The Ground Between

ANTHROPOLOGISTS ENGAGE PHILOSOPHY VEENA DAS,

MICHAEL JACKSON, ARTHUR KLEINMAN, BHRIGUPATI SINGH, EDITORS

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Ritual Disjunctions:

Ghosts, Philosophy, and Anthropology

Michael Puett

■ Allow me to begin with a ritual as described in the *Records of Rites* (*Liji*
禮記), one of the ritual classics from early China.[1] To set the scene, let us
suppose that a ruler passes away. The ruler's son becomes the new ruler,
who then performs sacrifices to his deceased father. In these sacrifices, an
impersonator would play the ritual part of the deceased, receiving sacri-
fices from the living. In the example at hand, the living ruler's son would
play the impersonator role for the ghost of his grandfather (the ruler's de-
ceased father): "Now, according to the way of sacrificing, the grandson acted
as the impersonator of the king's father. He who was made to act as the
impersonator was the son of he who made the sacrifice. The father faced
north and served him. By means of this, he made clear the way of a son
serving his father. This is the relation of father and son" (ICS 131/26/14).[2]

The stated goal of the ritual is to inculcate in each performer the proper
dispositions that should hold in the relationship between father and son.
But the ritual did not involve these participants simply coming in and act-
ing in their ritually proper roles, with the father acting as a proper father
and the son acting as a proper son. On the contrary, the entire ritual oper-
ated precisely through a series of role reversals: the ruler would have to
behave as a proper son to his own son, who would in turn have to behave
as a proper father to his own father.

The disjunction between these ritual roles and the behavior that would
exist outside the ritual is underlined repeatedly: "The ruler met the victim
but did not meet the impersonator. This avoided impropriety. When the
impersonator was outside the gates of the temple, then he was seen as a
subject; when he was inside the temple, then he was fully the ruler. When

the ruler was outside the gates of the temple, he was seen as the ruler; when he entered the gates of the temple, he was fully the son. Therefore by not going outside, he made clear the propriety of ruler and subject" (ICS 131/26/13).

Both of these passages conclude with the same point: the proper relationship between father and son, as well as that between ruler and subject, is defined precisely by the demarcations of the ritual space. For these demarcations to work, the participants must relate to each other according to their ritual roles. Indeed the ability of the ruler to approach his son (who would be playing the role of the ruler's father) with proper filial dispositions is given as a definition of proper sacrificial action: "Only the sage is able to sacrifice to the High God, and only the filial son is able to sacrifice to his parents. 'Sacrifice' [*xiang*] is to face toward [*xiang*]. One faces toward it, and only then can one sacrifice to it. Therefore, the filial son approaches the impersonator and does not blush" (ICS 126/25.6/7).

If the ruler so succeeds in developing these filial dispositions, then the sons and grandsons throughout the realm will be moved by the ruler's filiality as well, and he will come to be seen as the father and mother of the people: "Therefore, if his power is flourishing, his intent will be deep. If his intent is deep, his propriety will be displayed. If his propriety is displayed, his sacrifices will be reverent. If his sacrifices are reverent, then none of the sons and grandsons within the borders will dare be irreverent. . . . If his power is slight, his intent light, and he has doubts about his propriety, then, when seeking to sacrifice, he will not be able to be reverent when it is necessary to be so. If he is not reverent when sacrificing, how can he be taken as the father and mother of the people?" (ICS 133/26/22).

The overall goal of the ritual is becoming clear. Following the death of the ruler, the deceased father must be made into a supportive ancestor, the ruler must be a proper descendant to this ancestor, and the ruler's son must learn to be a proper son to his father, the new ruler. Moreover the ruler must train himself to treat the people as his family, and the people must come to act toward the new ruler as if he were their father and mother.

Hopefully all of this is accomplished in the ancestral sacrifice. The result of the ritual is that the ruler, by playing the part of the son to his own son, learns to become a proper descendant to his deceased father, who is impersonated by his son, just as his son, by playing the part of the proper father, learns to become a proper son to his father. Implicit in the ritual is the hope that the deceased father, by occupying the grandson playing the role of the father, will be trained to become a proper ancestor, and the populace, seeing

the ruler properly playing the role of son to his deceased father, will in turn be moved to play the role of son to the ruler—just as the ruler comes to play the role of father and mother of the people.

As explicated elsewhere in the text, the same logic plays out in relation to the sacrifices to Heaven, through which, as one could at this point predict, the ruler becomes the Son of Heaven and Heaven comes to see the ruler as his son (Puett 2005).

Thus, through these sets of rituals, an array of potentially antagonistic forces—Heaven, the ghost of a recently deceased ruler, the new ruler, his son, and the populace—come to have filial dispositions toward each other. As a result, the entire realm becomes, ritually speaking, a single family, linked through familial dispositions. Instead of interactions being dominated by dispositions like anger, jealousy, and resentment, the interactions within rituals are defined by the proper dispositions associated with the relations between particular roles in a patriarchal hierarchy: ancestor, father, son. Ritually speaking again, the world—including Heaven, ghosts, and living humans—comes to function as a perfect patriarchal lineage built up through father-son dyads.

But, of course, this is not the way the world really operated. And the very nature of the ritual and the reason the ritual would (hopefully) be effective were predicated on underlining such a disjunction between the ritual and what existed outside of it. The father and son would not enter the ritual space and be required to behave as a proper father and son to each other. On the contrary, the working of the ritual demanded that the ritual roles be clearly separated from the world outside of the ritual, with the father playing the role of the son and the son playing the role of the father.

This might seem like an odd place to begin an essay on anthropology and philosophy. And all the more so because the text I have been quoting from is not an ethnographic description of a ritual but rather a work of ritual theory from classical China. My reason for quoting it at such length is because I would like to argue that the ritual theory glimpsed here opens up some interesting possibilities for anthropological theory in general, and more particularly some interesting issues for ways to bring together anthropological theory with philosophy.

To help lay out the argument, allow me to begin by reflecting a bit on how material like that just discussed has already played a role in the development of anthropological theory and (to a much lesser extent) philosophy. I do so in order to argue that the material has been appropriated and domesticated in ways that perhaps limit its potential interest.

To begin with ancestors, premodern China has long been posited as one of the world's clearest examples of a culture predicated on ancestral worship. Indeed one of the most influential studies of premodern Chinese culture described the Chinese as having "lived under the ancestors' shadow" (Hsu 1967). In such a vision, the Chinese purportedly lived in a world in which they would be expected to follow the path laid out by their ancestors, to whom they would be offering constant sacrifices as acts of obeisance. One of the major breaks between premodern and modern China is thus often presented precisely as a shift from living under the ancestors' shadow to living in one's own (see, e.g., Xin 2000).

Formulations of Chinese cosmology follow similar lines. If ancestral sacrifice has come to play a canonical role in anthropological discussions of premodern social practices, premodern Chinese visions of the world have played a comparable role in studies of cosmology.[3] Premodern Chinese cosmology is often described as one of harmonious monism, wherein the entire cosmos was linked by the same lines of continuity as found among human families. Here again the breakdown of this traditional cosmology is often posited as one of the key issues in the formation of a modern China.

As should already be clear, however, such descriptions of premodern Chinese culture have arisen in part by taking the ideal results of ritual action and presenting them instead as founding assumptions. These views find strong confirmation in the material discussed earlier, but they are presented not as assumptions but as the world normatively created within a ritual space—a ritual space that is explicitly contrasted with what exists outside.

But one can generalize the point. There was a recurrent tendency in nineteenth- and twentieth-century theory to emphasize the degree to which so-called traditional societies assumed themselves to be living in a cyclical, harmonious cosmos. Around such views an entire framework developed focused on the shift from a harmonious to a fragmentary cosmology, from a continuous to a discontinuous world, from traditional worldviews to modern. Mircea Eliade (1954) is but one highly influential example among many that could be mentioned. It is notable, however, the degree to which such narratives—Eliade's very much included—rested for their evidence on so-called traditional cosmologies from rituals.

This tendency to read ritual statements as cosmological assumptions has been noted by Maurice Bloch (1977) as well, with a particular focus on the issue of time. Bloch offers as an example Clifford Geertz's famous

interpretation of Balinese views of cyclical time, as contrasted with the predominantly linear visions of time purportedly dominating in the modern West. Bloch notes correctly that Geertz's arguments rest primarily on evidence drawn from rituals. He argues that instead of presenting a dichotomy between cyclical and linear views of time in terms of cultural assumptions (in this case, traditional Bali on the one hand and the modern West on the other), the distinction should instead be between ritual constructions of time and lived experience. The former, Bloch argues, are often cyclical, while the latter are universally linear.

Discussing the difference between cyclical and linear visions of time in terms of ritual versus nonritual forms of experience is certainly an improvement over the attempt to place such a distinction into a tradition/modernity narrative. However, Bloch's solution has its dangers as well. What lies outside ritual for Bloch is still essentially what we experience, the "we" now being read as universal humans as opposed to modern humans. Culture (however understood) is thus largely taken out of the discussion of our lived experience. But there is a danger that the work of ritual is being misunderstood as well, as it simply comes to occupy the same distancing place in our theoretical frameworks that "traditional cosmologies" did in an earlier generation.

Let me explain what I mean by *distancing*. It is not just that, because of these frameworks (be they "tradition/modernity," or "ritual/universal lived experience"), we are in danger of systematically misreading huge amounts of ritual materials and the cultures that produced them—a serious danger in itself. It is that, by placing these materials and cultures within the frameworks we do, we guarantee that they can be nothing but the objects of our theoretical discussions and philosophical projects. Unless, for example, we really want to believe we live in a harmonious, cyclical cosmos, or—in another framework—to enter a ritual space that constructs such an experience, then any material drawn from such a culture could never be something we would allow ourselves to think through or learn from. A ritual text, read in such a way, could be nothing other than an interesting document from another world—one about which we could perhaps have great nostalgia but one that never really threatens our theoretical models or makes us think anew.

But what if we were to do the opposite? What would happen if we were to develop our philosophical and theoretical orientations using indigenous theories as well, allowing those theories to challenge the models within which we have become so used to thinking? Invaluable work has been undertaken

in demonstrating the degree to which our theoretical models are dependent on specific—primarily Protestant—religious traditions (see, e.g., Asad 1993; Sahlins 1996). So perhaps now we are in a position to start building theoretical models from other traditions as well.[4] As with any theory, such approaches will mask as much as they reveal, but by building from numerous different theoretical orientations coming from different traditions, we may be more likely to see the workings and implications of these masks and revelations.

Let us return to the issues of ritual and lived experience in classical China in order to get a better sense of some of these workings in practice. And let me start by saying a few more words about early Chinese religious practice. I will focus on those practices dominant in the Warring States and Han (ca. fifth through first centuries BCE), the period during which our ritual text mentioned earlier was written.

The world in classical China was composed of numerous different energies and powers in constant interaction with each other. These interactions were usually conflictual and potentially highly dangerous. In terms of interactions between humans, the energies of what we would call negative emotions—anger, jealousy, resentment—could erupt at any moment, and often for seemingly minor and mundane moments. Hence the possibility at any moment of the emergence of fights, conflicts, and violence. This was equally true of the energies within the human body. The interactions of these energies with each other and with energies outside the body could often be quite destructive, resulting in sickness and death. Then things would get worse: after death, the energies of anger and resentment would harden and become focused explicitly on those still alive. The resulting energies would haunt the living, bringing about yet more sicknesses and yet more deaths. And these are just the energies associated with humans. There are other energies and beings throughout the cosmos that suddenly emerge for reasons unclear to us. Our interactions with them as well are often equally dangerous.

Given such a world, attempts were made to name these energies, to map them, to chart their common patterns of interactions so that they could be understood and altered. The various energies in the human body, for example, were mapped, with constant effort to see what forms of exercises and dietetics could alter the ways the energies interacted both within the body and with energies outside the body. One of the more famous ways of doing this was to classify some of the energies as *yin* and others as *yang*, and then to seek exercises and dietetics to bring these different

energies into greater balance and harmony and thus avoid sickness. Another was to classify the different energies into different phases that would then be harmonized with similarly classified energies in the environment. But it is important to emphasize that these classifications and mappings were not ontological descriptions of the human body or the larger cosmos; they were mappings of various patterns of interaction with the goal of altering those interactions in favorable ways.

This was equally true of the energies that would be classified as nonhuman. The dangerous energies that would be released after death, for example, were called *gui*. When referring to them as deceased humans, the term is best translated as "ghost." But not all gui are necessarily dead humans. The term can also be used to map those highly dangerous creatures that exist in the larger world. We usually do not know the origins of such creatures; they may or may not be deceased humans. In such cases, the term *gui* is perhaps best translated as "demon." Either way, a gui is an extraordinarily dangerous creature whose interactions with living humans are dominated by energies of anger, resentment, and viciousness.

As with the energies within the human body, the goal was to identify the forms of work that could be undertaken to alter the nature of the interactions between humans and these gui. When the gui were deceased humans, the goal was to transform the highly dangerous interactions between ghosts and living humans into one between ancestors and descendants. Here again, these terms must be understood relationally. It is not that the substance of something called a ghost would be transformed in an ontological sense into something radically different that could be called an ancestor. Rather the relations between the living humans and the creature would be altered such that different and (from the perspective of the human) better patterns of interaction would be created.

If the gui was not clearly related to a group of living humans who could then relate to it as an ancestor, then the goal would be to make it into a god or goddess—again in a relational sense. It would be treated as a god or goddess, given a place in the pantheon, and provided with sacrificial offerings on a defined schedule—the key, again, being to alter the forms of interaction between humans and the gui, shifting it to one of mutual support rather than antagonism and conflict.

These same points would hold for the interaction of humans with the natural environment. Many of these interactions would be dangerous and highly conflictual: animals attacking and killing humans, humans eating poisonous plants and dying, cold temperatures developing in which hu-

mans freeze to death, rains and droughts occurring that lead to floods and lack of adequate water. Here too the goal would be to alter and transform these relations. In this case, such a transformation was accomplished initially through domestication: by domesticating the animals and plants and creating an agricultural world in which the domesticated plant would be harvested according to the shifts in temperature and rains, what had been a highly dangerous set of interactions becomes a harmonious one, in which the interactions are on the contrary productive for humans. The result is a harmonious world based upon cyclical time.

But, again, it is not that the cosmos itself has been fully transformed. In all of these cases, we are dealing with human attempts to alter sets of relationships. The energies in one's body are never fully harmonized; the world is never fully domesticated; the gui are never fully transformed into ancestors or into gods and goddesses. The world of our experience is thus one not of harmony but of constant ruptures of dangerous energies that must yet again be contained, altered, and transformed. This is true at the level of our bodies and the constant dangers of illnesses; it is true at the level of our interactions with other humans, which can at any moment be overtaken with energies of anger and resentment and even shift into violence; it is true of our dealings with the ancestors and gods, who at any point can and often do revert to being dangerous ghosts; it is true of our work with the larger cosmos, from which we receive endless disasters that are highly destructive of human flourishing. Not only is harmony not an assumption nor a pregiven state; it is, on the contrary, something one is constantly working to achieve and never succeeding in accomplishing for any length of time.

In short, there was no assumption in early China of a harmonious, monistic cosmos. The problem was precisely that it was, in our experience, fragmented or, perhaps more accurately, pluralistic—pluralistic not in the political sense but rather in the literal sense of the word. The world consists at every level of ever-changing beings and energies in constant (and often conflictual) interaction—a world thus filled with, among other things, highly dangerous and capricious ghosts. The goal was then to develop a set of practices to transform that world into something that was, for brief periods of time, slightly more harmonious, in the sense of having better relationships and better forms of interaction.

As is probably becoming clear, the reason that these practices from classical China could be so misread is that the materials explicitly say all of the things that are commonly attributed to Chinese culture in general. But

these are not descriptions of beliefs but rather attempts to map and transform a world that is seen as not operating this way.

A couple of examples will help to make the point. The text I quoted from earlier is the *Records of Rites* (*Liji*, 禮記). In another chapter of the work ("Li yun"), the development of the ritual system is explicitly compared to the development of agriculture. Both worked to produce a harmonious system through domestication—in the one case domesticating aspects of the natural world such that, in their transformed state, those elements would allow for higher levels of human flourishing, and in the other case domesticating human dispositions such that they allow for the same. In both cases of agriculture and ritual, all under Heaven comes to be taken as a "single family" (ICS 9.22/62/5).[5] But, of course, the world is not really a single family; it is simply domesticated at both the cosmic and societal levels to operate as such to whatever degree possible.

Another chapter of the same text (the "Jifa") presents the pantheon of gods as a humanly constructed one, organized according to the hierarchies and patterns advantageous to human growth (ICS 123/24/9). The resulting pantheon is a perfectly ordered hierarchy—but, at the same time, of course it is not.

Simply put, humans are not living under the ancestors' shadow. The deceased are ghosts who have been domesticated into relationships defined to benefit the living. And these domesticated relationships are never enduring. The ancestors are constructed, ordered, and arranged into a lineage by and for the benefit of the living, at the same time that they haunt and attack the living (Puett 2010a).

Those who would present classical Chinese culture as having assumed a harmonious cosmos with which humans should try to accord, and of assuming a world of ancestral models to whose wills the living should try to conform, have taken the results of such ritual actions and presented them as foundational assumptions. But this completely misses the point of what animates and motivates the endless constructions of such claims. These constructions work precisely because, in a sense, they do not work. Or, more precisely, they work only as a constant process, in which these highly dangerous interactions are endlessly being worked on, mapped, classified, and transformed—endless because these transformations never work for any lengthy period of time. Underlying the endless (and often contradictory) mappings, the endless ritual work, and the endless sacrifices is the knowledge that these practices are always doomed to ultimate failure. The ancestors, to give one prominent example, always revert to being ghosts.

And, of course, even calling them ghosts is already using a mapping to describe the phenomenon. They are best thought of as ruptures, as emergences of dangerous energies that will then be named (as ghosts) and worked upon through ritual activity.

■ It is this endless work, and the tensions that underlie the ritual calls for cosmic harmony, that we have missed and domesticated in our models of this material. One of the best examples of a text from classical China that asserts a model of a harmonious, monistic cosmos can be found in several chapters of the *Baihu tong*, in which the authors work out seemingly endless chains of interactions of phenomena according to various correlated cosmological phases. But instead of reading this as the sign of an assumption of a monistic cosmos, we need to see the agony underlying the writing of such a text, the agony of knowing that of course the mapping does not really work—and hence the felt need to continue the mapping in such compulsive detail.

This might seem at one level like a pessimistic vision. And at one level it certainly is. It helps to explain the strong emphasis in the songs and poetry of China on loss—loss of an earlier moment when relationships with friends or family were robust and deep. But the flip side of this is a strong commitment to the importance of those moments when the relationships, for an inevitably brief period of time, actually do work. Emphasizing the fragility of robust relationships also deepens their power.

But it is also not pessimistic for another reason: it is simply not the case that the participants would necessarily want the ordering, mappings, and rituals to always work perfectly. And perhaps this is a good moment to return to the ritual with which we began.

The background behind the ritual should now be clear. When the ruler dies, the danger is that he will become a highly dangerous ghost, that the father will fail to be a good ruler or a good father, that the son will fail to live up to his duties as an heir apparent, and that the populace will fail to support the new ruler. The goal of the ritual is to create a harmonious, hierarchical relationship between them of ancestor-father-son. Underlying the ritual, of course, is the clear knowledge that this is not the way the world operates.

Along these same lines: notable for its absence in the ritual is a female figure. The ritual works by removing the females who not only gave birth to the males in question but who (we know from other documents about

the lived reality of the time) played a crucial role in running the court. The result is a perfect, patriarchal line moving from ancestor to son. Moreover, ritually speaking, the ruler serves as both father and mother of the people. The entire realm is thus organized in such a patriarchal form, with Heaven above and the ruler below as Son of Heaven and parent to the populace.

But it is not simply that the participants know that the world does not operate this way. The ritual itself works precisely by underlining the fact that the world does not operate this way. Hence the role reversals that animate the ritual. Perhaps there might be a danger that the father would foolishly believe that, outside the ritual, he really does live up to his role as a father. But he certainly knows that he is not the son of his own son. The key to the ritual is that each participant is not only called upon to perform his respective role properly; each participant is also called upon to perform a role that by definition he is not playing outside of the ritual. One trains one's disposition to interact properly precisely by being forced to act out the disjunction of such interactions from the nonritual space.

What animates the ritual, then, is the set of negative interactions that operate outside the ritual space—a son, for example, acting as a proper father to a father with whom he just had a vicious argument. But the opposite is true as well. It is not just that the interactions within the ritual space do not exist outside the ritual space; it is that the participants would not fully wish such a ritual world to be eternal and fully successful anyway. In the example at hand—a walk into the ritual space after a vicious fight—the ritual space would presumably be tempting. But a purely male-based patriarchal order—if such a thing were somehow possible—would hardly have appealed to all of the participants. Or rather it in part might have appealed and in part would not have appealed, and in that tension lies the work of the ritual.

Allow me to expand the point with reference to the claim mentioned earlier, that in early China people lived their lives under the ancestors' shadow. As is now becoming clear, the characterization is wrong in not just one but in several senses. To begin with, it is the father, not the deceased ghost being transformed into an ancestor, who is empowered by the sacrifice. In the perfect world constructed by the ritual, the father becomes the fulcrum of all the relationships, connecting Heaven, the ancestors, and the populace, with himself at the center. Of course, the ruler is also called upon in his ritual role to play the part of father (to his son and the populace) and son (to his father and Heaven) properly, so hopefully he is being transformed through the ritual as well. Nonetheless, if successful, the sacrifice dramat-

ically empowers the father in this constructed patrilineal cosmos, whereas everyone else (including the ghost-cum-ancestor) is defined by him.

Such an outcome may well have appealed to the ruler, but it could hardly have seemed fully appealing to the rest of the participants. In our hypothetical example of the son who enters the ritual space having just endured a vicious argument with his father, the ritual moment of having his father subservient to him may seem desirable, but the son also knows that the result of the ritual will be an empowerment of his father and will indeed quite probably play to his father's worst desires for even more power. Thus in the ritual role of playing the father, the son is haunted not only by the anger and resentment from just before entering the ritual space but also by the knowledge that the implication of the ritual moment of subservience is ultimately an enhancement of the power of the father and probably an enhancement of the father's drive for power. But any consolation that could be gained by the knowledge that the empowerment effects of the ritual will in fact never fully work is also belied by the fact that the failure of the ritual also means a return to the negative emotions of anger and resentment that can often pervade the relationship outside of the ritual space—or, in the example at hand, the relations that led to the vicious argument.

So it is not just that humans do not live under their ancestors' shadows, and it is not just that the ancestor always reverts to being a ghost. It is that the ritual enactment is haunted at every level by the implications of the role-playing, wherein all of the various transformations are both non-enduring and highly ambivalent.

It is indeed a ritual that operates precisely through these hauntings. At each level the enactment is haunted by the emotions and dispositions of the other levels. Even the perfect ritual moment is haunted by the facts that it is so clearly marked as discontinuous from the world of our experience, that ruptures will inevitably occur in the enacted relationships, and that the perfect ritual relationships are in fact not only not fully desirable but, from the point of view of many of the participants, extremely chilling. And the power of the ritual depends precisely on these hauntings, and hence the emphasis on disjunction.

The same holds true for our cosmological text mentioned earlier. Would the authors really have wanted to live in a seamless, perfect world of flawlessly harmonious correlations? Probably in part yes and in part no, and hence the chilling tensions underlying the production of such a compulsively detailed text.

But let us return to the rituals and ask a very basic question: Why would such rituals be productive? Instead of thinking about ethics in terms of moral judgments, the material under discussion focuses on embodiment, with the participants being called upon to play particular roles and to inculcate the proper dispositions associated with those roles. But it is a curious type of embodiment that actually works to heighten the anxieties that such role-playing entails. The ritual roles are to be embodied, and the proper dispositions associated with those roles are to be inculcated, but the embodiment is clearly presented as impossible to achieve fully, and not even something that one would necessarily want to achieve fully. The ritual, and the ethics of the ritual, thus play in the tensions between the world of ritual and the world of experience, and the discontinuity between the two defines the efficacy of the ritual itself.

I suspect the reason such a ritual works is precisely because it heightens the tensions of our different layerings of emotions and dispositions. All of our interactions and relations are based on complex emotions and conflicting role expectations. There is always a danger that these interactions will become violent and dangerous, but there is never an easy solution to how these relations can be improved. And the rituals in question work precisely by underlining that complexity. Rituals help us refine our dispositions and transform our more dangerous emotions into ones that allow us to relate better to those around us. But these perceived better relations are not only not complete; they have their own dangers as well. Hence the emphasis on disjunction and reversed-role-playing, all of which work to highlight the ambivalences, complexities, and dangers not only of one's dispositions toward others but also of the refined dispositions associated with the rituals. By so highlighting these ambivalences, complexities, and dangers in the very acts of embodiment, the actors hopefully will become ever better at working at these conflicting dispositions in their daily life as well.

Here too one can generalize the point. Once the actions involved in what an earlier anthropology described as ritual and cosmology are taken out of the frameworks that read them as representative of a traditional worldview emphasizing harmony and continuity, one can glimpse a set of practices that we have perhaps been misreading rather systematically. Far from representing a world of harmony and continuity, they often, to quote from Robert Orsi's (2005: 170) outstanding study of the workings of Catholic rituals, operate in "the register of the tragic."

Let us return to our theoretical models. As should be clear by now, the ritual theory from the *Records of Rites* under discussion—and, for that matter, the cosmological theories as well—are not theory in the way we usually tend to use the word. These are not theories that attempt to describe the nature of ritual or the nature of the world. They instead work precisely like the rituals themselves, but at a metalevel. They describe a world of perfectly harmonious interactions that are neither enduring nor even enduringly desirable, and describe them in a way that underlines the tensions that make them work. Hence their fascinating strength, once taken out of our models that have so successfully domesticated them and stripped them of their complexity. All theories mask and reveal, but the ones under discussion allow that play of masking and revealing to be part of their power.

So what would it mean if we were to take these materials seriously as a philosophical position, as theory in this new sense?[6] And what would it mean if we were to think of an anthropology that would be inspired by it? To begin with, it would focus our attention on the complexity and tense layerings of emotions that underlie our activities. It would provide an extraordinarily rich language to talk about the degree to which such activities are worked around the fear and hopes of constant emergences and ruptures, and the degree to which those emergences and ruptures are then actively worked upon in turn. It would help us to envisage an anthropology that focuses on the common, the mundane, and the everyday, that emphasizes the extraordinary potentials for the eruptions of violence in the common and mundane, that underlines the forms of activity utilized to transform such eruptions, and that highlights the dangers of those forms themselves.[7]

It would also help us to envision an ethics that would be based on embodiment, not simply in the sense of embodying a particular role and set of values but, more important, by doing so with the full understanding that such an embodiment is by definition impossible to achieve fully. The same point would hold for our theoretical work, which would be seen less as producing models to explain behavior and more as productive but always limited frames for working with the complexities of endlessly conflicting relationships. Both ethics and theory therefore would be seen to operate, to refer again to Orsi, in the register of the tragic.

It might also help us to develop a critical vocabulary to rethink many of the comparative categories that underlie our nineteenth- and twentieth-century theoretical models—categories like ritual and cosmology. Many of

these categories have been abandoned recently, precisely because they are so connected with the types of frameworks mentioned earlier by figures like Eliade. But perhaps our goal on the contrary should be to revitalize these categories by taking indigenous theories about them seriously and exploring the phenomena and practices associated with them accordingly.

In short, using these indigenous theories might help us to break down some of our own assumptions about how theory operates and to develop new ways of thinking with and through frameworks that are more deliberate in their transformative work. The goal should not be just to deconstruct twentieth-century theoretical categories but to utilize indigenous visions to rethink our categories and the nature of categories altogether. Such an approach could be, one hopes, a move toward a truly philosophical anthropology and a truly anthropological philosophy.

NOTES

1. *The Records of Rites* (*Liji*, 禮記) is one of the most influential texts on ritual in East Asia. The chapters were written over the course of the fourth, third, and second centuries BCE and were compiled into a single text by the first century BCE. The text was thereafter defined as one of the "Five Classics" and became part of the standard educational curriculum throughout East Asia for much of the subsequent two millennia.

2. References to the text of *Liji* are cited as ICS. My translations here and throughout have been aided greatly by those of James Legge (1885).

3. Perhaps the most influential such presentations are Granet's (1934) and Weber's (1951).

4. I have been tremendously inspired in this effort by the work of Veena Das, whose explorations of indigenous theories have opened up new ways of thinking about violence and everyday life. See, most recently, her outstanding "Violence and Nonviolence at the Heart of Hindu Ethics" (2012b).

5. For a fuller discussion of the chapter, see Puett (2010b).

6. For preliminary attempts to do this, see Puett (2010a); Puett et al. (2008), particularly 18–42.

7. I have been deeply influenced by Veena Das's work in this regard, both for her focus on the ethics of ordinary life, including the forms of violence that appear in the everyday and the types of ethical work that can be undertaken therein, as well as for her commitment to exploring these issues in terms of the indigenous theories of the cultures in question. See, for example, Das (2007, 2012a).