

INNOVATION AS RITUALIZATION: THE FRACTURED COSMOLOGY OF EARLY CHINA

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INTRODUCTION

How does one create anew? Or, put in stronger terms: how does one break from tradition and create a new order?

Such questions are often, and mistakenly, presented as modernist concerns: modernity is often defined, among other things, as based upon a willingness to innovate, to break from the traditional orders of the past. Theoretical discussions of innovation then proceed from the question of how one can legitimate such innovation without reference to the guiding tradition from which one is departing.

By definition, premodern cultures would be seen as unable to contribute to such a theoretical discussion—since, after all, premodern traditions are the traditions one is breaking from. According to such a view, premodern societies were dominated by ritual traditions that were legitimated through some kind of a belief in cosmic holism: rituals were believed to be based upon either divine commandments or cosmic patterns.

In contrast, the argument runs, it is only in modern times that such traditional forms of authority broke down, thus creating the problem of how we are to legitimate our actions without reference to traditional ritual norms. If political communities are understood to be guided by human laws, institutions, and decisions, then how can we legitimate such actions when there is no longer a divine being to follow or a set of cosmic patterns to imitate? Thus, theories have been developed around notions of individual autonomy, juridical notions of a self-willed populace, and so forth. Within such a framework, of course, premodern thought can only be of antiquarian interest; it could not conceivably be

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helpful for solving contemporary problems such as these.

I would argue strongly, however, that such a framework is dangerously misleading. I remain unconvinced that any meaningful distinction can be drawn in terms of a shift in thinking from “premodern” to “modern” times. And, in the case of China, this point can be made in far stronger terms: a number of texts from early China were written from a perspective precisely the opposite of that so often attributed to them. For a number of texts, the opening assumption was not that human ritual was normatively based upon divine or natural guidelines but rather the opposite: that the world was one of discontinuity, fragmented and fractured, without an inherent foundation or basis to guide ethical and political behavior. And one of the reasons that texts from early China are so rich from a philosophical perspective is that an entire body of these texts was written to discuss the problem of legitimating certain types of human behavior. But instead of doing so through notions of the autonomous will transcending tradition, the concern was to theorize innovation through ritual. I will argue that some of these attempts have much to contribute to contemporary discussions of innovation.

I. THEORIES OF AUTONOMY: THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF THE WILL

Much of twentieth and now twenty-first century Western theory on the problem of innovation has been based upon a dualism of individual autonomy and context. The theoretical problems then come down to issues such as how an individual can legitimately transcend his or her context in ways that are not harmful to other individuals. The goal of such problems is to conceptualize how a self-willed individual autonomously accepts the legitimacy of rules, understood not as contextual tradition but rather as humanly created and debated. Broadly speaking, then, most of the theoretical emphasis could be described as an attempt to define innovation in terms of discontinuity. The problem is perceived to be one of creating a discontinuity from an otherwise continuous world: the individual breaking from his or her context, the modern world breaking from the organic world of the premodern past, etc.

The predominance of this paradigm for liberalism (in both its nineteenth and twentieth century versions) and self-proclaimed theories of modernism is well known. But it is worth emphasizing that the paradigm is so pervasive that much of so-called anti-modernist philosophy works in the precise same terms. To emphasize this pervasiveness, as well as some of its paradoxical implications, I would

like to use as an example the extreme anti-modernist arguments of Carl Schmitt, a figure who openly espouses a return to seventeenth century theories of sovereignty.

As Schmitt argued in his *Political Theology*:

In the theory of the state of the seventeenth century, the monarch is identified with God and has in the state a position exactly analogous to that attributed to God in the Cartesian system of the world. According to Atger, “The prince develops all the inherent characteristics of the state by a sort of continual creation. The prince is the Cartesian god transposed to the political world.” . . . A continuous thread runs through the metaphysical, political, and sociological conceptions that postulate the sovereign as a personal unit and primeval creator.¹

For Schmitt, the seventeenth-century sovereign is a direct correlate of a theistic cosmology—a cosmology predicated upon a transcendental God who can, simply through force of will, transgress the laws of nature in a miraculous intervention. The sovereign, for Schmitt, does the same at a societal level:

The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism, a theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world. This theology and metaphysics rejected not only the transgression of the laws of nature through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as is found in the idea of a miracle, but also the sovereign’s direct intervention in a valid legal order. The rationalism of the Enlightenment rejected the exception in every form. Conservative authors of the counter-revolution who were theists could thus attempt to support the personal sovereignty of the monarch ideologically, with the aid of analogies from a theistic theology.²

Schmitt contrasts this transcendental vision with conceptions of immanence that he sees as defining political philosophy beginning with the nineteenth century. Democracy, constitutional and legal forms of governance, and organic visions of the state and society are all, for Schmitt, based upon an immanentist cosmology:

To the conception of God in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries belongs the idea of his transcendence vis-à-vis the world, just as to that period’s philosophy of state belongs the notion of the transcendence of the sovereign vis-à-vis the state. Everything in the nineteenth century was increasingly governed by conceptions of immanence. All the identities that recur in the political ideas and in the state doctrines of the nineteenth century rest on such conceptions of immanence: the democratic thesis of the identity of the ruler and

¹ CARL SCHMITT, *POLITICAL THEOLOGY: FOUR CHAPTERS ON THE CONCEPT OF SOVEREIGNTY*, 46-47 (George Schwab trans., 1985).

² *Id.* at 36-37.

ruled, the organic theory of the state with the identity of the state and sovereignty, the constitutional theory of Krabbe with the identity of sovereignty and the legal order, and finally Kelsen's theory of the identity of the state and the legal order.³

Needless to say, Schmitt's sympathies lie with the transcendental vision of the sovereign—the sovereign who, standing outside given juridical norms and traditions, creates anew through acts of will. What bothers Schmitt is that non-transcendental positions limit the play of pure will.

As should by now be clear, Schmitt's move is simply a counter-intuitive play on the same paradigm of individual assertion put over and against a given context. What is unique about Schmitt is simply that he reverses the terms, so that here democracy is associated with continuity and the transcendental sovereign is associated with a discontinuity. But, for Schmitt every bit as much as the liberal thinkers he opposes, discontinuity is always the valued term: innovation is consistently defined as the transcendental will breaking out of a confining continuity. The paradigm, in other words, is the same, and the theoretical debates within the paradigm are variations that come down to what is defined as the discontinuity (is it the individual will, the sovereign, etc.) and how the discontinuity is legitimated (through a constitution guaranteeing individual rights, through a transcendence of such a constitution, etc.).

But I would like to emphasize that the similarity of Schmitt's framework to the liberalism he so despises is telling not just of the pervasiveness of the paradigm of discontinuity in recent Western theory but also of some of the potential dangers of that paradigm. Note, for example, the current administration in the United States. On the one hand, President Bush presents himself as an avatar of democracy throughout the world. On the other hand, as many scholars have noted, there is a clear similarity between Schmitt's political vision and that held by the Bush administration.⁴ To some extent, of course, one could argue that the seeming paradox is simply due to the fact that Bush's proclaimed love for democracy is simply an ideological cover for his Schmittian imperial ambitions. But that would be too simple. I would argue instead that any philosophy based upon notions of the will freeing itself from the constraints of a given context always contains potential dangers toward autocracy. I mention this not to suggest that we should reject philosophies based on notions of discontinuity: such philosophies have been profoundly responsible for much of democratic theory. But we do need to be cognizant of the dangers inherent in any such philosophical approach.

³ *Id.* at 49-50.

⁴ *See, e.g.*, GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *STATE OF EXCEPTION* (Kevin Attell trans. 2005).

But what does this have to do with China? Let us return to Schmitt's claim that a cosmology of immanence restricts the play of pure will. This is a claim of particular interest to the topic at hand, since it has long been used, from Hegel via Weber and contemporary theorists, in relation to Chinese thought. Unlike modern Western thought, the argument runs, Chinese thought was based upon an immanentist cosmology, and thus failed to develop the strong notions of unfettered will that characterize the modern West. What is unique about Schmitt in this debate is that he wants to link democracy to such a cosmology, and to find human transcendent will not in a modern individualism but rather in a seventeenth century sovereign. Nonetheless, the vision is the same.

I will argue in contrast that in China one does indeed find a similar debate concerning innovation.⁵ But it is a debate that at least sometimes played out in different ways, and in ways that will be of interest for the development of theory. For the texts I will turn to, the terms revolve less around the problem of how one can exercise one's will in transcending a given context and more around the questions of how contexts are formed and how new contexts can be forged. More specifically, the texts start from a sense that humans experience their surroundings as fragmented and discontinuous, and the questions that emerge are thus focused upon how one builds a better world from this discontinuity. In other words, instead of emphasizing the assertion of the innovative will as a moment of discontinuity, the body of theory I will discuss here from early China was concerned with much the opposite problem: the perceived problem was that the world, or at least the human experience of the world, is discontinuous and fragmented, and the goal is to build continuity.

Such a characterization of aspects of early Chinese thought will no doubt strike many readers as counter-intuitive, since it is so often asserted that Chinese thinkers assumed a continuous, holistic cosmos. As I have argued elsewhere, however, such an assertion is very much a projection, and a very misleading one at that.⁶ The discussion one finds in early Chinese texts about continuity arose not out of a worldview of immanence but rather out of a concern that the world was too fractured, too fragmented, and that order had to somehow be built out of this.

⁵ I have traced the larger history of this debate in my *THE AMBIVALENCE OF CREATION: DEBATES CONCERNING INNOVATION AND ARTIFICE IN EARLY CHINA* (2001).

⁶ MICHAEL PUETT, *TO BECOME A GOD: COSMOLOGY, SACRIFICE, AND SELF-DIVINIZATION IN EARLY CHINA* (2002).

II. A RITUAL THEORY OF INNOVATION

I turn first to the *Nature Emerges from the Decree* (*Xing zi ming chu*), an excavated text from the fourth century BCE.⁷ The text begins with a statement concerning human emotions:

In general, although humans possess nature, their mind is without a fixed purpose. It depends on things and only then becomes active; it depends on pleasures and only then is moved; it depends on repeated study and only then becomes fixed.⁸

Humans by nature are simply pulled by the things they encounter in immediate situations. As the text elaborates:

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 have called them forth.⁹

It is the nature of humans to have emotional energies. The reason these emotions emerge is that things (which in early Chinese includes other humans) have brought them out. So, for example, a given situation may bring out anger or sadness—for the text, this means that situation has called forth that emotion.

Movement, therefore, begins when things, each with its own nature, affect each other in situation after situation. The ways that our natures are drawn out in situations is defined as our “dispositions”:

The Way begins in dispositions, and dispositions are born from nature. At the beginning one is close to dispositions, and at the end one is close to propriety.¹⁰

The Way—movement itself—starts with our dispositions, with the ways that, because of our natures, we interact with other things.¹¹

At its basis, then, the world simply consists of situation after situation in which things, because of their respective natures, are banging against each other and reacting to each other—the reactions always being different in each situation because the things that happen to appear in each situation will always be different. Such are our lives.

⁷ The *Nature Emerges from the Decree* (XING ZI MING CHU) is an excavated text from the Guodian tomb. For a discussion of the Guodian find itself, see *Jingmen Guodian yi hao chumu*, WENWU 7:35-48 (1997). Some of the most helpful analyses of the text are: DAOJIA WENHUA YANJIU 17 (1999); GUODIAN CHU JIAN ZHUANHAO; ZHONGGUO ZHEXUE 20 (1999); GUODIAN CHUJIAN YANJIU; GUODIAN CHU JIAN GUOJI XUESHU YANTAOHUI LUNWEN JI (2000); DING SIXIN, GUODIAN CHUMU ZHUJIAN SIXIANG YANJIU (2000); THE GUODIAN LAOZI: PROCEEDINGS OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE, MAY 1998 (Sarah Allan and Crispin Williams eds., 2000); GUO YI, GUODIAN ZHUJIAN YU XIAN QIN XUESHU SIXIANG (2001).

⁸ *Xing zi ming chu*, strip 1, GUODIAN CHUMU ZHUJIAN 179 (translation by author).

⁹ *Id.*, strips 2-3.

¹⁰ *Id.*, strip 3.

¹¹ For a fuller discussion of the text’s view of dispositions, see my *The Ethics of Responding Properly: The Notion of Qing in Early Chinese Thought*, LOVE AND EMOTIONS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE LITERATURE 37-68 (Halvor Eifring ed., 2004).

As we are told in the opening line, however, this is inadequate: the goal is to achieve a fixed purpose through repeated study. Such a fixed purpose is defined as “propriety”—responding to things properly, instead of by immediate disposition.

Such a shift to propriety, however, does not consist of transcending a given context or imposing one’s will upon it. It rather consists of refining one’s responses to situations. And the repeated study that makes this possible is based upon ritual and related forms of practice. The text argues that a canon of proper behavior has been built up through past responses. This canon consists of the set of songs collected as the Book of Songs, the speeches collected in the Book of Documents, the rituals collected in the Book of Rituals, and the music collected as the Music. (The first three of these would later be joined with two other bodies of materials to become the Five Classics, which became a crucial part of the standard educational curriculum for much of East Asia until recent times.)

As for the Poems, Documents, Rites, and Music, their first expression was generated among humans. With the Poems, there were activities and they put them into practice. With the Documents there were activities and they spoke of them. With the Rites and Music, there were activities and they raised them.¹²

Each of these arose in particular situations in the past. In response to particular moments, songs were composed, speeches were made, and activities were undertaken. Sages later chose some of these songs, speeches, actions, put them into an order, and built an educational curriculum out of them:

The sages compared their categories and arranged them, analyzed their order and appended admonishments to them, embodied their propriety and put them in order, patterned their dispositions and both expressed and internalized them. As such, they were brought back for use in education. Education is the means by which one generates virtue within. The rites arise from the dispositions . . .¹³

These rituals, then, arose from the dispositions themselves: they were simply actions taken in response to certain situations in the past. But the later-born sages deemed some of these actions exemplary, and as such defined them as part of a ritual canon that people in general should enact. The goal of such an enactment would be to refine one’s own dispositions: by re-enacting exemplary actions from the past, one trains one’s responses so that one can achieve propriety.

Building a better society, therefore, is based upon ritualization: building a canon of practices that everyone should follow. And the criterion for which actions from the past should become part of that

¹² *Xing zi ming chu*, *supra* note 8, strips 15-16.

¹³ *Id.*, strips 16-18.

ritual canon is simply based on the question of whether a continued performance of them helps to refine one's ability to respond to others. Thus, one learns types of actions, pieces of music, exemplary speeches, moving poems, etc. But none of these are thought of necessarily as creations of individual will; they are simply things done in the past that come to be seen as useful to canonize.

The implication of this argument is that the world is inherently fragmented: there is no foundation, there are no overarching sets of guidelines, laws, or principles. There are only actions, and it is up to humans to ritualize some of those actions and thereby set up an ordered world.

A canon, then, is defined entirely in terms of ritual practice, a practice that emerges out of previous responses. This is, by definition, a completely open-ended argument, since any new set of actions that occur could come to be defined as exemplary. Such an argument is neither transcendental nor immanentist. The founding claim is rather that the world is inherently fractured, and the goal is to build an order, endlessly changing, through a constant process of ritualization.

Thus, instead of building the theory upon notions of the will as transcendental in regard to context, this text is discussing innovation and order entirely in terms of ritual. Innovation is not perceived as a transcendental will breaking from a given context; instead, it is occurring all the time anyway, in the sense that all acts, occurring in different situations, are different. What is defined as innovation, therefore, is always *ex post facto*: a given action may be defined as one that should be followed, and thus, by implication, it becomes a founding, innovative act. But it is not an innovative act in the sense of a transcendental will breaking through a given context. It is rather innovative in the sense that it is a response later deemed exemplary. In other words, we are dealing here with a theory of innovation based upon ritual, not upon the will.

I am going to argue that there is much here that is worth taking seriously as theory. But before I do so, I need to avoid a possible misunderstanding. I have already argued that theories taking continuity as their starting point (i.e., theories based upon assertions of discontinuity) are powerful but nonetheless potentially dangerous. Before continuing with my argument, let me point out immediately that the same thing is true of theories that take discontinuity as their starting point. More specifically, if the "Nature Emerges from the Decree" text represents a powerful model for ritual, let me turn to another text, with a similar starting point that moves in a potentially dangerous direction.

III. THE SOVEREIGN AS SOURCE

I turn now to the *Laozi* (also known as the *Dao de jing*). This is a text with a long history of different interpretations. I will here read the text through the lens of political thinkers like Han Feizi.¹⁴

Like many other texts from early China, the *Laozi* sees the myriad things of the world (including humans) as being “teeming and multifarious.” But the author argues that all of this multifariousness could be conceptualized as growing from a ground or root:

Reach the extremity of emptiness,
And hold fast to the firmity of stillness.
The myriad things become active together,
And I thereby watch them return.
Things are teeming and multifarious,
But each returns to its root.
Returning to the root is called stillness.¹⁵

Contrary to common experience, therefore, there must a ground from which all things emerge and to which they return—a stillness from which the activity of life emerges. And this ground can be taken as the mother of the myriad things:

There is a thing chaotically completed,
born before Heaven and earth.
Still and quiet,
standing alone yet unchanging,
going around yet never becoming weary,
and capable thereby of being the mother of all under Heaven.¹⁶

There must be a ground from which the teeming and multifarious world of human experience emerges, but no one pays attention to it. Why does this matter? Because the text is interested in the ways that a ruler can utilize these aspects of human experience. More specifically, the text calls upon the ruler to serve as this ground for the populace-becoming the basis from which all activity emerges.

The Way is nameless.
Although the uncarved block is small,
no one is able to subordinate it.
If princes and kings were able to hold fast to it,
The myriad things will submit on their own,
and Heaven and Earth will harmonize with each other
and send down sweet dew.
The people will adjust themselves,

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of the debates within which these arguments were produced, see my *TO BECOME A GOD*, *supra* note 6.

¹⁵ LAOZI ch. 16 (Puett trans.).

¹⁶ *Id.* ch. 25.

yet no one will order them.¹⁷

When done in this way, the people all submit to the ruler, but do so of their own accord. More significantly, they even do so assuming that the order created by the sovereign is in fact purely natural:

When his achievements are completed and tasks finished,
The commoners say that “We are like this naturally (*zi ran*).”¹⁸

Such a political and cosmological ontology is profoundly a-moral:

Heaven and Earth are not humane,
They take the myriad things as straw dogs.¹⁹

Indeed, ethics would only be appealed to by those who fail to follow this way:

When the great way is discarded,
There is humaneness and propriety.²⁰

Thus, the sage sets up an order, and the people incorrectly believe this to be a natural state. As such, they will not oppose the order of the sage. And, just as this assures the full submission of the people to the ruler, so is this an order that allows no submission of the ruler to any form of textual authority, laws, or precedents of any kind. The ruler simply generates an order as if it were a natural process, and the people submit to it without realizing they have submitted to anything.

Like the “Nature Emerges from the Decree,” the *Laozi* is assuming a world experienced as fragmented and discontinuous, and also arguing in terms of how to build continuity from this fragmented world. Thus, in contrast to those recent Western theories discussed earlier in this paper, in which the goal was to assert discontinuity, the arguments in the *Laozi*, like those of the “Nature Emerges from the Decree,” begin with an experience of a discontinuous world and then explicate how to build links of continuity. But unlike the “Nature Emerges from the Decree,” the *Laozi* builds these links not through a ritual repertoire but rather through a claim that the world we experience as fragmented can in fact be generated by a ruler, even though those within it will believe it to be perfectly natural.

IV. A NATURAL EMPIRE OF THE WILL

These arguments by the *Laozi* are, somewhat counter-intuitively, comparable to those of Carl Schmitt. The fundamental difference is that for Schmitt the sovereign rules by will; for the *Laozi*, the sovereign does

¹⁷ *Id.* ch. 32.

¹⁸ *Id.* ch. 17.

¹⁹ *Id.* ch. 5.

²⁰ *Id.* ch. 18.

so as well, but only in such a way that the populace fails to understand it as such. For Schmitt, the metaphor thus employed is one of a God creating *ex nihilo*; for the *Laozi*, the metaphor is one of natural generation. In their implications, however, the two positions are remarkably similar.

But if I am arguing that these materials from early China can be taken seriously as theory, then can they be utilized to explore what Western theory would call the “modern” world? More specifically: if Schmittian analysis fits the Bush presidency well, what about the *Laozi*?

At one level, the Schmittian emphasis on pure will—the sovereign as the exception to the standing juridical order—is fitting indeed. A willingness to reject or ignore existing treaties has indeed characterized the Bush presidency. Indeed, the entire invasion of Iraq was, needless to say, illegal from the perspective of international law. To some extent, Bush himself emphasizes this aspect, although of course he claims that he is following the will of God, rather than his own will:

“Going into this period, I was praying for strength to do the Lord’s will . . . I’m surely not going to justify the war based upon God. Understand that. Nevertheless, in my case, I pray to be as good a messenger of his will as possible.”²¹

But such an emphasis, of course, only underlines a generally Schmittian focus on the sovereign as replicating the action of an interventionist god.

Despite this close proximity of Bush’s thinking with a Schmittian philosophy of will, however, I would argue instead that Bush is at his (chillingly) most effective when he is emphasizing not a claim of the will standing against a given juridical order, but rather when he is, in a sense, acting as a Laozian sovereign: a sovereign who creates a new order so effectively that it comes to be seen as natural. As Ron Suskind narrates a conversation with a Bush aide:

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world really works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”²²

Bush may dream of being remembered as a Schmittian sovereign,

²¹ Ron Suskind, *Without a Doubt*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 17, 2004, at 51.

²² *Id.*

creating a new order as an act of will (or, in seemingly less ambitious moments, as creating a new order based upon God's will), but the success of that creation may have more to do with the administration's ability to have that created order come to be seen as natural-as part of the empirical world that all within will come to accept as reality.

V. THE ENDLESS WORK OF RITUAL

But if the *Laozi* can be used as theory, so can the *Nature Emerges from the Decree*. And I would like to argue that the vision of innovation as ritualization that one finds in the text does have great potential for theory.

The first point to be noted is that the authors of the "Nature Emerges from the Decree" developed their entire argument without any reference to a foundation (other than the claim that humans have responses to things). And such an anti-foundationalism, it could be argued, is one of the strengths of the text: it prevents the kinds of moves we saw in Schmitt and Laozi. If there is no foundation (whether defined as a transcendental sovereign or a sovereign generating an order that comes to be seen as natural), then all that matters is the endless process of ritualizing previous actions.

As a consequence, the discontinuous, fragmented world of human experience—the starting point of the theory—is never fully transcended. The ritual world that the text asserts can never become totalizing. It consists of particular relationships that come to be defined as proper, but they are only proper insofar as practicing them will enable the practitioners to refine their responses when they return to the fragmented world of experience. In other words, the ritual order consists essentially in building a canon of ritual acts, music, stories, and poetry that then become a repertoire for refining our experiences. Their effectiveness therefore resides entirely in their ability to aid us in our everyday, fragmented lives. In short, a discontinuous world is fully assumed throughout, and never fully transcended—a ritual repertoire simply enables us improve our ability to live within such a world.

Moreover, that ritual repertoire itself is always open-ended. Anything that occurs could always come to be defined later as something that should be brought into the ritual repertoire. The work of ritual is thus endless. No totalized end to the process is ever possible or even desirable.

Innovation, then, is in a sense always *ex post facto*. It is always after the fact that a given action would be defined as having been effective, and thus only later could it enter into a ritual repertoire and come to be defined as an innovative act that should be re-enacted. The

emphasis, therefore, is not on the individual will creating anew but rather on the endless world of relationships and on the endless creation and refinement of a ritual repertoire out of those relationships.

In claiming that such a view should be taken as theory, I would like to argue that it is fully applicable to what other theorists (incorrectly, in my opinion) call a “modern” world. Indeed, I would like to go a step further and argue that, in fact, this is what many of us actually do in our mundane, everyday lives anyway. But, by not focusing on the fact that this is what we are doing, we fail to do it as effectively as we could. Furthermore, we fail to take such aspects of our mundane, everyday lives as theoretically, politically, or ethically significant. One of the powerful implications of a text like the “Nature Emerges from the Decree” is precisely that we should in fact think of issues such as politics, innovation, and ethics as essentially involving the same processes that are involved in the seemingly mundane dialectic of ritual and everyday interactions. And one of the many implications of such an approach is that, by accepting the world as always inherently fragmented and by seeing our ethical response in terms of ritualization, we become far less at risk of being seduced by the sorts of rulers that Schmitt and the *Laozi* celebrate.

CONCLUSION

One of the arguments I have suggested in this Article is that one finds in early China a body of texts dealing with innovation that can and should be treated as theory. Part of the power of this theory, I have argued, would be that it takes as a starting point not a perceived unity (conceptualized as anything from a given context to a premodern past) that must be overcome but rather a discontinuous world—a fractured world of unrelated elements, connected by emotional and conditioned responses that may not be healthy. And the most powerful approaches in this theoretical literature to building a better world focus not on attempts to develop a totalizing unity (such as the *Laozi*) but rather on, broadly speaking, ritual.

In such a view, innovation is simply a question of ritualization—of particular actions being taken as normative until they are replaced by others. Innovation, then, makes no foundational appeal to either the individual will or any transcendental ground; it is simply a question of endless ritualization in a world that is accepted to be endlessly fragmented. But it is also one that, by emphasizing ritual, focuses our attention back to the sorts of seemingly mundane ritualization of behavior that happens constantly in everyday life and argues that larger forms of societal innovation are in practice just more of the same sort of

thing. In other words, innovation is what we are doing all the time anyway, but, if we focus on it, we can do it well.

This is, in a sense, a tragic view, in that it assumes there will never be a finality or a point of perfection. It is a fractured and fragmented world, and it will always be so. Indeed, some of the biggest dangers can come from trying to end this fragmentation too completely. The notion is that one never creates a full unity, but one can, through ritual, develop more productive ways of connecting with other people and with the larger world. Such a project is never-ending. But, when it works, it can, for periods of time, create pockets of order in which humans can flourish.