

Rethinking the HUMAN



Edited by J. Michelle Molina and Donald K. Swearer

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with Susan Lloyd McGarry

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The Haunted World of Humanity: Ritual Theory from Early China

Michael Puett

I begin with a story about distant antiquity. The following is from the *Mencius*,¹ a text from the fourth century BCE that imagines an even earlier period in China, prior to the invention of agriculture:

In the time of Yao, all under Heaven was not yet regulated. Flooding waters flowed throughout, inundating all under Heaven. The grasses and trees flourished, the birds and beasts multiplied, the five grains did not grow, the birds and beasts pressed in upon man, and the paths made by the hooves of beasts and the tracks of birds crossed throughout the central states. Yao alone was concerned about this.²

The text discusses Yao, a human in the midst of this chaos. Unlike other humans, Yao was concerned with what he saw around him, and he thus set out to change the world:

He raised Shun to set forth regulations to deal with the situation. Shun put Yi in charge of fire. Yi set fire to the mountains and lowlands and burned them. The birds and beasts ran away and hid. Yu dredged the nine rivers, cleaned out the Ji and Ta and had them flow into the sea, cleared the Ru and Han and opened the Huai and Si and had them flow into the Jiang. Only then were the central states able to obtain food . . . Hou Ji taught the people

to sow and reap the five grains. When the five grains ripened, the people were nourished. As for the way of the people, if they have full stomachs, warm clothes, and dwell in idleness without any education, they become close to animals. The sage was concerned about this and charged Xie to become the Supervisor of Education. He taught them using the relationships of man: fathers and sons have affection, rulers and ministers have propriety, husband and wife have differentiation, elder and younger have precedence, friends have trust.³

In short, order was created by humans domesticating the world and domesticating themselves. Prior to human domestication, humans and animals were not properly distinguished, wild grasses and forests flourished, and humans behaved like the birds and the beasts. Once humans burned the wilderness, domesticated the grains, and distinguished humanity from the (nowdrivenaway) animals, order emerged.

There are many such stories from early China. The *Xunzi*, a text from the third century BCE, makes a similar point in the form of a cosmological argument:

Therefore, Heaven and Earth gave birth to the superior man. The superior man gives patterns (*li*) to Heaven and Earth. The superior man 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 superior man, Heaven and Earth have no pattern, ritual and righteousness have no unity; above there is no ruler or leader, below there is neither father nor 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.⁴

According to this text, humans are born from Heaven and Earth. Heaven and Earth possess no pattern or order, and thus humans must create patterns in the form of a clear hierarchy to guide Heaven and Earth, as well as future humans. After these proper patterns are created, individual humans will come and go, but the proper patterns into which

those humans will enter (ruler/minister, father/son, husband/wife) will endure as long as Heaven and Earth.

Although *Xunzi* does not develop it in this passage, the same argument could be made in terms of the narrative given in the *Mencius*: prior to human activity, the world of Heaven and Earth was chaos, with wild grasses and forests flourishing, with humans behaving as beasts, with water from the rains flowing across the lands. With human domestication, however, the world becomes properly patterned. Random rains from Heaven and wild grasses and forests from the Earth become ordered, such that the rains are now appropriated through irrigation to grow the grains that are now consumable by humans, and the humans thus nourished are now taught to live in proper relations with each other, instead of living like the animals.

In summary, both texts portray humans providing order to what was previously a chaotic natural world, transforming and domesticating that world so that it now functions as a patterned system: through human organization, Heaven and Earth now each play a crucial role, and the products of each are made meaningful and significant through human domestication. As *Xunzi* puts it, humans now form a triad with Heaven and Earth, with each performing a crucial function in an ordered cosmos: Heaven provides the seasons, Earth provides the raw foodstuffs, and humans provide the order that gives Heaven and Earth their proper place.

But, of course, the world does not always function this way: wild animals continue to infringe on human land, wild grasses continue to grow in agricultural fields, rains continue to be too plentiful and overflow the drainage systems, and humans continue to behave outside of the normative relationships that should guide their behavior. The attempt to place the world into a set of patterned relationships, in short, is a never-ending project. The domestication of the world is never complete.

Western Theories of Humanity

This may seem like an odd way to begin an essay on rethinking humanity. I do so because I would like to argue that these stories—or, rather, the philosophical impulse that underlies them and the ritual traditions that surround them—are of great interest in the larger project behind this volume. For well over a century, the dominant theories of humanity have been based upon traditions emerging in the Western world. Although more and more scholarship is being done on non-Western materials, such materials are almost always the object of our analysis: our theories

are still almost entirely ones that arose recently in the West.

Over the past several decades, we have gone through a lengthy period of deconstructing these Western theories, showing the degree to which they are based upon Christian—often Protestant—narratives and assumptions.⁵ But we have barely begun to undertake a rigorously anthropological study of humanity, in which we would not simply be studying many cultures but in fact learning from the indigenous theories of those cultures and taking them seriously as theory. An anthropology that is worthy of its name is one in which theories of humanity from, for example, China, South Asia, and Africa are taken every bit as seriously as those that emerged in the West.

In this essay, I would like to make a small step toward such a project by taking some of the indigenous theories concerning humanity that arose in early China and treating them as theory. “Theory” refers to general or abstract principles. As recent critiques of Western forms of knowledge have made clear, theories arise from historical specificities. In other words, while locatable, they are most often referred to in their abstracted or general form. What I am suggesting is a self-conscious creation of theory from a non-Western locale, where we consider some of the aspects of transforming a specific “local” or particular into an abstract universal. Needless to say, no theory is perfect—theories from China will not explain everything, nor will they be fully satisfying. Many will be infuriating. That is only to be expected. We take some ideas as theory to help us highlight aspects of the human condition. Of course, theories will also hide and obfuscate as well.

I would like to start by addressing a common objection to the sort of project I am advocating here. The argument of that objection might be as follows. Visions of humanity from early China are traditional: they are based in a traditional view of the world, and one that is now being replaced by a modern one. Such visions might be of historical interest to see how traditional societies thought about the world, and they might be of romantic interest for those who would like to reject the modern world, but they are hardly of wider interest to those who accept that, for better or for worse, we now do live in a modern world that has swept away or at least is in the process of sweeping away traditional societies and traditional modes of thought.

To respond to such an argument, and also to introduce some of the major assumptions that have defined much of contemporary theory, let us look in more detail at what is meant by the term “modernity.” Put very broadly, much of what we call “modern” Western theory has been based

upon assertions of discontinuity.⁶ In terms of claims about modernity, the argument has been that, until very recently, all of humanity lived in so-called “traditional” cultures, meaning that humans would be born into a pre-given order that would define their position and place, along with a pre-given set of beliefs and a pre-given cosmology. According to this narrative, the modernity project, then consisted of encouraging individuals to break from this traditional order and create a new world that allowed for autonomy, an assertion of free will, and the ability to control the universe around them. The ideal of such a world would be one of autonomous individuals living according to self-willed laws and making decisions based upon a rational calculation of benefit and cost. In the neo-liberal version of this narrative, the result would be a celebration of capitalism, which would be seen as wiping away such a traditional order and bringing to the fore an order of autonomous individuals engaging in economic activity in a rational free market.

Most economists would happily admit that such markets do not actually exist: they are ideals, by definition removed from the messy world.⁷ The same is true of the other ideals mentioned: clearly humans do not really act as autonomous agents living according to self-willed laws and making decisions based upon a rational calculation of benefit and cost. The claim is we would be better off if we did, and hence the endless calls to assert autonomy.

In other words, the central move is to assert notions of autonomy over and against most of how we actually live our lives. This structure of argument pervades the reading of history. As we must endlessly assert our will over our mundane lives, so is the assertion of modernity as a whole a rejection of an earlier, traditional world. Of course we now begin to see modernity as a shifting target. There is always yet another “traditional” world from which to break. Yet the dominant theme characterizes “the modern world” as having made a decisive break from a “traditional” continuous world that somehow dominated all of humanity for thousands of years. The traditional/modern split includes within it a normative call for individuals to break from antiquated roles and closed cosmologies, to “gain agency.”

Unfortunately, such readings of history have been so influential that what under this narrative would be categorized as “traditional” modes of thought are thus consistently read as having assumed a continuous, pre-given cosmology. Nowhere is this more so than so-called “traditional” China, frequently characterized as having assumed a harmonious, unified cosmos.

As should already be clear from the examples at the beginning of this paper, philosophical arguments from early China hardly assumed such a pre-given order.⁸ Indeed, both of the texts argue explicitly that order can only be achieved through a dramatic human domestication of the given world. Immediately, it should be clear that our standard readings of this material from the perspective of a modernity paradigm are not fully accurate.

Many Western theories based upon claims of autonomy and modernity have come under fire recently. The past several decades have seen a flourishing of theoretical attempts to rethink the vision of an autonomous individual, usually in the form of trying to break it down, citing the danger of reifying the human as autonomous.⁹ Such arguments, which would ultimately come under the label of “post-modernism,” characterized attempts to define humans as autonomous agents as being a primary problem that obscured the formation of subjects outside of the West, thus the solution entailed breaking down such claims to autonomy.

This critique of modernization theory often took the same structure as the object of the critique. If theories of modernity assumed a continuous order—say a traditional order—from which we must now break as autonomous individuals, many of the so-called “post-modern” theories have tried to critique this vision through a comparable move: there are autonomous individuals in our theoretical world and now we must break those individuals down yet further. If we can break down an “autonomous individual” and say the autonomous individual consists of multifarious things, that helps break down the dangers of falling into visions of individualism, autonomy, will, etc. In other words, for this approach, more discontinuity is a goal.

The Fractured World of Humanity

I would like to introduce a body of theory from early China that poses the problem for humanity and therefore the solutions for humanity in a different way. These theories are of particular interest because they pose the problem of fractured experience as being very much the opposite of how many contemporary theorists see the problem of the fragmented subject.

These theories are abstracted from the texts I introduced above that hinted at how, in early China, they saw the primary problem as the fundamentally fractured and fragmented nature of human experience in the world. If we take these particular texts to the level of theoretical generality, the theory of the human would read as follows:

We live in a world in which things in what we call the cosmos happen

at irregular times. At times, it rains, it gets cold, it gets hot—sometimes there seems to be a pattern to all of this, but oftentimes the changes do not follow such a pattern. Moreover, even what we call the individual is a conglomeration of energies, emotions, and desires, many of which can be quite dangerous and can lead people to do horrible things to each other—even to those within their immediate families.

That comes to an end when people die. But then they become ghosts who haunt the next generation, with the energies of anger and jealousy being directed at those still alive. The living are thus constantly haunted by ghosts. Everything we have done in the past and everything previous generations have done will haunt us until we die. Our energies then do the same to the next generations.

The world we face, in other words, is always fragmented and fractured, and the fundamental problem for humans therefore is not to fragment it further or assert more discontinuity. The problem for humans is to begin the process—and it will never end—of trying to create connections and build a more ethical world from the fragmented one of our experience.

But only for brief periods is this likely to succeed. I emphasize brief because the theories I am talking about are inherently tragic in their ultimate implications. The human transformation of the world can never fully succeed. In our mundane lives, we try to build pockets of order for brief periods of time before they inevitably fall apart.

The body of theory I will be discussing takes this as its central problem: if what humans face is a fragmented and fractured world, then how do we build these pockets of order in which for brief periods of time we are good to each other, we help each other, we inspire others to be better, we bring out our better energies and inspire others to do the same—until, inevitably, negative energies flourish again and we try to build a new order yet again. We live in a world of endless sets of relationships—of our energies within us, of ourselves with others and with things in the world—and many of these relationships are negative. Like animals, we are drawn by our immediate desires, until we are consumed by other animals drawn by the same insatiable energies. This body of theories sees the problem as one of improving those relationships by refining our responses, controlling what come to be seen as our lesser desires, and transforming ourselves and the larger world such that better relationships can flourish.

If the results will inevitably be tragic, the efforts are nonetheless crucial. For only humans can create a better world. As *Xunzi* put it in the quotations given above, “only humans can give pattern to the world.” In these theories, then, the solution was not to assert discontinuity—either

by asserting autonomy or by breaking down a claim of autonomy by asserting yet more discontinuity. Discontinuity and fragmentation were rather the problems that needed to be solved.

This has been abstract.¹⁰ This next section will discuss more concretely how these theories solve what they perceive as a fundamental problem in the human condition.

Refining One's Dispositions

A theory from the text known as “Nature Emerges from the Decree” goes along the following lines.¹¹ We humans exist in a world in which there are things—the Chinese term used here (*wu*) refers to any thing, including humans. These things each have their natures. The world then consists of these things as they interact with each other in every situation—endlessly coming into contact with each other, drawing out reactions from each other. With humans, our natures include various energies—what we would call our emotional dispositions. The various situations we are in pull out these energies—a given situation will make us happy, sad, angry, and so on:

The energies of joy, anger, sorrow, and sadness are given by nature. When it comes to their being manifested on the outside, it is because things (*wu*) have called them forth.¹²

Often, the resulting interactions will be harmful for other human beings and the rest of the world. This text also claims that humans alone have the possibility of forging a better form of interaction, instead of simply having their energies drawn out by whatever situation they encounter:

As for the Way's four techniques, only the human way can be way-ed [i.e., only the human way involves a fixed purpose]. As for the other three techniques, one is moved and that is all.¹³

According to the text, we should not try to get rid of these energies since they are an inherent part of humans. Instead we seek moments in our lives retrospectively—or, as the tradition builds up, in past historical periods—when for whatever reason humans have related well to each other. It could have simply been by accident. That makes no difference. All that matters is that, at a certain moment, a good response occurred. The goal is then to

take that moment and make it into a ritual—which means having people re-do it, developing that same dispositional sense that occurred at that moment when (surprisingly) people acted well toward each other, thus inculcating in themselves the proper energies associated with that good response. Over time, a tradition of ritual repertoires accumulates from which humans slowly learn different ways of guiding their emotions, and thus slowly learn to have better dispositional responses toward those around them. These repertoires of ritual also train the next generation to have better dispositional responses toward those around them.

Through ritual, humans learn as they grow up that using a certain bodily motion or tone of voice affects other human beings in a certain way. When we meet someone what tone of voice do we use? What bodily language? Out of these commonplace and mundane issues, more profound issues start to be addressed. How can we live our lives in such a way that affects others for the better? How can we ultimately work to build a society in ways that work for the better?

As the text says, “The rites arise from the dispositions . . .”¹⁴ The rituals are what came to be regarded later as good dispositional responses, which are then made into rituals to help refine the dispositional responses of those who come later. As with the domestication of the world through agriculture, the rituals are not a purely artificial construction: they depend on taking phenomena in the world and working with them and transforming them—in this case, transforming the dispositional responses into a normative set of actions.

Ghosts

And then we die. But when we die, the next generation has to live with what we have done—perhaps literally living with our ghosts.

Thus far we have been talking about ways of improving our own dispositional responses to those around us. But among those things everyone has to deal with is the past. We are haunted all the time by what came before. Thus, just as we must build up rituals for dealing with things around us, we must do the same with the dead.

What are the dispositional ways we can guide our emotions to act well with such ghosts? In a literal sense this will involve changing the ghosts into ancestors. Or, if the ghost is not one of the things we can consider as part of our lineal kin, then transforming that ghost into a god. Either way, our goal is to develop a relationship to that past in a way that we hope will transform us through our ritual actions toward it, transform everyone else who sees this process going on, and perhaps influence that past energy and transform it as well.

The “Meaning of Sacrifices” chapter from *The Book of Rites* discusses this transformation.¹⁵ As is often the case in early China, the initial creations of these rituals are ascribed to sages—humans who were able to see how to work with phenomena to create a better world. In this text, the description of the creation of the rituals is put in the mouth of another sage, Confucius:

Zai Wo said: “I have heard the names ‘ghosts’ and ‘spirits,’ but I do not know what they mean.”

The Master [i.e., Confucius] said: “The energies (*qi*) are the flourishing of spirit; the earthly souls (*po*) are the flourishing of the ghost. Combining the ghost and the spirit is the highest teaching.”¹⁶

The text continues with Confucius speaking:

Everything that is born will die. When one dies, one returns to the ground. This one calls the “ghost.” The bones and flesh wither below; hidden, they become the earth of the fields. Their energies (*qi*) are sent out above; they become radiant brightness. According with the essence of things, instituting the pivot of action, [the sages] clearly named “ghosts” and “spirits,” taking them as a pattern for the black-haired people.¹⁷

Or to put it more simply: when someone dies, some of those energies float up into the heavens, while the earthly souls (*po*)—along with the flesh and the bones—return to the ground. As human beings we need to create a ritual way of relating to these two sets of things. Confucius continues his explanation:

The sages took this as still insufficient, so they constructed dwellings and houses, and set up temples and ancestral halls. They thereby differentiated closer and more distant kinship, and closer and further removed in terms of descent. [The sages] taught the people to turn to the past and look back to the beginning, no longer forgetting where they came from.¹⁸

After creating places for the different kinds of remains of the dead, the sages then created rituals for the living to perform to each:

When these two ends were established, they [the sages] responded with two rituals. They set up the morning service, burning fat and manifesting it with the radiance of [burning] southernwood. They thereby responded to the energies (*qi*). This taught the populace to return to the beginning. They offered millet and rice, and served liver, lungs, head, and heart, presenting them and separating them into two bowls, and supplementing them with sacrificial wine. They thereby responded to the earthly souls (*po*). This taught the people to love one another, and taught superiors and inferiors to utilize their dispositions. This was the utmost of ritual.¹⁹

Thus, the “spirits,” the energies that float into the heavens, would be worshipped as ancestors—ranked into a lineage and then worshipped according to lineage rank in an ancestral hall. This forces the living to create relationships with them in their role as figures in a lineal relationship to those still alive. Doing so constantly reinforces the sense among the living of the degree to which we are based on what came before, the degree to which we should be beholden to what came before. The energies that remain on the ground—the earthly souls, flesh, and bones—would be placed in a tomb. A feast would be the ritual, performed in order to promote proper familial feelings toward the immediately deceased kin.

For example, if one’s father were to pass away, one would worship his energies as an ancestral spirit in the sense of one’s lineage relationship to it: he would be an ancestor one generation above, and would in turn be the descendant of ancestors above him. In contrast, what one would worship at the tomb would be the father as a family member, to whom one would strive to have proper familial feelings.

In both cases, of course, the relationships built with the ancestral spirit and the tomb occupant are very different from the relationships with that person while alive—relationships that would often have been fraught with difficulties, negative energies, and so on. But we are now striving to develop proper, ritual relationships with these two remains of the person, normative relationships that will by definition be distinctive from the complex relationships we really had with that person while alive. The ritual energies we are now worshipping, and the proper relationships we strive to develop toward them, are based upon the normative ritual visions of how we ought to relate to our family members. By performing these ritual relationships, those alive hope to have a better relationship

with the next generation. The inherent disconnect between the proper relationships we are striving to develop toward the ancestral spirit and the tomb ghost, and the relationships we actually had with that person while alive, is part of what makes the rituals efficacious.

We try to bring ghosts, spirits, and the past that haunts us into a ritual order in which we are transformed by developing better relationships with them—proper ritual relationships that will then, if we perform them well, improve the way we relate not only to the past but also to those currently living among us.

A Ritual World of Perfection

In understanding the implications of these arguments, I would like to underline how different these theories are from those that might typically be attributed to a “traditional” worldview. These theories do not argue for a passive acceptance of a pre-given order, nor do they assume a continuous, harmonious cosmos. On the contrary, they emphasize the brokenness of the world. These theories call for humans to transform themselves and the world ceaselessly in order to create better relationships. Indeed, as the texts at the beginning of this paper argue, the domestication of the world is an absolute necessity, and something only humans can do.

The goal is thus neither to accept a pre-given, continuous order nor, as in a modernity narrative, break from such a continuous order and assert individual autonomy. The goal as discussed above is to work ceaselessly to transform the world—to create a continuous, harmonious order, even though this is by definition impossible for anything more than brief periods of time.

The practice uses repeated actions to create a ritual world composed of perfect relationships—the equivalent of the domesticated world of human agriculture described in the first quotations from *Mencius* and from *Xunzi*, which also saw human domestication of the natural world in agriculture as related to the domestication of humans in the world of ritual. In this ritual world of normative relationships, humans would behave well toward each other and would maintain a perfect relationship with the past.

But, of course, the world does not really operate this way. Just as, in the agricultural sphere, wild grasses grow in our fields, the rains do not come when we need them, and people starve because the natural processes do not fit into the patterns we require for our domestication, so do human emotions spill beyond the ritual patterns we create, and so do humans continue to behave horribly toward each other.

As Arthur Kleinman has written so eloquently, things are stubborn—they resist our interpretations, our narratives, our attempts to construe the world as we would hope.²⁰ By creating a ritual world in which people act properly toward each other, and by having people perform these proper ritual relationships on a recurrent basis, the hope is that we can continually train ourselves to have better dispositional responses in the nonritual world of fragmentation and discontinuity.

As some colleagues and I have argued elsewhere,²¹ ritual thus creates a subjunctive world of “as if,” which operates and in part gains its power from the disjunct ritual creates with the world of our own experience: if we experience a world of fragmentation and discontinuity, haunted by ghosts and capricious spirits, then we create a ritual world of flawless continuity, in which everything is perfectly related to everything else. The training of our dispositions in the perfect relationships of ritual helps us to deal with the flawed and often vicious relationships outside ritual.

In the example of ancestral worship, we worship the deceased in its ideal state—as a perfect ancestor above, and as a perfect family member in the tomb. Of course, the person while alive was not perfect, nor were we perfect toward that person while alive. The inevitable disjunct between that ideal and the actual complexities of the person and our relationships with that person while alive is one of the reasons the rituals can be so effective: that disjunct becomes part of what the practitioners experience, and this allows them to inculcate within themselves an ideal to which they can strive, perhaps doing better than the generations before.

The Tragic World of the Ghosts

Thus, by performing these rituals, we hope to create better dispositional responses to those around us and to what came before, slowly building up a better world. If we do this, then for brief moments of time we can create such a better world, a more ethical world for those around us in which we may inspire those around us to be better human beings and in which we can deal with the past effectively and productively.

By definition the process can never end. We are always constructing better relationships to others, to our past, and to history. Inevitably our attempts fail. Humans still have negative energies, and will still behave horribly to each other. New situations will emerge. We will have to develop yet more relationships based upon them and try to work with those as well. These attempts to transform the world can never succeed fully.

With rituals of ancestor worship, it is an endless attempt to—at a literal level—place elements of the past into specific places where we can then

deal with them effectively. Ultimately this always fails: the ancestors are never fully ancestors, they are also ghosts who continue to haunt us. Despite our best efforts, the ghosts are still there. They will never fully become ancestors, nor will we ever fully relate to them as ancestors. When the past comes back as ghosts, either literally or figuratively, as a past that haunts us, we have to deal with that as well.

Or putting this in an historical sense, it means that the past is always there. Events accumulate, and our attempts to build narratives to deal with these events and relate well to them will inevitably be insufficient. So, as we develop these narratives and ways of relating to the past that inevitably fail, and these—speaking literally or metaphorically—ghosts continue to haunt us, we then strive endlessly to build up new ways of relating to the past, and new ways—again literally or figuratively—of placing the ghosts into places where we can deal with them. And this too will inevitably fail, thus producing the need for yet more responses.

It is a vision that says from day one we face a broken world haunted by ghosts, and what we as humans do is endlessly cultivate our emotions with other human beings through a ritual repertoire, endlessly trying to construct a better world yet knowing that we will never succeed for any length of time. At most, what we will get are brief pockets of order.

This emphasizes the need for humans to strive continuously to build and re-build the world. Underlying the surface pessimism is an optimistic vision of what humans are capable of doing. If this is what we can aim for, if this is all we can aim for, then it ought to be the entire focus of human life: in our daily lives being as good toward other human beings as we can, endlessly developing this ritual repertoire to improve ourselves and those around us. We can become, for brief pockets of time, better human beings, affecting those around us for the better: a seemingly tragic vision, but also a powerful and optimistic one.

This view does not assume that humans should be striving for autonomy or will. We should accept the inevitability of a world in which we are constrained by what came before, constrained by negative energies we have within us, constrained by the stubbornness of things which by definition will resist our attempts at control and domestication. Given this stubbornness of things, the goal is to endlessly develop ways of refining and transforming our relationships with them and those around us such that we gradually become better human beings.

This vision brings to the table a fascinating way of thinking about becoming better human beings not through abstract notions of autonomy or will, not through visions of how we break from something that came

before—breaking from a traditional order, or declaring our autonomy from things that constrain us—but rather accepting a world in which we are inherently constrained and then working, I will again use Arthur Kleinman’s terminology here, to give care to those around us.²² Spending a life slowly building a somewhat better order, knowing that we will fail but knowing in the attempt to do so we will help others and perhaps leave a legacy that will enable others who come after us to build upon it further. A powerful way of thinking about the human condition and an inspiring vision of what it means to be a human living our common, mundane, everyday lives in ways that we hope will, for brief periods of time, affect those around us for the better.

NOTES

1. *Editor's note*: all translations by author. [Bracketed items are author's interpolations.]
2. *Mencius* or *Mengzi*, 3A/4 (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong, Institute of Chinese Studies, Ancient Chinese Text Concordance Series [hereafter referred to as ICS], 1995).
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Xunzi*, "Wangzhi" (Hong Kong: ICS, 1996), 9/39/3–6.
5. Marshall Sahlins, "The Sadness of Sweetness; or, The Native Anthropology of Western Cosmology," *Current Anthropology* (1996) 37:3; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).
6. For an excellent discussion of theories of modernity, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Fredrick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).
7. See, for example, Milton Friedman, *Essays in Positive Economics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953).
8. There are, of course, texts from early China (such as the *Baihu tong*) that try to argue that the cosmos is a unified, harmonious order upon which humans should model themselves—a position with which the texts I discuss in this paper would have strongly disagreed.
9. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man," in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109–136.
10. It has also been very ahistorical. For those readers who would like more background on the creation of these ritual texts and the impact they later had on Chinese history, see Michael Puett, "Human and Divine Kingship in Early China: Comparative Reflections," *Religion and Power: Divine Kingship in the Ancient World and Beyond*, edited by Nicole Brisch (Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2008), 199–212. In this paper, however, I will intentionally pull these arguments from their historical context and instead treat them as theory—not just applicable to aspects of early Chinese practice but also of potential interest to us today. Indeed, it is important to point out that, even when they were written, these were arguments about what one should do, not descriptions of actual practice. Not only can they be read as applicable to more than just early China, they are not even necessarily the best guides for understanding early Chinese ritual practice.
11. The text in question is the *Xing zi ming chu*, ("Nature Emerges from the Decree"), excavated from the Guodian tomb. For fuller discussions of the text, see Sarah Allan and Crispin Williams, editors, *The Guodian Laozi: Proceedings of the International Conference, Dartmouth College, May 1998* (Berkeley: The Society for the Study of Early China and Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2000); Ding Sixin, *Guodian Chumu zhujuan sixiang yanjiu* (Beijing: Dongfang chuban she, 2000); Guo Yi, *Guodian zhujuan yu*

- xian Qin xueshu sixiang* (Shanghai: Shanghai jiaoyu chuban she, 2001); Michael Puett, "The Ethics of Responding Properly: The Notion of *Qing* in Early Chinese Thought," in *Love and Emotions in Traditional Chinese Literature*, edited by Halvor Eifring (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 37–68; Michael Puett, "Innovation as Ritualization: The Fractured Cosmology of Early China," *Cardozo Law Review* 28:1 (October 2006), 28–30.
12. *Xing zi ming chu*, strips 2–3, *Guodian chumu zhujian*, 179.
 13. *Ibid.*, strips 14–15, 179.
 14. *Ibid.*, strips 16–18, 179.
 15. The text in question is the "Meaning of Sacrifices" chapter (*Ji Yi*) of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji*). The *Book of Rites* would ultimately become one of the Five Classics, part of the standard educational curriculum for the educated elite throughout much of East Asia, and would accordingly become one of the most significant bodies of ritual theory throughout East Asia. See *Liji* (Hong Kong: ICS, 1992), 123–129.
 16. *Ibid.*, 126/25/24.
 17. *Ibid.*, 126/25/25–27.
 18. *Ibid.*, 126/25/28.
 19. *Ibid.*, 126/25/29.
 20. See Kleinman's paper at the beginning of this book and also Arthur Kleinman, *Writing at the Margin: Discourse Between Anthropology and Medicine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing, and The Human Condition* (Boston: Beacon, 1988).
 21. Adam Seligman, Robert Weller, Michael Puett, and Bennett Simon, *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
 22. See Arthur Kleinman's *What Really Matters: Living a Moral Life amidst Uncertainty and Danger* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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