful discussion and beginning of such a theory, see Cheryl Cottine's dissertation *Roles, Relations, and Chinese Ethics*.

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