

Chinese Metaphysics and its Problems

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Michael Puett

One of the more exciting projects over the past century has been the attempt to bring Chinese thought into larger comparative categories and to allow those categories to be accordingly altered and developed. In the earlier attempts to do such work, metaphysics and conceptions of reality were a primary focus of concern. Over the past few decades, however, that emphasis has shifted to ethics. The results of this work in comparative ethics have been tremendously exciting, but it has occurred at the expense of continuing work in the area of metaphysics. This book is thus very timely, allowing us to reflect again on an issue that has received less attention recently than it deserves.

Given this introduction, my choice of a topic may seem somewhat surprising. I will begin with a text that explicitly focuses not on metaphysics but rather on ritual and, indeed, ethics – the *Book of Rites (Liji)*. But I will try to argue that the sophisticated and very powerful set of theories offered by the text concerning ritual is also rooted within a complex set of metaphysical claims. The goal of my chapter will be to analyze these metaphysical arguments, to discuss why they are so important for the theories of ritual found within the text, and to explore the philosophical implications of the text's attempts to develop a ritual-based vision of reality.

The argument of the “Liyun”

I will turn first to the “Liyun” chapter.¹ The chapter opens with a dialogue between Confucius and his disciple Yan Yan 言偃. In distant antiquity, according to Confucius, the Great Way prevailed:

In the practice of the Great Way, all under Heaven was public. They selected the talented and capable. They spoke sincerely and cultivated peace. Therefore,

¹ For a fuller elaboration on some of the ideas discussed here, see Puett 2010b.

people did not only treat their own kin as kin, and did not only treat their own sons as sons.² (*Liji*, “Liyun,” ICS, 9.1/59/24)

But the Great Way was subsequently lost: “Now, the Great Way has become obscure. All under Heaven has become defined by families. Each treats only its own kin as kin, only their own sons as sons” (*Liji*, “Liyun,” ICS, 9.1/59/27–8). The point of the loss is clearly the emergence of the dynastic system, in which everything would be defined according to competing lineages. Ritual, intriguingly, is seen as one of the problems:

Ritual and propriety are used as the binding. They are used to regulate the ruler and subject, used to build respect between the father and son, used to pacify elder and younger brother, used to harmonize husband and wife, used to set up regulations and standards, used to establish fields and villages, used to honor the courageous and knowledgeable, taking merit as personal. Therefore, schemes manipulating this arose, and because of this arms were taken up. (*Liji*, “Liyun,” ICS, 9.1/59/28–30)

The very inventions designed to improve the life of humanity – including, most importantly, ritual – also broke humanity from the earlier harmony, creating competitive schemes and manipulations.

But, if used properly, ritual can also help to bring about a different – and much better – type of harmony. Indeed, even after the loss of this harmony through the creation of the dynastic system, six figures were able to use ritual successfully:

Yu, Tang, Wen, Wu, Cheng, and the Duke of Zhou were selected because of this. These six rulers were always attentive to ritual, thereby making manifest their propriety, thereby examining their trustworthiness, making manifest when there were transgressions, making the punishments humane and the expositions yielding, showing constancy to the populace. If there were some who were not following this, they would be removed from their position and the populace would take them as dangerous. This was the Lesser Peace. (*Liji*, “Liyun,” ICS, 9.1/59/30–2)

This effective use of ritual brought about a Lesser Peace – lesser, that is, than the harmony of the Great Way.

Thus far, the argument would appear to be that the Lesser Peace is, as the name implies, a lesser version of the Great Way, and that our goal should be to return to the Great Way. But then Confucius provides a fuller description of what the Great Way was like in distant antiquity. Yes, humans were in harmony with the natural world. But it was also a period when humans had to take shelter in caves and nests, and could eat only undomesticated fruits and raw meat:

² My translations from the *Liji* here and throughout have been aided greatly by those of Legge 1885.

In ancient times, the former kings did not yet have houses. In the winter they lived in caves, in the summer in nests. They did not yet know the transformations of fire. They ate the fruits of grasses and trees, and the meat of birds and animals. They drank their blood and ate their feathers and fur. (*Liji*, “Liyun,” ICS, 9.5/60/14–15)

The sages thus created for humanity dwellings, fire, and agriculture to lift them from the state of animals. These inventions dramatically improved the life of humanity. But they also broke humanity from the harmony within which they once lived. And yet, as is now clear from the narrative, the text is not calling for a return to this Great Way – a way in which humans would again be reduced to the state of animals. Instead, the text is calling for ritual to be used effectively such that the world of humanity can be brought into a different type of unity than existed before. As with the six successful rulers from the past, a form of unity would be created that would nonetheless maintain all of the inventions that had destroyed the Great Way of the past.

One of the key analogies the text makes to explain how this could be done with ritual is agriculture. Just as the invention of agriculture involved domesticating elements of plants and animals that exist on earth such that they could be grown and employed in accord with the patterns that exist in the heavens (particularly seasonal change), so does ritual, if used properly, involve taking elements of human beings and domesticating them such that they work with larger patterns. In the case of humans, these elements are the dispositions: “What are the dispositions of humans? Happiness, anger, sadness, fear, love, detesting, liking – humans are capable of these seven without study” (*Liji*, “Liyun,” ICS, 9.23/62/8). All humans have these dispositional responses from birth.

The sages then domesticated these dispositions through rituals, just as the sages domesticated the earth for agriculture:

Therefore, the sage kings cultivated the handles of propriety and the arrangements of the rites in order to regulate human dispositions. Thus, human dispositions are the field of the sage kings. They cultivated the rites in order to plough it, arrayed propriety in order to plant it, expounded teachings in order to hoe it; took humaneness as the basis in order to gather it; and sowed music in order to pacify it. Therefore, rites are the fruit of propriety. (*Liji*, “Liyun,” ICS, 9.35/63/25)

And, also as with agriculture, the domestication was done to bring these dispositions into the patterns found in the larger cosmos:

Thus, when the sagely humans created rules, they necessarily took Heaven and Earth as the basis, took *yin* and *yang* as the level, took the four seasons as the handle, and took the sun and stars as the marker [of time]; the moon was taken as the measure, the ghosts and spirits as the assistants, the five phases as the

substance, the rites and propriety as the instruments, the dispositions of humans as the field, and the four efficacious creatures as the domesticates. (*Liji*, "Liyun," ICS, 9.26/62/22-4)

The result of this domestication through the rites was that humans and spirits were brought into accord with these patterns:

Thus, the rites were practiced in the suburbs, and the myriad spirits received offices through them. The rites were practiced at the earth god's altar, and the hundred goods could be fully appropriated through them. The rites were practiced in the ancestral shrines, and filiality and kindness were submitted through them. The rites were practiced with the five sacrifices, and the correct standards were taken as models through them. Therefore, from the suburban sacrifice, earth god altar, ancestral shrine, mountains and rivers, five sacrifices, propriety was cultivated and the rites were embodied. (*Liji*, "Liyun," ICS, 9.30/63/10-11)

Through ritual, then, the sage makes all under Heaven into a single family. But unlike the way that this was done when the dynastic rule was first created, the sage does this not in a manner that breeds competition. Instead, the sage does it covertly, building upon the domesticated dispositions of the populace:

Therefore, as for the sage bearing to take all under Heaven as one family and take the central states as one person, it is not something done overtly. He necessarily knows their dispositions, opens up their sense of propriety, clarifies what they feel to be advantageous, and apprehends what they feel to be calamitous. Only then is he capable of enacting it. (*Liji*, "Liyun," ICS, 9.22/62/5)

All under Heaven has thus been brought together as a single family – but now this unity includes all of the inventions and technologies invented by the sages, and it is a unity in which the sage is at the center of the new sets of relations that have been created.

In other chapters of the *Liji* this argument is fleshed out. The family in question is one in which all of the individual families of the realm are linked to the ruler, who becomes the father and mother of the people, and the ruler in turn becomes the Son of Heaven (Puett 2005). The ruler thus resides at the center, linking the entire populace and the larger cosmos. The entire world becomes a single family, but not in the form that occurred after the introduction of dynastic rule, in which single families were vying with each other to take control of the realm. It is rather a ritual construction, in which familial dispositions have been extended to the ruler and, through the ruler, to the rest of the cosmos. As in agriculture, in which elements of the natural world were domesticated in accord with

patterns such as seasonal change, in this case human dispositions have been domesticated and connected to the rest of the cosmos.

Instead of living like animals, human sages have domesticated the world and placed themselves in the center, linking the realms of Heaven and Earth: “Thus, the sage forms a triad with Heaven and Earth and connects with the ghosts and spirits so as to control his rule” (*Liji*, “Liyun,” ICS, 9.18/61/26). Ritual became the means by which this world was actively brought into harmony. But this was not a harmony like that which existed in distant antiquity. Now it is a harmony in which Heaven and Earth have been actively connected by the sage, and with the sage in the center. It is thus a world in which the harmony that exists includes and is in part based upon the creations of humans, including everything from clothing to shelter to agriculture to morality.

But unlike the Great Way of the past, this is an unstable order, and hence is called the Lesser Peace. Since the dynastic system was created, we are told, only six figures have been able to pull this off. The reason, the narrative makes clear, is that the world is not really a unity – this is simply a ritual construction. It is a broken and fragmented world, and an effective ruler is one who can use the dispositions of humans to create a covert sense that the world is, on the contrary, a single family.

This is an argument directly reminiscent of that seen in the *Xunzi*:

Therefore, Heaven and Earth gave birth to the gentleman. The gentleman gives patterns to Heaven and Earth. The gentleman forms a triad with Heaven and Earth, is the summation of the myriad things, and is the father and mother of the people. Without the gentleman, Heaven and Earth have no pattern, ritual and righteousness have no unity; above there is no ruler or leader, below there is no father or son. This is called the utmost chaos. Ruler and minister, father and son, older and younger brother, husband and wife begin and then end, end and then begin. They share with Heaven and Earth the same pattern, and last for ten thousand generations. This is called the great foundation. (*Xunzi*, “Wangzhi,” 5.7a–7b; HY 28/9/65–29/9/67)

It is humans that create a new world by bringing Heaven and Earth together, with humans in the center.

Let us reflect on the implications of such an argument for the conceptions of reality in the text. Although the text says relatively little about the larger cosmos, I would like to argue that it is in fact telling of a larger vision of reality, and one that I think is common throughout several of the chapters of the *Liji* (in particular the “Jifa” and “Jiyi,” as well as the “Liyun” itself) (Puett 2005; 2010a). The implicit view is that the world, at least in our experience, is one of discontinuity – of distinct things that interact and relate to each other poorly. This may not have been true in distant antiquity, but it is true in the historical present. The goal of human

behavior is thus to domesticate this world by finding patterns in this set of poor relations (such as, for example, the shift of the seasons), and to transform things (including everything from human dispositions to elements of the natural world) such that a different type of order is created. The result of this domestication is the creation of a harmonious world – but it is a creation. Harmony is not characteristic of the existent world, and humans are not being asked to conform themselves to some pre-existent harmony. Harmony is a product of human domestication.

In the “Liyun,” this point is underlined by means of a historical narrative that paints two portraits of an earlier period of unity and harmony. In the first portrait, the period of unity and harmony is presented explicitly as the flourishing of the Great Way. But in the second portrait, humans at the time were simply like animals. The progressive accumulation of innovations to lift humanity from this state is clearly presented as being proper and fitting, even though these innovations – including ritual itself – also entailed a loss of the earlier unity. The result was that humans created a world of discrete entities that interacted poorly with each other. In the case of humans, this was a world in which everything became defined as private, and endless competition came to define human interactions. The world, in short, was one of discrete things in competition and strife.

But it is clear from the dual opening frame that the text is not calling for a return to this earlier unity, as such a return would also entail a loss of the progressive accumulation of innovations among humans. It is rather calling for a domestication in which the discrete things would be connected back to each other into a new form of unity. The result of this human activity is that a far better form of unity is created – far better, of course, from the point of view of humanity.

Let us pull back and turn to some of the larger issues that this text may raise for us. I mentioned before that Chinese metaphysics was once a primary focus of comparative concern. When this was the case, Chinese cosmology was often held up as being perhaps the paradigmatic example of a harmonious cosmology – a cosmology in which everything within the natural world was inherently interrelated, and the goal of humans was thus to accord with the larger patterns of the natural world.

Such a reading arose at a certain time, and for clear reasons. It arose in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western scholarship, with China being held up as the perfect Other to a self-proclaimed modern orientation in which humans would be breaking from the natural world and learning to control it. Put negatively, this meant that Chinese cosmology restricted humanity simply to following the larger patterns of the world, unable to assert human free will. Put positively, it would lead to a romanticized reading of Chinese cosmology, in which humans were seen as

harmonizing with a larger world instead of trying to dominate it. But such a reading – whether put positively or negatively – simply defined classical China as the Other, as the opposite of what was claimed to characterize the modern West.

This reading of Chinese cosmology was part of a much larger development in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Western social theory, which posited a “traditional” world from which a “modern” world was breaking. One of the primary characteristics of a “traditional” worldview was that it assumed a vision of the cosmos as a unified whole, with a set of patterns to which humans had to learn to cohere. Rituals, for example, were read as functioning to bring humans into alignment with these larger cosmic patterns. The reason that China became such an Other for much of Western theory was that it seemed to be the one major civilization with a significant philosophical tradition that maintained this earlier worldview. Hence the importance of China for so many thinkers from Hegel to Weber and beyond.

But, apart from simply being a significant Other to a self-conceived modern West, it is not really clear how much one could learn from a cosmology portrayed this way. This may in part explain why the focus has shifted away from metaphysics in more recent comparative discussions of China.

But perhaps we have been missing some of what is interesting about this material, and thus ways in which the material could indeed be brought into a richer comparative conversation.³ In the “Liyun,” the argument is not that the world is inherently harmonious and that we must learn to accord with this harmony. The world of our experience is rather filled with discrete entities that relate poorly to each other. There are indeed patterns – pockets of order – in the world, these pockets do not cohere into an overall unity. Our goal is thus to utilize these pockets of order as we transform the world into one where humans can flourish.

Several colleagues and I authored a book arguing that if one takes indigenous theories of ritual seriously – and those from classical China were the best example of this – one finds views of ritual and cosmology radically at odds with the characterizations of “traditional” cultures posited in so much Western theory. Far from assuming a harmonious cosmos with which ritual would help bring one into accord, classical Chinese ritual theory on the contrary argued that the world of our experience was one of fragmentation, and that ritual served to create an “as-if” world of

³ For outstanding work along these lines, see the excellent discussions of harmony in Li (2014), of coherence by Ziporyn (2012), and of theodicy by Perkins (2014).

harmony that was seen as distinct from the world outside the ritual space (Seligman et al. 2008; Puett 2010a). In the example from the “Liyun,” the statement that the world was a single family is a ritual statement, and one that is explicitly not an empirical statement about the nature of the actual world.

What I would like to argue is that many of our models in comparative religion and philosophy may be based at least in part on mistakenly taking “as-if” statements as being assumptions – taking, most frequently, ritual statements as being assumed worldviews. If one looks at so many of the statements concerning harmony that are said to characterize so-called “traditional” societies, it is remarkable how many such statements are in fact ritual claims. But stating in a ritual context that the world is harmonious is not indicative of an assumption that the world is harmonious; it is more likely indicative of a ritual claim – an “as-if” claim – made in contrast to the world of our lived experience.

In the case of China, it has been particularly common to read the sensibility generated in a ritual context as a metaphysical assumption. But, again in this case, the generated ritual sensibility is intended to contrast with the actual world of our experience. So reading such a ritual sensibility as an assumption misses both the work of ritual and the metaphysical assumptions that underlay the perceived need for such ritual work.

Of course, it could be argued – quite correctly – that this is an overly strong argument to make about Chinese metaphysics based on a ritual text. After all, one is dealing here with a text explicitly devoted to arguing that harmony of a kind that is beneficial for human flourishing is a product of ritual – an argument that could perhaps be read as simply being written in opposition to another, perhaps dominant position, that the world really is harmonious, and our goal as humans really is to learn to live properly within this larger unity.

But, in fact, this argument finds a parallel with other texts from the early Han as well – texts that are not based upon notions of ritual at all. In the “Fanlun” chapter of the *Huainanzi*, for example, one finds a very similar argument (Puett 2014b). The chapter opens with a passage about the world of distant antiquity, when humans lived in perfect harmony with the natural world. Then, in the ensuing section, the text describes distant antiquity again, only now noting that in this period humans also had no clothing, no shelter, no agriculture. The sages accordingly had to invent new technologies that would improve the life of humanity. But these very inventions broke humanity from the harmony of nature and created a world of discontinuity and competition. The chapter concludes by arguing not that we should return to antiquity but rather that sages should

now create a new form of harmony that would include all the inventions of mankind – agriculture, writing, the state, etc. – within a larger cosmic order.

Unlike the “Liyun,” the argument here is worked out not in terms of ritual but rather in terms of cosmology. But the structure of the argument is almost identical to that of the “Liyun.” In both texts, humanity is posited as having resided in distant antiquity in perfect harmony with the larger world. But this harmony also was one in which humans had no clothing, no shelter, and no distinctive morality. Human sages accordingly created inventions that allowed humanity to move itself beyond the level of animals. But these same inventions also led to the destruction of this earlier harmony. Both texts are calling for a new form of unity to be created, in which a type of harmony will be formed, but one in which humans will occupy the center, organizing the world in a way that will be, at least for humans, superior to the harmony that existed before.

In both texts, therefore, a higher form of unity is being created. And in both cases the issue is to take a current world of discontinuity, of competition and strife, and create a different type of harmony in which humans can flourish.

In other words, although the central claim concerning ritual in the “Liyun” is distinctive, the overall argument concerning unity is not. On the contrary, what we are finding is a running concern in a number of late Warring States and early Han texts calling for human domestication as the key for forging a properly unified world. In none of these texts is there a claim of a pre-existent harmony with which we must accord. The pre-existent harmony is rather presented explicitly as one in which humans could not flourish, and one that must be altered and domesticated by human activity.

The implication, put in strong terms, is that perhaps we should consider the notion of a unified, harmonious world as being not an assumption in early China and rather the goal of human work – the work of ritual, the work of political construction, and the work of building correlative systems. And if this was the work that needed to be undertaken, the perceived problem was that the world of our experience was one of discontinuity.

To put it another way, the world is not inherently harmonious. There are pockets of what could be seen, from the point of view of humans, as orderly. Human work – ritual, organizational – then involves trying to build from those pockets of order one that is more fully coherent, but organized by and for humans. This is a model not of according with some form of harmony that exists in the world out there but rather of domesticating the world in order to build a larger harmony.

When seen from this perspective, conceptions of reality from classical China take on a larger comparative significance. Far from advocating that we simply accord with a harmonious world out there, the debates concerned rather how one builds, through active human involvement, moments of order amidst a world of fragmentation and discontinuity. In everything from ritual theory to social theory to discussions of the relations between humanity and the cosmos, the comparative implications of these texts are tremendously exciting.

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