

# Ritual and Its Consequences

*An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*

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# I

## Ritual and the Subjunctive

The idea that ritual creates a shared and conventional world of human sociality goes back at least two millennia, as do insights about the resulting problems of self and society, individuality and convention. Such a world is always subjunctive, just one possible alternative. Let us begin our inquiry with a quotation from Xunzi, an early Confucian thinker from the third century BCE: “Heaven and Earth are the beginning of life; ritual and propriety are the beginning of order; the gentleman is the beginning of ritual and propriety.”<sup>1</sup> Heaven and Earth generate life, but it is humanity who brings order to the world through the creation of rituals. As Xunzi elaborates:

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.<sup>2</sup>

Heaven and Earth give life, but they are also fundamentally chaotic, without pattern. And so, therefore, is humanity. Only humans can give pattern and order to the world. In short, order is an artifice of humanity:

Someone asks: "If man's nature is evil, from where are rituals and propriety generated?" I respond: "All rituals and propriety were generated from the artifice of the sages. They were not originally generated from the inner nature of man. Thus, a potter works clay and makes vessels; as such, the vessels are generated from the artifice of the craftsman, and were not originally generated from the inner nature of man. Thus, a craftsman carves wood and completes implements; as such, the implements are generated from the artifice of the craftsman, and were not originally generated from the inner nature of man. The sages accumulated their considerations and thoughts and practiced artifice and precedents; they thereby generated rituals and propriety, and made laws and standards arise. As such, rituals, propriety, laws, and standards were generated from the artifice of the sages, and were not originally generated from the inner nature of man."<sup>3</sup>

Comparable views occur repeatedly in early Confucian writings. As we are told in the *Book of Rites*: "The Master said, 'As for the sacrificial victims, ritual, and music being properly arranged and flourishing, this is the means by which there is no harm from the demons and spirits and no resentment from the hundred families.'<sup>4</sup> This chaotic and fragmented world, controlled by capricious and potentially antagonistic demons and spirits, can only be ordered through human rituals.

Let us now turn to a selection from the rabbinic literature. From *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*:

With ten utterances the world was created. What need do inhabitants of the world have of this? It is to teach you that, for anyone who practices one commandment, and anyone who observes one Sabbath, and anyone who preserves one life, Scripture accounts it to him as if he preserved the entire world that was created with ten utterances.<sup>5</sup>

A clearly well-intentioned deity created this world, and even the most minute ritual action on the part of a human supports that creation.

At first glance, these appear to be two radically distinct visions of ritual. In the one tradition, ritual is a human construct, aimed at bringing order to an otherwise fragmented and chaotic world. In the other, ritual is a divine

construct, sent to allow humans to live properly in and even help support a divinely created order.

An earlier anthropology would have dissolved the difference between such visions by simply ignoring the content of the cosmological claims. Ritual, according to figures such as Radcliffe-Brown, simply functions to create social cohesion. It would have served the same function in both the early Chinese and Judaic traditions. The only difference between the two is that China produced some theorists like Xunzi who understood what ritual was really about:

There is no doubt that in China, as elsewhere, it was thought that many or all of the religious rites were efficacious in the sense of averting evils and bringing blessings. It was believed that the seasons would not follow one another in due order unless the Emperor, the Son of Heaven, performed the established rites at the appropriate times. Even under the Republic a reluctant magistrate of a *hsien* may be compelled by public opinion to take the leading part in a ceremony to bring rain. But there developed among the scholars an attitude which might perhaps be called rationalistic or agnostic. For the most part the question of the efficacy of rites was not considered. What was thought important was the social function of the rites, i.e. their effects in producing and maintaining an orderly human society.<sup>6</sup>

Radcliffe-Brown continues:

The view taken by this school of ancient philosophers [the Confucians] was that religious rites have important social functions which are independent of any beliefs that may be held as to the efficacy of the rites. The rites gave regulated expression to certain human feelings and sentiments and so kept these sentiments alive and active. In turn it was these sentiments which, by their control of or influence on the conduct of individuals, made possible the existence and continuance of an orderly social life.<sup>7</sup>

In this classic formulation, Xunzi, like modern social scientists but unlike the practitioners themselves, understood that ritual is a human construct to maintain social cohesion. In contrast, practitioners, who would include Rabbi Nathan, mistakenly read ritual as a divine construct.

Much subsequent theory has rightly opposed such a devaluing of indigenous beliefs. Most famously, and certainly most influentially, Clifford Geertz shifted our focus toward the meaning-making subject.<sup>8</sup> Ritual, under such an approach, is to be understood according to the total system of signs that make a given action meaningful to the participants. In the case at hand, this would

entail a thick description of early Chinese and Judaic material, focusing on their respective—and thus radically different—systems of meanings.

One of our concerns with such an approach, however, is that Geertz tames ritual practice by interpreting it according to a coherent worldview, instead of looking at its actual workings. As Talal Asad has argued, Geertz's approach to religious practice owes a strong debt to what may be termed a post-Protestant emphasis on the coherence of belief.<sup>9</sup> Such an approach is of dubious universality. Indeed, as we will argue in chapter 4, this reading of religious practice emphasizes a very different pole of activity than ritual. In the cases at hand, such an approach may be particularly dangerous: as we will discuss later, the Chinese and Judaic traditions actually have an enormous amount in common, despite their radically different theological underpinnings.

Finally, Geertz, somewhat ironically, repeats one of the fundamental errors of Radcliffe-Brown, namely, an a priori emphasis on ritual as an encompassing concord. By emphasizing ritual as concord and unity (whether in the realm of social function or in the realm of the totalizing system of cultural meanings), both theorists fail to emphasize some of the key features of ritual—features that our examples will hopefully help to underscore.

We have emphasized the potential inadequacies of both Radcliffe-Brown and Geertz for a particular reason. These two figures represent the two basic poles around which much of twentieth-century and now twenty-first-century theory on ritual has revolved. On the one hand is an emphasis on the social function of ritual, with an overt rejection of the importance of culture. On the other is an emphasis on the worldview that is perceived to underlie the actions of the ritual participants. Such views, we will argue, came to prominence in a particular historical moment. As such, they are of great interest—but not as theories of ritual.

The model we propose instead understands ritual as a subjunctive—the creation of an order *as if* it were truly the case. Or, putting it in different words, the subjunctive creates an order that is self-consciously distinct from other possible social worlds. Unlike Radcliffe-Brown, then, we take cultural meanings very seriously, but unlike Geertz we do not read such meanings as an overriding set of assumptions concerning the world. On the contrary, we emphasize the incongruity between the world of enacted ritual and the participants' experience of lived reality, and we thus focus on the work that ritual accomplishes.

With this point in mind, it is worth returning to our two examples thus far. For Xunzi, the goal of ritual is to bring order, hierarchy, principle, and ethics to a world that is otherwise chaotic, amoral, and indifferent—to live *as if* the world were actually a moral, coherent universe. For Rabbi Nathan, the goal is

to enact divinely ordained commandments—to live *as if* enacting them actually preserved the divinely created world. In the Chinese case, rituals are explicitly presented as a human artifice; in the Jewish one, the rituals are presented as a product of a great deity. Both cases, however, imply that ritual action creates a new world, in self-conscious tension with an unritualized world. A rabbinic dictum explicitly recognizes the subjunctive aspect of the human ordering of the world: “He who rules justly is as if he participates with the Holy One, Blessed Be He, in the creation of the world.”<sup>10</sup> It is thus not surprising that, as we shall see, the work involved in enacting ritual in these two traditions is remarkably similar.

So what does it mean to analyze ritual as a subjunctive, and how, then, does ritual work? We will tackle the questions first from a theoretical perspective and then in terms of specific examples from the early Chinese and Judaic traditions, as well as elsewhere.

### Ritual and the Subjunctive

Ritual activity—and, with it, the construction of a subjunctive universe—occurs throughout many different modes of human interaction, not just religion. The courtesy and politeness of daily life are also modes of ritual action. The truth value of such ritual invocations (like saying “please” and “thank you”) is not very important. We are inviting our interlocutor to join us in imagining a particular symbolic universe within which to construe our actions. When I frame my requests with please and thank you, I am not giving a command (to pass the salt), but I am very much recognizing your agency (your ability to decline my request). Hence, saying please and thank you communicates in a formal and invariant manner—to both of us—that we understand our interaction as the voluntary actions of free and equal individuals. “Please” creates the illusion of equality by recognizing the other’s power to decline.

Other forms of politeness, of course, construct quite different social illusions. Chinese courtesies have long marked hierarchies instead of imagining equalities. Endless modernizing campaigns by both republican and communist governments over the twentieth century—to say please and thank you or to call everyone comrade—have attempted to substitute other visions of the social world. None, however, has so far succeeded over the long term, because they posit a very different kind of social self underlying the convention.

Note that even in the imagined equalities of American courtesy, the power to decline may not be real. When we ask our children to please clear their plates or our students to please open their books, declining is not a

normal option. Nevertheless, we ask *as if* the behavior were voluntary, because that ritual creates the social world that allows our interactions to continue in peace. Rituals such as saying “please” and “thank you” create an illusion, but with no attempt to deceive. This is a crucial difference from a lie, which is an illusion with a clear attempt to deceive the other. In this ritual is much more like play, which is the joint entrance into an illusionary world (and which we shall explore much further in chapter 3).

By framing our interaction with the “illusions” of courtesy, the frame actually pulls us in after it, making the illusion the reality. And the reality will last only as long as we adhere to the illusion. So, for example, when we ask our children to please feed the dog and they refuse, we may get angry and shout, “DAMN IT, FEED THE DOG NOW!” At this point we both leave the illusionary world of mutuality and respect for the one of brute power. We fall back into a world from which politeness had saved us.

The continual possibility of falling out of the illusion does not make it a lie, no more than children’s play is given the lie when mother calls the children home for dinner, or a play by Euripides is given the lie by the audience’s exiting the theater and getting on the subway. Illusions are not lies—they are a form of the subjunctive. Illusion is what can be, as indeed so many different symbolic worlds can.<sup>11</sup> Answering “fine” to inquiries about how we are is usually a ritual pleasantry. We do not mention the nagging headache, the argument with the teenage child, or the overdue paper. “Fine” is untrue, but still not exactly a lie. “Fine” deceives no one; it simply establishes a certain kind of social relationship. One can pull it out of the realm of ritual interaction and treat it as a lie (“but your leg is in a cast!”), but that is a different form of interaction. Not true yet not deceptive—this is the joint entrance into an illusionary world.

Of course, by presenting our actions in this light—more precisely, by constructing a symbolic universe where our activities with one another can be understood in this manner—we are also in a sense actually denoting the construction of the illusion as the real nature of our interaction. The “as if” quality of the ritual invocation, its subjunctive sense, is also what makes it real. What is, is what can be.

This suggests that the rituals of politeness posit a possible, even plausible, mode of activity between interlocutors by building an illusion that pulls them out of a more Hobbesian world of the war of all against all. This works only so long as all accept that possible world (through sharing its mode of speech and approach), represented by the formal codes of polite invocation. This mode of speech (the please and thank you) is both signified and signifier in one. Courtesies point to a particular way of human social interaction (of mutual respect) and are at the same time an instance of that mode. By saying please

and thank you, we are both symbolizing a fundamentally civil recognition of one another and actually acting out and instantiating such behavior in the world. Such civil modes of address are what Peirce called an “index,” with the unique characteristics of being both about society and in a mutually creative relationship with it.<sup>12</sup>

We argue that what constitutes society—what makes the social a *sui generis* entity, irreducible to any other—is precisely a shared “could be,” a mutual illusion of the sort that all rituals create. To a great extent, this is what symbols do more than anything else: they represent a “could be.”<sup>13</sup> This shared “could be” (or, sometimes, “what if”) is the nodal point where members of a society come together as symbol users. It is surely not coincidental that Terrence Deacon begins his important book *The Symbolic Species* by invoking the subjunctive as what distinguishes us from other mammals and primates.<sup>14</sup>

We could perhaps go one step further and postulate that much of what the individual ego experiences as a uniquely individual event (love, desire, hate, envy, frustration, etc.) can become social and shared only through its symbolic representation in terms of a “could be” or a “what if.” What if we spent our life together, we slept together, he were dead and out of my way, I had her jewelry or beauty, I was boss and he worked for me, and so forth. We cannot actually share (as opposed to simply describing) our desire or hate or frustration with another soul; we cannot produce in another our own desires, hates, or frustrations. We can, however, attempt to evoke the same sets of feelings or experiences through a shared “could be.” Our individual experience of an “is” (the very real feelings of desire, hate, or even hunger and poverty) can only become social through the imaginative act, the “as if.” Such diverse phenomena as the thrashing of figures from the underworld by the priests of Demeter, the Muslim casting stones at Iblis during the hajj to Mecca, or Incas driving off evil spirits all involve this construction of (and by) a subjunctive universe, which creates a community of empathy at the same time.<sup>15</sup>

What we share as symbolic beings is potentiality. A community of fate shares a sense of what “could be” (if they rounded up all the Jews in Poland or Japanese in California or Muslims in Banja Luka, it “could” happen to you, even though you are a Jew in Toronto, a Japanese in Paris, or a Muslim in Islamabad), as well as, of course, a shared “once there was.” The capacity to empathize, to share in the potential space of what could be, may be inherent in the human species as symbol users. Nevertheless, the specific forms of this cultural creativity, of the formation of this potential space, are not at all given or constant. They change as the historical context changes. The strong image of the barbarian as an other, for instance, only emerged in Athens of the fifth century BCE in consequence of the Persian conflict.<sup>16</sup> Thus the shared



intermediary space of empathy can either contract or expand, and its structuring is a subject of conflict, often violent conflict, throughout history. Peasants in feudal society were beyond the shared empathy of the aristocracy. The bourgeoisie in Paris following the Commune of 1871 apparently did not see themselves as participating in the same “what if” as the defeated workers, and so on.

When we say of a culture that its members share a symbol system, or a set of values, or a common idea of the sacred, we are in essence asserting that they share the potential space of a shared “could be.” The moral community that Émile Durkheim outlined in his *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* exists precisely because it shares the potential space of culture.<sup>17</sup> Much ritual action in fact provides this shared sense of empathy—sometimes even in terms of an explicitly shared “what if.” When Jews sit around the Passover Seder table and are explicitly enjoined to fulfill the commandment to feel “as if you yourselves have been liberated from Egypt,” they create that shared symbolic space where the communality of the “could be” becomes the very basis of the ongoing collective experience. The Shi’ite enactment of the defeat of Imam Hussein at Karbala and the Catholic participation in the Eucharist all have similar import.<sup>18</sup> Confucius, famously uninterested in the world of spirits, still insisted that when “he offered sacrifice to his ancestors he felt *as if* his ancestral spirits were actually present. When he offered sacrifice to other spiritual beings, he felt *as if* they were actually present.”<sup>19</sup> Maimonides enjoins us to attend to our prayers “as if” we are standing before the Creator of the universe.<sup>20</sup>

While ritual activity carries its own form of intentionality, it is important to note that ritual is not necessarily concerned with what we term sincerity. In any ritual, as with saying please, performing the act marks acceptance of the convention. It does not matter how you may feel about the convention, if you identify with it or not. In doing a ritual the whole issue of our internal states is often irrelevant. What you *are* is what you *are in the doing*, which is of course an external act. This is very different from modernist concerns with sincerity and authenticity (including religious fundamentalist concern with such authenticity, as we address in a later chapter). Getting it *right* is not a matter of making outer acts conform to inner beliefs. Getting it right is doing it again and again and again—it is an act of world construction. This suggests the counterintuitive insight that in this world of ritual acts the self is left more “room to wander” (perhaps also to wonder) than in one where the self has to be firmly identified with its role—where the matrix of social order is in sincerity (for which there is never enough evidence, cannot be, anywhere, at any time). As ideal types the self *who does ritual* is very different from the self *who is sincere*.<sup>21</sup>

The creation of “as if” worlds is a central aspect of ritual action, which we see as necessary for human life. This subjunctive aspect of ritual is crucial to many forms of civil social behavior (though, as we pointed out, the codes of civility may be very different in different places). Thus, it is not enough for kings to be kings, they must act as if they were kings. Justice must not just be meted out, it must be seen to be meted out. There are any number of everyday examples that show the sometimes counterintuitive importance of this “as if.” Imagine a family of five, two parents and three children—all love and care for one another, and any major event (when one falls and gets hurt, or when one wins a prize) will mobilize all of them to help or support or praise (as appropriate) the member in question. But, in daily life there is often much pushing, screaming, grabbing of hairbrushes, not helping with the dinner or feeding the dog, and so on. The parents then decide that everyone has to treat each other with a bit more respect, more civility, more use of please and thank you. Many of us have experienced this and know that it works—at least for a time, until the please and thank you begin to get lost. Ratcheting up the amount of love everyone feels, on the other hand, is not the way to make life more pleasant in the household. There is no need, and it is not even possible. Everyone loves the others. That is not the point. Instead, the problem is to get everyone to act *as if* they love one another. More real love (whatever that may be) is not needed, nor even reinstating a feeling that has been lost. Not at all. What was missing was the behavior that would create a shared subjunctive—ritual. Erich Segal was wrong—love does not mean never having to say you’re sorry. That is precisely what love does mean—at least if you want to share a life with the person you love.

Both self and other enter this world of shared action. Sharing the act, they both point to or index the shared world that is their relationship. Writ large, the social is this shared, potential space between separate egos. It is constituted by a common “could be,” by a shared subjunctive that first and foremost parses out the lines and boundaries of empathy as shared imagination. Ritual enacts this shared space in a way not so different from the “enactment” of the potential space between ego and object in the form of transitional objects (such as the infant’s blanket or special teddy, for example).<sup>22</sup> Ritual, in Margaret Alexiou’s words, is critical in “keeping the metaphorical system alive.”<sup>23</sup> Through their embedding in everyday life, “ritual systems carry metaphorical systems, each forming a treasury of associations transmitted over time.”<sup>24</sup>

By emphasizing ritual as subjunctive, we are underlining the degree to which ritual creates a shared, illusory world. Participants practicing ritual act as if the world produced in ritual were in fact a real one. And they do so fully conscious that such a subjunctive world exists in endless tension with an

alternate world of daily experience. Careful readings of Durkheim will show the differences of this understanding of ritual from his own, which sees ritual as the arena of collective effervescence that establishes the collective conscience. We, however, posit ritual action as a subjunctively shared arena, a space in between. It is not a place where individual entities dissolve into a collective oneness.

Since the practice of ritual creates its own illusory world, ritual must be understood as inherently nondiscursive—semantic content is far secondary to subjunctive creation. This is not, of course, to suggest that ritual has no words. It most certainly does—from invocatory language in religious ceremony to the use of “please” and “thank you” in contemporary American etiquette. But it is nondiscursive in the sense that it cannot be analyzed as a coherent system of beliefs. The meaning of ritual is the meaning produced through the ritual action itself. That is one reason that so many rituals include nondiscursive media like music or masks, and even language may be used in ways that defy discursive interpretation.

Moreover, the meaning produced through ritual action always exists in problematic tension with the nonritual world. This is why seeking to analyze ritual in terms of a larger vision of unity—whether found in the functioning of society or a meaningful system of signs—is so problematic, and so often misconstrues the actual workings of ritual. This has often been the case within Durkheimian tradition, broadly conceived.

In his own terms, Jonathan Z. Smith has made a convincing argument for this ritual creation of a subjunctive universe. In his famous study of bear ceremonial rituals among circumpolar hunters, Smith argued strongly against previous attempts to read the meaning of the bear ritual as an example of a nonrational, magical way of thinking. The ritual in question involved raising the bear from a cub, treating it as a guest in the village, and then slaying it only after it took actions interpreted as an acceptance of the necessity of its death. Interpretations of such a ritual as an example of sympathetic hunting magic saw it as an attempt to influence the natural world: by killing a bear according to proper forms of etiquette, the same would hopefully occur in the wild as well. Smith convincingly argued, on the contrary, that the ritual worked precisely out of the clear incongruity between the world of ritual and actual world:

There is, I believe, an essential truth to the old interpretation of “sympathetic magic” as an “offensive against the objective world” but that the wrong consequences were deduced. It is not that “magical” rituals compel the world through representation and manipulation; rather they express a realistic assessment of the fact that the world cannot be compelled.<sup>25</sup>

Accordingly, Smith argues, ritual should be understood as operating precisely out of an understood tension between the world and what we are calling the subjunctive:

I would suggest that, among other things, ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful. Ritual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled course of things. Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts. But it relies, as well, for its power on the perceived fact that, in actuality, such possibilities cannot be realized.<sup>26</sup>

Ritual, therefore, should best be understood as working precisely out of the incongruity of the subjunctive of ritual and the actual world of lived experience: “From such a perspective, ritual is not best understood as congruent with something else—a magical imitation of desired ends, a translation of emotions, a symbolic acting out of ideas, a dramatization of a text, or the like. Ritual gains force where incongruence is perceived and thought about.”<sup>27</sup> As Smith properly points out, an emphasis on congruity has guided many theories of rituals—whether reading ritual according to a magical worldview, to a symbolic system of signs, or to the following of a myth. And, we would add, a functionalist reading of ritual is equally based upon an emphasis on congruity.

Smith’s emphasis on incongruity and tension is an excellent starting point for a theory of ritual. But a friendly amendment to Smith’s argument may also be called for. Smith’s attempt to save ritual practitioners from being read as prerational actors may have led him to go too far in emphasizing the cognitive aspects of incongruity—that ritual works because it allows the practitioners to think about the disjunction between ritual performance and the real world. But it is important to note that ritual is not necessarily—or even primarily—something one thinks about. Indeed, if we take Smith’s emphasis on incongruity seriously, it may actually help point us away from such a cognitive reading of ritual and toward one focusing more on the active, and endless, work of ritual.

Let us turn for an example to the practice of “secondary burial” among rural Cantonese of the New Territories, Hong Kong.<sup>28</sup> James Watson described how the goal of a family is to maintain the patriline. Marriage is exogamous, so

women are brought in from other lineages in order for a patriline to continue. In reproduction, people consider the bones of the child as an inheritance of the father, and the flesh as an inheritance of the mother. Since the patriline is associated with the bones, the flesh that the females contribute is seen as bringing in a dangerous pollution to the family as well. While alive, therefore, a human being is inherently polluted. Only after death can this pollution finally be ended. The goal is to eradicate the polluting flesh and define the ancestor exclusively in terms of the bones. This is accomplished through a series of ritual actions. The corpse is first placed in a coffin. Just before the coffin is taken out of the village, the daughters and daughters-in-law of the deceased rub their hair against the coffin, thus absorbing the pollution of the decaying flesh. The coffin is then buried. Then, after the flesh has fully decomposed, the bones are exhumed, cleaned of every last scrap of flesh, and then placed in a ceramic urn. An auspicious location is determined, and the bones are reburied in a tomb. If this is done properly, the bones are then believed to bring fertility and good luck to the descendants. The continuity of the patriline is thus assured, freed from the pollutions of the flesh.

The subjunctive world created by these burial rituals only works in self-conscious opposition to an everyday world seen as inherently polluted. And, by definition, there is no possibility that such pollution can be eradicated in the real world: the ritual assumes that, for reproduction, a pollution of the patriline is inherent and necessary. Ritual, therefore, is an endless work of creating a subjunctive world in overt tension with the world of lived experience.

## The Work of Ritual

Given an approach to the study of ritual that emphasizes tension and incongruity, it is interesting to explore the ways that ritual interacts with the world of everyday experience. Some of the most exciting work in this area has been undertaken by Robert Orsi, a scholar deeply concerned with the ways in which Protestant approaches to religion have led to misguided understandings of religious behavior. Orsi's ethnographic work on American Catholicism instead focuses precisely on the complex relationships that develop in everyday life via religious practices. As he states:

Religious theories that emphasize meaning focus on the end-product, a story that is said to link heaven and earth, but the solidity and stability of this dissolves if you focus instead on the processes of religious meaning-making. What we see if we do this is the

wounding; in this devotional world, as in others, meaning making is wounding.<sup>29</sup>

Instead of the emphasis on systems of harmony, such an approach instead focuses on the tragic:

I [have] suggested replacing the meaning-making subject with a more tragic figure whose engagements with the world, within particular circumstances of power, proceed through media that may embody meanings against him or her. Persons working on the world do so always in the context of the world's working on them. This leads to a more chastened view of culture generally and of religion in particular, one that steers clear of words like empowerment, agency (simply), and transcendence and instead moves in the register of the tragic, of the limited and constrained, or what I would think of as the real.<sup>30</sup>

Instead of focusing on the agency of the meaning-making subject, Orsi emphasizes the limited, and potentially tragic, relationships of everyday life.

For example, Orsi has explored the ways in which the relationships to saints that develop in ritual practice create a repertoire of orientations—a repertoire that in turn affects the ways in which practitioners respond to events in their everyday lives: “Religions have provided Americans in the turbulent and distressing circumstances of life in this society over time . . . with a repertoire of feelings and orientations with which to take hold of their world as it takes hold of them.”<sup>31</sup> The focus of the analysis thus turns to the ways that everyday life comes to be reexperienced in response to the practices of devotion: “The narrative practices of the devotion do not represent the recasting of mundane experience in another “symbolic” or “religious” key, but the re-experiencing of everyday life in a new way.”<sup>32</sup> The work of ritual, then, involves developing repertoires that operate in complex interplay with the world of everyday experience.

To quote Orsi once more, here in reference to his grandmother's devotion to Saint Gemma Galgani:

What the saint seems to have offered was companionship on a bitter and confusing journey—bitterness and confusion to which the saint's own stories had contributed. My grandmother asked no grace of Gemma other than that of accompaniment, no miracle beyond the recognition of shared lives. But the sharing was costly. As Gemma's and Giulia's stories teach, in between a life and the meanings that may be made in it, for and against that life is the wound. Meaning

making begins in wounding, and the process of meaning making is wounding.<sup>33</sup>

The interplay of religious practice and everyday life always operates, at least ultimately, in the realm of the tragic. We have finally left Radcliffe-Brown and Geertz well behind.

### Ritual and the Tragic

These arguments imply that ritual always operates in a world that is fragmented and fractured. Moreover, the subjunctive world created by ritual is always doomed ultimately to fail—the ordered world of flawless repetition can never fully replace the broken world of experience. This is why the tension between the two is inherent and, ultimately, unbridgeable. Indeed, this tension is the driving force behind the performance of ritual: the endless work of ritual is necessary precisely because the ordered world of ritual is inevitably only temporary. The world always returns to its broken state, constantly requiring the repairs of ritual.

If the world is always fractured, and if ritual always operates in tension with such a world, then we need to think of ritual in terms of such an endlessly doomed dynamic. Ritual should be seen as operating in, to again quote Robert Orsi, “the register of the tragic.”<sup>34</sup> Although the claims of ritual may be of an ordered, flawless system, the workings of ritual are always in the realm of the limited and the ultimately doomed.

Such an emphasis, needless to say, runs counter to much of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century theorizing about ritual. As alluded to earlier, most of these theories emphasize ritual in terms of harmony—in the sense of either interpreting ritual according to a harmonious worldview or seeing the functioning of ritual as leading to harmony. Both of these views, we would argue, arose out of an evolutionary strain in twentieth-century Western thought—a strain that read ritual as belonging to a “premodern” world that had since been overtaken by a “modern” world in which ritual had become devalued. According to such a view, ritual was associated with more primitive cultures, where the emphasis was on conformity to and harmony with a larger social and cosmological whole. This contrasted with a modern world based on individualism and autonomy. Such an evolution was often presented in positive terms, as the heroic release of the individual from conformity to a ritually based traditional order, and of the future freed from the fetters of the past. But it could also be presented in negative terms, as a shift away from a harmonious

world and toward one of alienation. Whether presented positively or negatively, however, the model was the same: ritual was associated with a pre-modern world and was accordingly read in terms of harmony and conformity to tradition.

We would like to dispute this entire framework. In chapter 4 we will offer our rereading of the issue of “modernity.” Here, however, we would like to stress that the reduction of ritual to harmony is simply false: it means taking the claims made within ritual (of systematicity, of harmony, of order) and reading these as assumptions concerning the nature of the social and cosmic worlds themselves. In fact, it is quite the opposite: ritual actions involving order and harmony are only necessary among actors who see the world as inherently fractured and fragmented. If ritual participants thought the world was inherently harmonious, why bother with the rituals? Indeed, it is only from a nonritual perspective (as, for example, among Protestant theorists of the past century in the West) that such a reading of ritual becomes possible. As we will see in the following section, indigenous theories developed within ritual traditions hardly read the world as harmonious.

Let us make the point by referring again to the bear hunt rituals discussed by Jonathan Z. Smith. The reading of the bear hunt as representing an assumption of a harmonious world, in which animals would willingly volunteer for their deaths, was only made by twentieth-century scholars who read the ritual acts as representing the assumptions of the (primitive) participants. But, as Smith was able to show, the ethnographers who worked with the natives clearly documented, both from the statements made by the ritual participants and from the actual hunting methods employed, that there was no belief whatsoever that the animals would willingly give themselves to the hunter. During the hunt, there were no rituals of respect with regard to the hunted animals at all. Indeed, the preferred method for the hunt was subterfuge—to kill the bear while it was asleep or otherwise unaware, so that it would be unable to attack. In other words, the hunters clearly understood that the bear would kill the humans if it saw them.<sup>35</sup> The ritual, therefore, only makes sense in terms of the perceived disjunct between the ritual act and the world of lived experience. The ritual cannot be read as representing a worldview.

Instead of reading ritual in terms of a worldview of harmony, then, we will emphasize ritual in terms of the tragic. From the point of view of ritual, the world is fragmented and fractured. This is why the endless work of ritual is necessary, even if that work is always, ultimately, doomed.

If so many scholars have misread ritual by placing it into a premodern/modern teleology, it may well repay the effort to turn to indigenous ritual



theories to see how they read ritual action. We will see that they offer a very different picture than those emphasized by so many recent scholars.

### Ritual and the Fractured World

The musings of Robert Orsi on contemporary American Catholicism resonate well with early Chinese discussions of ritual. This fact should not surprise. If contemporary theory has been overly influenced by Protestant readings of religious practice, then turning to theories that were developed outside of such a context may prove invaluable. So, to follow out the implications of our argument concerning ritual, let us return to these early Chinese texts on ritual, but now taking them not as pseudo-functionalist analyses but rather as themselves ritual theory. To deepen our analysis, we will turn to “Nature Emerges from the Decree” (*Xing Zi Ming Chu*), a recently excavated text from the fourth century BCE.<sup>36</sup>

Like many texts from early China, “Nature Emerges from the Decree” assumes a fractured, discontinuous world. It is up to humans to build patterns of relationships out of this fractured world and thereby create an ordered, ethical way of life. Ritual, for the text, becomes the repertoire of these patterns, a repertoire that is endlessly growing, constantly changing, and always in danger of becoming inadequate.

If we are to take the text seriously as theory, the argument deserves closer scrutiny. The text opens with a simple 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.”<sup>37</sup> 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.”<sup>38</sup> Humans are containers of emotional energies. These energies are constantly being dragged out by our encounters with things—and for early Chinese texts, the category of “things” includes humans as well.

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 are 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.”<sup>39</sup> The Way—movement

itself—starts with our dispositions, with the ways that, because of our natures, we interact with other things.<sup>40</sup>

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.

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.”<sup>41</sup> 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, and 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.<sup>42</sup>

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 reenacting 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: creating a canon of practices that everyone should follow. And the criterion for which actions from the past should become part of that ritual canon is simply based on 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, and so on.

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. The resulting ritual canon is a set of practices that emerged out of previous responses.

Just as we saw with Robert Orsi's arguments, ritual is defined here not as a system of meaning but rather as a set of relationships. Some of these relationships come to be defined as ritual, and are to be enacted on a constant basis by the latter-born. An inherent tension is thus built up between ritual actions and those actions of the mundane world. In the ideal, the practice of the former will help direct the proper conduct of the latter. But the tension is never erased.

### Ritual and Autonomy

Such a definition of ritual as subjunctive, with a full understanding of the inherent tension between ritual actions and their application to nonritual activity, will allow us to rethink aspects of ritual that have been misunderstood by those who tend to read ritual in terms of inner meanings or outer harmonies. In particular, we would like to turn to the issue of autonomy. From the point of view of what we have been calling a Protestant framework, ritual behavior often appears as a submission of humans to external norms—as a rejection of autonomy. Ritual, from such a point of view, consists of discipline and constraint, whereas sincerity is a turn inward toward the true self. From the point of view of a ritual order, however, this is not the case at all: a ritual order does not assume that all action is or even necessarily should be a repetition of rituals from the past. By definition, most action is not. The point is that, ideally, such actions should, in a sense, be ritual without ritual precedent.

Once again, we will allow our Confucian ritual theorists to guide us. The problem is very simple: if one is constructing a subjunctive world of “as if” through ritual, then what happens when one confronts a situation (as one does all the time—it is, after all, a fractured world) where there is no clear ritual telling one what to do, or where there are conflicting ritual obligations. This is a problem that confronts the most complex decisions we have to face in our lives, and it is also one that appears in common, mundane, everyday circumstances—if one is a parent and a child does something wrong, when does one speak sympathetically, and when does one speak harshly?

For our Confucian ritualists, the answer was clear: one of the goals of ritual is to train practitioners to be able to act as if there were a ritual telling them what to do. A contemporary example will help to make the point. When a child asks for butter at the dining table, one tells the child to say “please.” When one then gives the butter, one tells the child to say “thank you.” For the first few years of this, it is just by rote: one simply tries to get the child to repeat the words. And, if it stops at just this, then one has, to a minimal degree, created a subjunctive world of politeness. But the hope is clearly that it will not stop there: the hope is that the child, as she grows, will be able to express equivalent forms of making requests and expressing gratitude in situations where a simple “please” or “thank you” would be inappropriate.

This, of course, is the shift from emotional response to propriety discussed in “Nature Emerges from the Decree”: ritual helps refine our ability to respond properly to situations. But perhaps the most powerful discussion can be found in the *Analects*, the text that purports to quote the words of Confucius and his disciples. The distinction made there is between ritual and humaneness. Humaneness is, essentially, simply behaving properly toward other human beings. For us, the crucial point is that this is not necessarily a sincerity mode (although many later followers certainly did read it as such). Instead, it is perhaps best understood as simply the way that one acts ritually when there is no ritual to tell one what to do: if one spends one’s life doing rituals properly, then one gains a sense of how the subjunctive world constructed out of those rituals could be constructed in situations without a ritual precedent, or in situations where ritual obligations conflict. At a more mundane level: humaneness would be the ability to express gratitude effectively when simply saying “thank you” would be inappropriate or insufficient. Or it is the ability, to return to our earlier mundane example, of a parent to sense from the situation and the respective personalities involved whether at a given moment it is more effective to speak harshly or sympathetically to a child who has acted incorrectly. When ritual obligations conflict, the key is to have trained one’s responses such that one can act as if there was indeed a clear ritual guide.

For early Confucian thinkers, there is an even higher level than humane-ness: the highest example of ritual action was to become a sage. Here, too, it was certainly possible to define the sage as one who acts in individual sincerity, and many later figures did so. But one can also define it in ritual terms: a sage is simply someone who acts properly in any given situation—whether or not there is a ritual precedent to guide his action. As such, a sage would also be seen as exemplary, and his actions would therefore come to be defined as ritual for later generations.

Within ritual, therefore, there is indeed a mode of action that is in some ways akin to what a sincerity framework would valorize as autonomy. But it is an autonomy defined not in a Kantian sense but rather in a ritual sense—someone who acts without ritual precedent but does so as an extension of the “as if” of ritual. The point here is not that ritual does not constrain and discipline. It does. But, from the point of view of ritual, this is not a denial of autonomy but a means, at the highest level, of achieving its ritual equivalent. Sagehood, in other words, is only attainable through ritual—whereas a more contemporary framework would argue that autonomy is only achievable through a denial of ritual.

Intriguingly, it is in the Judaic tradition where one finds some of the most telling parallels. As Jonathan Schofer has argued about Rabbi Nathan: “The ideal sage is a man who is fully constituted through the Torah such that his most basic impulses are structured in accord with rabbinic laws and ideals. He attains this state by allowing himself to be trained, molded, planted, conquered, or governed by the tradition.”<sup>43</sup> As in the early Confucian tradition, sagehood is the goal, but it is a goal that is to be achieved through a submission to ritual, not through a rejection of it. The inner comes to reflect the outer, and not the other way around.

Later thinkers in both traditions would take such notions to higher extremes. Maimonides held that the ultimate goal of submitting to ritual was to become not a sage but a prophet.<sup>44</sup> And later thinkers in the Chinese tradition would openly espouse practitioners becoming divine.<sup>45</sup>

Schofer himself notes the similarity of such positions to those found among Confucian thinkers. In drawing a comparison between the two, Schofer also points out the paradox of “their relatively similar views concerning the sage and tradition and their very different views at the level of theology or metaphysics.”<sup>46</sup> The similarity exists because both are *ritual* orders, and both are therefore committed to the idea that autonomy can only be the result of submitting oneself to a ritual tradition, rather than asserting claims of sincerity against such a ritual tradition.

Again, from within the Jewish rabbinic tradition, we can find something similar expressed in the famous dictum: “All that a talmid chacham [sage/student] is . . . to teach, was already given to Moses on Sinai.”<sup>47</sup> The dictum can of course be read in different ways: on a simplistic level, it can be understood as severely circumscribing innovation—after all, all that is possible to be taught has already been given by the tradition (Moses on Sinai). More deeply, however, the dictum actually legitimizes the ongoing cultural production *within* the tradition by extending the mantle of tradition to future generations of interpretation and exegetical prowess.

Ritual continues to provide an ongoing arena of creativity and tradition, acceptance and obligation. Ritual practice becomes the arena where the dynamic of that third space, the potential space within which cultural creativity takes place, is worked out. Now this interplay allows different degrees of creativity and acceptance. Ritual prayer in a synagogue or church tends to one end of a scale, text study to another.<sup>48</sup> The degrees of formalization, invariance of sequence, and encoding by actors are all different, with text study being, let us say, less formalized and invariant than liturgy. For that matter, text study itself can have differing degrees of formalization, invariance, and encoding by the actors within the same tradition, making a particular mode of study more or less ritualistic. The general point we are trying to stress is that creativity is always in tension with the tradition. Ritual provides the central space for playing out this tension. It is no surprise that both Jewish and Confucian ritual traditions strongly emphasized notions of autonomy. It is only from a more contemporary perspective that this would appear to be paradoxical.

Finally, we can learn something of the issue of autonomy and how it is structured in regard to ritual action from the laws of purity and impurity. These would seem, on first sight, to present the least autonomous, most “obsessive” ritual forms of engagement with the world that we can conceive. And yet, perhaps the case deserves deeper consideration.

We would like to argue that the play of intentionality within and upon the impurity of certain (material) matter seems to reproduce in ritual form the very play of creativity and tradition that is the source of all cultural production. Here of course the tradition is not a human, cultural tradition but the very stuff of the world. This is the creativity of human agency and intentionality as they act upon and transform the world. It is almost as if the categories of purity and impurity define a realm of meanings and significance (like a child’s circle of play) within which the drama of humanity and the world—the cultural construction of categories—can take place and be invested with meaning. Impurity is always with us, if only because our categories can never in themselves fully

encompass the world. To hark back to Mary Douglas's famous analysis, it is not so much boundaries violated that makes for impurity.<sup>49</sup> Rather, the play of impurity and purity itself constructs a cultural space where we need not query the origin of mankind (and its categories), in and out of the world.

Here too it is worth recalling how in early Israelite religion the rules of purity and impurity were critically connected to metaphors of creation and of *imitatio Dei*. The individual, entering into the state of purity (first at the Temple and, later, at one's own table) participated (first through sacrifice and then through ritualized prayer and eating) in the process of world construction. The congregant, as an adherent to the rules of ritual purity, participated in a process of cultural creation—the *as if* of world creation and maintenance.<sup>50</sup> In a subjunctive sense he was participating with God in the creation and maintenance of the universe through the construction of a space of ritual purity that was both inside and outside of the orders of the world being maintained. Boris Ostrer has, in fact, recently demonstrated how the Mishnah constructs the human body as analogous to the fallen Temple, or rather its altar, as a site of holiness.<sup>51</sup> Like the Temple, the body must be maintained in its purity, and his analysis of the alternating symbolic valence of red and white in the calculus of this purity is stunning. He shows how “the source of purity, the most pure and sacred place in the entire Jewish world [the Temple], is identified with the body, which bears the worst possible impurity.”<sup>52</sup> Both, at different historical periods, mediate between the individual and the natural, social and supernatural worlds. By the rabbinic period (the time of the Mishnah) the rabbis had to replace the mediation of the ritual with the mediation of the text of ritual—but the dynamic is the same.

The psychoanalyst Arnold Modell identified a similar phenomenon in his analysis of Paleolithic art in the caves of Altamira and Niaux (representatives of an art form that existed, relatively unchanged, from 30,000 BCE to approximately 12,000 BCE).<sup>53</sup> Modell stresses how the Paleolithic artists made use of natural geologic formations (cavities in the floor, protrusions in the wall, formations of stalactites, etc.) as intrinsic components of their pictures. He analyzes this, which he calls “the interpenetration of reality with the artistic vision,” as forming a transitional space of creative work, “a tangible expression of the mental process of creation itself.”<sup>54</sup> Modell likens this to Winnicott's idea of transitional object—the teddy bear or favorite blanket—which plays the same role in externalizing psychic processes, “the child's first creative relationship with the environment.”<sup>55</sup> Notions of purity and impurity play a somewhat similar if much more structured and complex role in mediating between humankind and the natural environment. Just as the cave art in Niaux makes use of natural formations in the creation of an object that (like

the transitional object) is neither fully human nor fully of the world, so too do ideas of impurity (at least in Judaism) create a space that is neither solely human nor solely of the natural world. In this sense they are akin to the transitional object that exists in a potential space between the individual and the environment.<sup>56</sup> With all the differences between the cases, the similarity is rooted in the appropriation of a space between the object world and the human one, partaking in both and, in the process, being transformed. Both take part in what Wilhelm Worringer called the “great process of disputation between man and the outer world” that will continue “to the end of time.”<sup>57</sup> For Worringer, religion, no less than art, was one of the grand mediating structures of this disputation.

If we are willing to extend the object world to the existence of primary processes, as did the Confucian sages—specifically those drives of sex and death—laws of ritual purity center on creating a human space free from the overwhelming imperative of those drives.<sup>58</sup> The laws of ritual purity circumscribe a space between the social and the instinctual, a human space, not fully divorced from the overwhelming power of the instinctual but not fully succumbing to it either. These rituals construct a subjunctive space where some control over both death and sex can be at least temporarily and partially afforded.

Impurity is both always already there, in certain objects, and equally always only transmitted by acts of human agency and intentionality. It shares the characteristics of what Winnicott termed the “third arena of human living, one neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality.”<sup>59</sup> This intermediary arena of living can constitute a potential space, which negates the idea of space as separation.

Rabbinic laws of impurity provide a clear example of this because they tie intimately to humanly constructed objects. Natural objects do not become impure unless they are the source of impurity. Houses can become impure, stone utensils but not stones, clay jugs but not mud. The Talmud presents examples of famous debates where the point in question was when in the creation of an object (an oven, a knife) does it enter the realm where impurity can adhere to it? The rules themselves create that space where the natural world can be mastered by its very distinction and separateness from the human endeavor. The impurity of menstruating women, lepers, or those with seminal emissions creates a human category out of a natural process (similar again to the Paleolithic artist who interpenetrates the creative/inner and the actual environment). In so doing it creates a space where mankind can approach and apprehend the world in a creative manner.

The laws of impurity in Judaism encompass both what scholars have come to characterize as ritual modes of impurity (involving bodily flows, scale



disease, mold on houses, contact with certain animals and with death), as well as moral modes of impurity (revolving around the abrogation of injunctions in the realm of violence and sex).<sup>60</sup> Violations in the first realm pollute the individual and his or her body, violations in the second pollute the land and the community.<sup>61</sup> Each delineates a different type of space, between differentially defined entities. The first exists between the individual and the world of external objects. The second lies between the individual and the world of internal objects, which most threaten social order and the shared subjunctive of the community of empathy. Each form of pollution concerns the creation and maintenance of different “worlds.” In each the consequences of its destruction are correspondingly different. Both, however, define a subjunctive space within which human existence can take place and, in so doing, a world can be constructed.

Crucially, both create a space for human action and praxis. They open up the very possibility of human agency by blurring the absolute dualism between world and humankind, allowing the latter to act on the former. This is true not only for the world of external objects but also for internal states, the chaos of drives and desiderata, demons and spirits that were the concern of the *Book of Rites*. Control over primary instinctual drives becomes the basis for an ordered human life in society and so for human life itself. Autonomy, in this reading, is in opposition not to heteronomy but to chaos—which makes any human action impossible. In contrast, ritual rules of (among other things) purity and impurity permit the very extension of human existence in the world.

### Ritual and Its Dangers

Within their subjunctive worlds, of course, rituals may still lack real internal tensions. While ritual opens up the very possibility of cultural creativity and human praxis, it also carries its own dangers within that practice. To see how this is so, let us return to the Confucian tradition and to the “Nature Emerges from the Decree” text. Ritual, as defined in the text, is by definition open-ended. Any new set of actions that would occur in the ongoing accumulation of actions within a tradition would simply become part of what the latter-born would deal with, and any of those actions could come to be defined as exemplary and be entered into the repertoire that makes up a ritual canon. Since, in other words, the world is inherently fractured, the goal is to build an order, endlessly changing, through a constant process of ritualization. Such a theory assumes that there is an inherent tension between those actions that are deemed ritual and those actions that are not. Ideally, the practice of the

former aids us in the practice of the latter, and the latter could always potentially be entered into the repertoire of the former. But the tension is always there.

Yet, of course, if such a tension is inherent, then it will always breed attempts to end the tension. There are several ways in which this can be done.

To begin with, there will be tendencies in a ritual order to close the canon, to declare that a given ritual order is complete and can allow no further additions or modifications. As such, no actions outside the current canon can be allowed in, and all such nonritual actions become radically devalued. In short, the lines between ritual and nonritual action become rigid and absolute. Once this happens, ritual can easily turn into pure repetition, being enacted more and more forcefully against what is perceived to be a complete disorder in the world of mundane reality. Ritual, in short, becomes endless, compulsive repetition—a cultural equivalent of the stereotypical compulsive-obsessive, constantly attempting to deny the fractured nature of lived experience through a turn to ever more purified repetition.

This danger always plays in relation to the opposite danger. If one of the goals of ritual is to create humans who are, to follow our Chinese and Judaic ritual theorists, sages, then we can potentially find a danger from the other end. Sagely action, by definition, is outside the dictates of ritual precedent, but it can and often does become precedent for new rituals. This means that a ritual order that allows too many sages can quickly cease to work effectively, because it would mean endless innovation and thus the end of a meaningful tradition. A canon that is closed absolutely can create problems; a canon that is too open can create problems as well.

Historically, both of these problems played out in the Confucian tradition, and, in fact, both constantly played off against each other. Indeed, one of the reasons that self-proclaimed Confucians in the first century BCE worked to close the canon was precisely in response to the proliferation of self-proclaimed sages over the previous two centuries. Their move was to proclaim Confucius as the last sage, and the Five Classics (mentioned earlier) as the final collection of ritual. The redaction of the Mishnah and the Babylonian Talmud followed a similar dynamic.

As we will detail in the chapter on ritual and sincerity (chapter 4), however, attempts to close a ritual canon tend to provoke a response of claims of sincerity—claims that rituals are simply rules of conformity that prevent sincere belief. There is thus an inherent dynamic in ritual systems to become too closed (to prevent the emergence of too many sages), and this in turn breeds a tendency to assert sincerity claims in opposition to ritual. As we will see, this is a recurrent and inherent tendency in ritual orders. The current

situation—often and mistakenly referred to as a “modernity” standing in opposition to a “tradition”—is but one more moment in this dynamic.

### Theoretical Implications

One of our concerns with so much ritual theory—whether of the functionalist variety or of the Geertzian hermeneutic variety—is that it has been overly concerned with reading ritual according to a vision of system, of totality, and of harmony. Whether that totality is read as a functional system or a system of meanings, it is always ordered and, when idealized, is always seen as either creating or exemplifying a static, harmonious world.

In contrast, we have argued here that ritual—particularly when it is effective—more often operates in the realm of the limited and thus the subjunctive. It is in practice (the only place that matters) imperfect to the situation at hand and in endless need of constant, if only minor, adjustment to make the disconnect less painful. With “Nature Emerges from the Decree,” the claims rested upon a vision of a fractured, discontinuous world—a fractured world in which humans build out certain patterns. Ritual is part of a never-ending attempt to take particulars of these patterns and build an order out of them. Ritual, therefore, means never-ending work. It is a recurrent, always imperfect, project of dealing with patterns of human behavior—patterns that are always at risk of shifting into dangerous directions—or of unleashing demons.

Such a tragic view 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. When it is effective, that effectiveness in part arises from the sense 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. Although such a project is by definition never-ending, it can, for periods of time, create pockets of order in which humans can flourish.

Indeed, the biggest dangers for ritual orders tend to come from trying to end this fragmentation, leave the realm of the limited and the tragic, and achieve finality or perfection—either by turning to a purely closed system of endless repetition or by creating a totalizing system of sincere meaning. Radcliffe-Brown and Geertz, in a sense, mistakenly take each of these two alternatives respectively in their readings of ritual. The implication is not that they are fully wrong in their analyses—there would almost assuredly be moments in any given cultural history where one of these two forms would indeed play out. Their mistake was to take such forms as standard, rather than as moments in the cultural history of the workings of ritual.

## CHAPTER I

1. Xunzi, Wangzhi, 9/39/1–2, 5.7a.
2. Ibid., 9/39/3–6, 5.7a–7b.
3. Xunzi, Xing'e, 23/114/9–11, 17.2b–3a.
4. Liji, Biao Ji, 151.33.27.
5. Quoted in Schofer, *The Making of a Sage: A Study in Rabbinic Ethics*, 134.
6. Radcliffe-Brown, "Religion and Society," 158.
7. Ibid., 160.
8. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*.
9. Asad, "Anthropological Conceptions of Religion: Reflections on Geertz."
10. This appears in both the Babylonian Talmud Tractate 10b and in later medieval texts such as *Hoshen Mishpat*, 1b.
11. Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*.
12. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce*, 98–119.
13. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art*.
14. Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*.
15. Burkett, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual*, 51.
16. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*.
17. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.
18. Needless to add, shared empathy also invokes the limits of empathy and of those beyond the boundaries of empathy—who are often recalled at the same moment of ritual enactment (as in Jewish Passover and Christian Easter).
19. Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, 25.
20. Maimonides, *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Tephila, 4.
21. In terms of mid-twentieth-century social theory, we are talking about a very different type of fit between incumbent and role. This is potentially important because most theories of modernization and democracy posit the sincere type as a basis for democratic, liberal societies. But there are certainly critical counterfactual cases. Ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy had democracies without this type of self-role relationship.
22. We refer here to Winnicott's psychoanalytic work on transitional objects, *Playing and Reality*, to which we will return in the following chapter. The mother's participation in the transitional object is in the form of her willingness to leave it in undefined space, free of origins or belonging (to world of mother or infant). Her recognition of its unique place in the infant's mental universe is critical to its success.
23. Alexiou, *After Antiquity: Greek Language, Myth and Metaphor*, 349.
24. Ibid., 318.
25. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*, 65.
26. Ibid., 63.
27. Ibid.
28. Watson, "Of Flesh and Bones: The Management of Death Pollution in Cantonese Society," 155–86. Portions of this paragraph appeared earlier in Puett, "Bones," 1014–15.

29. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, 144.

30. *Ibid.*, 170.

31. *Ibid.*, 169.

32. *Ibid.*, 186.

33. *Ibid.*, 145.

34. *Ibid.*, 170.

35. Smith, *Imagining Religion*, 61–64.

36. 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 Hu-beisheng Jingmenshi Bowuguan, “Jingmen Guodian Yi Hao Chumu.” Some of the most helpful analyses of the text are Guodian Chu Jian Zhuanhao, *Daojia Wenhua Yanjiu*, vol. 17; “Guodian Chujian Yanjiu,” *Zhongguo Zhexue*, vol. 20; Wuhan Daxue Zhongguo Wenhua Yanjiuyuan, *Guodian Chu Jian Guoji Xueshu Yantaohui Lunwen Ji*; Allan and Williams, *The Guodian Laozi: Proceedings of the International Conference, Dartmouth College, May 1998*; Ding, *Guodian Chumu Zhujian Sixiang Yanjiu*; and Guo, *Guodian Zhujian yu Xian Qin Xueshu Sixiang*. Portions of this section, as well as the briefer discussion of the text in the conclusion of this chapter, appeared earlier in Puett, “Innovation as Ritualization: The Fractured Cosmology of Early China.” For a fuller discussion of the text, see Puett, “The Ethics of Responding Properly: The Notion of *Qing* in Early Chinese Thought.”

37. *Xing Zi Ming Chu*, strip 1, p. 179.

38. *Ibid.*, strips 2–3, p. 179.

39. *Ibid.*, strip 3, p. 179.

40. For a fuller discussion of the text’s view of dispositions, see Puett, “The Ethics of Responding Properly.”

41. *Xing Zi Ming Chu*, strips 15–16, 179.

42. *Ibid.*, strips 16–18, 179.

43. Schofer, *The Making of a Sage*, 168.

44. See Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, 128–37.

45. Puett, *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice, and Self-Divinization in Early China*.

46. Schofer, *The Making of a Sage*, 118.

47. The “talmid chacham” means both teacher and student: both the wise student and student of the wise. In a sense its own linguistic ambiguity expresses the self-same attitude toward creativity and tradition as is expressed in the statement (the wise master of course being the representative of the tradition within which the student learns and is acculturated).

48. In certain religions the study of religious texts, not only core texts such as the Bible or the Koran, but also the interpretative literature of tradition is, itself, a soteriological act of great significance. This is especially true in Judaism (and to a lesser extent in Islam), where text study in and for itself is granted the highest religious valuation. Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority*; and Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meanings in Rabbinic Exegesis*.

49. Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

50. Klawans, "Pure Violence: Sacrifice and Defilement in Ancient Israel."

51. Ostrer, Leviticus 13:13 and its Mishanic parallel.

52. *Ibid.*, 25.

53. Modell, "The Transitional Object as the Creative Act," 188–92.

54. *Ibid.*, 190.

55. *Ibid.*, 191.

56. See Winnicott's chapter "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena," in *Playing and Reality*, 1–30.

57. Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, 127.

58. On this general subject, see Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Israel*.

See also the literature review by Klawans in his "Ritual Purity, Moral Purity, and Sacrifice in Jacob Milgrom's *Leviticus*."

59. See Winnicott's chapter "The Place Where We Live," in *Playing and Reality*, 122–29.

60. On issues of purity and impurity, see by Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Israel*; "The Impurity of Immorality in Ancient Judaism"; and "Notions of Gentile Impurity in Ancient Judaism." See also Buchler, *Studies in Sin and Atonement in the Rabbinic Literature of the First Century*; and Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Israel*.

61. Klawans, "The Impurity of Immorality in Ancient Judaism"; and "Pure Violence."

## CHAPTER 2

1. We are not attempting a comprehensive review of psychological aspects of, or psychological theories of, ritual, but rather highlighting capacities for tolerating, indeed cultivating, ambiguity. Nor are we exploring ritual with the tools and terminology of Gestalt psychology. There is an increasing body of literature examining ritual from perspectives of cognitive psychology, and some works attempting to formulate verifiable hypotheses about ritual behavior. See McCauley and Lawson, *Bringing Ritual to Mind: Psychological Foundations of Cultural Forms*.

2. See Levin, *The Flight from Ambiguity*; Mills, "Sociological Ambivalence and Social Order: The Constructive Uses of Normative Dissonance"; Zielyk, "On Ambiguity and Ambivalence"; Heilman, "Inner and Outer Identities: Sociological Ambivalence among Orthodox Jews"; Seeman, "Role Conflict and Ambivalence in Leadership"; and Frenkel-Brunswick, "Intolerance of Ambiguity as an Emotional and Perceptual Personality Variable."

3. See Merton, *Sociological Ambivalence and Other Essays*; Homans, *Social Behavior: Its Elementary Forms*; Coser, "The Complexity of Roles as Seedbed of Individual Autonomy"; and Coser, "Role Distance, Sociological Ambivalence, and Transitional Status Systems."

4. Merton, "The Role Set: Problems in Sociological Theory"; Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure: Toward the Codification of Theory and Research*; and Coser, *In Defence of Modernity: Role Complexity and Individual Autonomy*.