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Beyond Morality: The Joyful Way of Confucius

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Beyond Morality: The Joyful Way of Confucius

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Introduction

The question of what it means to live a good life is both timeless and universal; across different philosophical traditions of different cultures this question remains a point of significant debate. Even within one single philosophical tradition, one seldom finds a singular answer. It is therefore unsurprising that the rich cultural tradition of classical Confucianism has already produced a large body of writings on different interpretations of the good life. Contemporary scholarship is still actively engaged with Confucius' teachings; scholars are still working to fully grasp the meaning and implications of his words as they have been presented in the *Analects*. The question remains: how might one comprehend Confucius' conception of the good life?

Previous scholarship has predominantly argued that the good life is the result of *ethical* pleasure rather than intrinsic pleasure; happiness, in terms of pleasure, must at all times be guided by moral principles.¹ In a Confucian sense, this means that the individual must at all times adhere to ritual or virtue; solely moral innocence and the fulfilment of ethical desire will give rise to true (ethical) pleasure.² Additionally, previous scholarship has argued that the good life results from the interaction between virtue and wisdom; the good life, according to this view, is “sustained and enabled by one’s wisdom”.³ Wisdom is essential in the sense that it enables one to comprehend the ultimate meaning of life; only by leading a moral life and through an active commitment to the process of learning along the way, can one truthfully lead a good life.⁴ Especially self-cultivation plays a central role within scholarly tradition as it is supposed to ensure that individuals “may achieve the practical wisdom

¹ Shirong Luo, “Happiness and the Good Life: A Classical Confucian Perspective” (*Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 18:1, 2019), 41

² *Ibid.*, 45

³ Yao Xinzong, “Joy, Wisdom and Virtue – The Confucian Paradigm of Good Life” (*Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 45:3-4, 2021), 224-226

⁴ *Ibid.*

needed to live and govern well.”⁵ In summary, previous scholarly debate has predominantly been driven by ethical philosophy; it has paid ample attention to the relation between happiness and virtuous living, in which the former is often regarded largely as a byproduct of the latter.

However, surprisingly little has been written from the perspective of *joyous* living; for a long time, scholarship has largely refrained from studying notions such as joy and pleasure within Chinese philosophy.⁶ While Confucius’ *Analects* undeniably emphasizes and encourages leading a moral life, it does not necessarily equate this with the concept of the good life (in terms of happiness and joy); pleasure and ethical action may often accompany one another, but they are not necessarily one and the same. It is not unreasonable to assume that it might be due to Confucius’ historical context that it has been challenging for traditional scholarship to avoid taking a political or ethical approach. The time during which Confucius lived, conventionally referred to as the Spring and Autumn Period (770 – 481 BCE), was characterized by significant social and political upheaval. This resulted in the flourishing of philosophical debates on both private and public matters as different thinkers debated on how to return to the order and peace of former times. The political and the personal, according to Confucius and many other thinkers of his time, are deeply intertwined; accordingly, Confucius’ teachings were largely practical as much of them were “addressed to would-be political leaders and contains advice on how to govern properly”.⁷ It is exactly due to the political nature of the text, that scholarship has often equated virtuous living with the good life; after all, virtuous conduct was deemed deeply necessary for the restoration of social and political stability.

⁵ Christopher W. Gowans, *Self-Cultivation Philosophies in Ancient India, Greece and China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 196

⁶ Michael Nylan, *The Chinese Pleasure Book* (New York: Zone Books, 2018), 17

⁷ Gowans, *Self-Cultivation Philosophies in Ancient India, Greece and China*, 196

However, I would like to argue in my thesis that in order to understand Confucius' teachings on the good life and on joyful living, it can be fruitful to consider the text beyond its historical context and accordingly, beyond its political nature. While the personal and the political are not necessarily mutually exclusive, this approach allows for a perspective that emphasizes a different dimension, perhaps even a more profound dimension, of the good life. While political notions are regularly explored within the *Analects*, they cannot be the sole focus of the good life; as Bryan W. Van Norden explains, "political activity is merely a means to [...] enjoying simple everyday pleasures like a walk down the river, going for a swim, singing, and hanging out with your friends and family."⁸ In other words, while the political nature of the text is undeniable, one must move beyond its political dimension to truly grasp the foundations of the good life.

In his work, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, Philip Ivanhoe introduces the notion that according to Confucian tradition, in order to live a good life, one must aspire to live harmoniously with the Dao, as this will offer "a unique sense of *metaphysical comfort*"⁹. The cultivation of a spontaneous and harmonious connection with the Dao allows the individual to become part of something "much greater and grander than anything [they] could muster on [their] own", which results in a true "sense of security, peace, and ease."¹⁰ Ivanhoe briefly explores this concept through the intimate relationship between music and joy; however, his analysis remains limited in scope and offers only a cursory examination of this metaphysical connection. As a result, his theory leaves a lot of dimensions underexplored; therefore, while Ivanhoe's concept will serve as the foundation of the present thesis, this work will aim to deepen its scope. Ultimately, this thesis will

⁸ Bryan W. Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis/ Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc, 2011), 39

⁹ Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2017), 131

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

explore *how* one can establish and foster this connection with the Dao. I will argue that the *Analects* contains three principal ways which allow one to cultivate and strengthen one's connection with the Dao: ritual, music, and interpersonal relations. I will contend that these three concepts are necessary components of a joyful life; through the acts of ritual, music and the cultivation of interpersonal relations one can spontaneously and harmoniously find connection with the Dao and consequently, experience a profound sense of joy and pleasure. The value of these acts extends beyond the ethical and political realm; they actively contribute to the realization of a good and pleasurable life. This, then, is what would be considered a good life according to Confucius' teachings.

In order to explore this concept, this thesis will provide an analysis of the *Analects* with a primary focus on passages that centre around the experience of ritual, music, and interpersonal relations. Each of these three concepts will be explored in a chapter of their own. These experiences, as I will illustrate, are not necessarily *ethically* driven. When studying the *Analects*, it becomes clear that while one can obediently serve others and live a humble life, and accordingly fulfil one's social and political roles dutifully, this is not enough to truly live a good life. This might be considered acceptable, "but it is still not as good as being poor and yet *joyful*, rich and yet *loving ritual*".¹¹ The foundation for the good life cannot be ethical; rather, it is rooted in a more profound metaphysical basis. It concerns the fundamental structure of our world: the Dao (or the Way). The Dao is the fundamental principle and the ultimate source of the universe; it is characterized by its profound spontaneity, which allows for the natural flow of all things. The greatest joy – the truest pleasure – can solely be achieved when one lives in accordance with the Dao; this will allow for a unique sense of metaphysical comfort as one harmoniously moves with the cosmic order. It is the Dao, rather than strict ethical principles, that lies at the centre of Confucius'

¹¹ Confucius and Edward Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis (Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 6 (1.15)

teachings; according to the *Analects*, the Master himself has said that “Having in the morning heard that the Way [the Dao] was being put into practice, [he] could die that evening without regret.”¹² This thesis will illustrate how through engagement with ritual, music and interpersonal relations, one can put the Dao into practice and find harmony in its natural spontaneous order, and thus, live a life of profound joy and happiness.

Accordingly, one’s engagement with ritual, music, and interpersonal relations can and should not be driven by an ethical impulse; ultimately, according to the *Analects*, “it is harmonious ease that is to be valued”.¹³ Even if one would “stick rigidly to ritual in all matters”, the individual would remain limited in their accomplishments.¹⁴ In other words, solely abiding by strict ethical principles will never suffice. For example, the sense of joy incited by music should be a spontaneous process in which we allow it “to infuse us” as we lose ourselves “in its inviting rhythms and movements”.¹⁵ The joy and fulfilment it can bring to one’s life should not be underestimated; when Confucius first heard the Shao music, he “did not even notice the taste of meat” for three months straight due to its beauty.¹⁶ Confucius’ disengagement with his food is evidently not the result of an ethical impulse; rather, it is due to a spontaneous and harmonious connection with the music that seems to be guided by a metaphysical force rather than an ethical or political one. The *Analects* also emphasizes the simple yet profound pleasure of interpersonal relations; having “friends arrive from afar – is this not a joy?”¹⁷. This thought is reiterated in *The Chinese Pleasure Book* by Michael Nylan, as she argues that nearly all early Chinese thinkers consider friendship to be “vital to the good

¹² Confucius and Edward Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 32 (4.8)

¹³ *Ibid.* 5 (1.12)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 134.

¹⁶ Confucius and Edward Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 68 (7.14)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1 (1.1)

life replete with sustaining pleasures”¹⁸. In the *Analects*, when asked about his personal aspirations, Confucius answers that he wishes to “bring comfort to the aged, to inspire trust in my friends, and be cherished by the youth.”¹⁹ This answer reaffirms the importance of interpersonal relationships; mutual trust, comfort and affection form an important basis for a good and joyful life. They are not solely pleasurable to the individual, but will also enhance their connection with the Dao without the need for rigid moral constraints; this concept will be further explored in the current thesis.

In conclusion, when contemplating Confucius’ conceptions of the good life, it is prudent to avoid excessive emphasis on the role of wisdom and moral principles; true pleasure and joy are the result of a profound connection with the Dao rather than from superfluous contemplation on virtue and ethics. While one’s actions can and should be guided by moral principles, these will not suffice if one wants to experience true joy. In order to experience true metaphysical comfort, one needs to find connection with the Dao through the fostering of ritual, music, and interpersonal relationships.

¹⁸ Michael Nylan, *The Chinese Pleasure Book*, 93.

¹⁹ Confucius and Edward Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 51 (5.26)

Chapter 1: Ritual

“Do not look unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not listen unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accordance with ritual; do not move unless it is in accordance with ritual.”²⁰

There is no doubt that ritual or rites (*li*) plays a vital role within Confucian philosophy; in the *Analects*, Confucius consistently reinforces the importance of ritual as demonstrated in the passage above. One must follow ritual in every aspect of life. At first, Confucius’ perspective on life and the importance of ritual may seem confusing and rigid; it seems to reinforce the notion that many scholars have, namely the idea that every action must at all times be constrained by strict moral principles; that at all times, one must remain conscious of what is and is not proper conduct. However, as this chapter will illustrate, ritual is not merely the expression of strict moral guidelines; rather, Confucius’ adherence to ritual reflects a more profound understanding of how ritual allows for the fulfilment of personal joy. Its primary purpose is to foster a connection with the Dao; it is the sole means to truly live a good life.

As I will explain the defining features of ritual in the next segment of the chapter, it will also become evident that the subsequent chapters of this thesis on music and interpersonal relations essentially build upon the current chapter on ritual as they can be considered (to some extent) a more detailed exploration of certain aspects of ritual.

In order to illustrate the importance of ritual in Confucius’ conception of the good life, this chapter is organized into key subsections that will explore the various dimensions of this thesis’ core argument. First, this chapter will provide an outline of what constitutes ritual according to the Confucian tradition. Consequently, it will explore the relation between ritual and the cosmic order and illustrate how ritual is a necessary component in order to facilitate a

²⁰ Confucius and Edward Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 125 (12.1)

connection with the Dao. Following this, the chapter will illustrate the importance of emotional sincerity and harmonious ease in the enactment of ritual. Finally, the concluding subsection of this chapter will explore how ritual, when grounded in emotional sincerity and harmonious ease, can allow for the realization of the good life. As will be illustrated, ritual-guided behaviour will provide metaphysical comfort and can thus facilitate the experience of profound joy and happiness.

1.1 Ritual in Confucian Context

At the outset, it is necessary to define what constitutes ritual or rites. Ritual can be understood as a wide range of behavioural norms and practices that one applies in different contexts in one's life, from grand religious activities to everyday conduct. It essentially functions as "a primary standard of social conduct" where everyone is encouraged to adhere "to set guidelines and principle" which regulate "various patterns of behaviour and social interaction".²¹ In other words, ritual dictates that one's behaviour should at all times be guided by certain guidelines, whether one is engaged in a sacrificial ritual towards the gods or one is practicing one's governmental position or even when one is conversing with one's parents or friends.

As Bryan W. Van Norden explains, "rituals can help humans form and maintain genuine communities" as it allows for the expression and reinforcement of emotions and dispositions.²² Thus, the rituals observed at a wedding serve to express one's love and devotion, while the rituals of a funeral facilitate the expression of grief and sorrow. Furthermore, these rituals also serve to strengthen the fabric of the community as they draw people together; it allows them to collectively experience love, happiness, and sorrow. Even everyday rituals, such as shaking hands with a business associate or giving a hug to a friend,

²¹ Mario Poceski, *Introducing Chinese Religions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 44

²² Bryan W. Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 26-27

serve to convey one's emotions and dispositions, while simultaneously fostering a sense of community.

1.2 The Interplay between Ritual and the Dao

However, the value of ritual extends beyond the formation of communities; ritual, ultimately, must be understood as a means to harmonize with the cosmic order, with the Dao. This becomes clear when considering a passage from Book Sixteen from the *Analects*: “Confucius said, ‘When the Way prevails in the world, rituals [...] issue from the Son of Heaven’”.²³ Rituals, thus, are not mere arbitrary social or moral principles instituted to constrain one's behaviour; they have a more profound, metaphysical origin and allow us to give our lives meaning. By engaging with ritual, one does not merely foster a sense of community, but one also aligns oneself with the cosmic order. This requires true trust in the Way as one allows oneself to be guided by the Son of Heaven, whose authority directly emanates from Heaven (*tian*) and who therefore has a profound understanding of the Dao. The aforementioned passage further states that when the Way does not prevail in the world, ritual does not issue from the Son of Heaven, but from feudal lords or ministers; this would result in disorder as ritual should at all times be guided by the metaphysical world and must therefore be in accordance with the Dao. Our understanding of ritual, therefore, cannot be separated from our conception of the Way; the two are deeply intertwined and reinforce one another.

This notion is similarly reinforced in Book Twelve of the *Analects* when the Master explains to Yan Hui that one must restrain oneself and return to the rites; “if for one day you managed to restrain yourself and return to the rites, in this way you could lead the entire world back to Goodness.”²⁴ This passage further demonstrates that ritual allows one to engage

²³ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 193 (16.2)

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 125 (12.1)

with the entire cosmic order; while it may also contribute to personal development or the engagement with one's community, it has a much broader significance. The interplay between ritual-guided behaviour and the much broader cosmic order of the Dao stems from the fact that Confucians view themselves "as part of a deep metaphysical structure of the cosmos"; therefore, they desire to "attune themselves to both the natural and social order".²⁵ Thus, the adherence to ritual is not necessarily an act to limit or discipline oneself; rather, it allows the individual to realize their role in a much deeper and more metaphysical structure. After all, the Dao "is a normative pattern much grander and more meaningful than anything an individual person could possibly achieve on his or her own."²⁶ The ritual, thus, serves as a bridge between the self and the community, but also, and most importantly, with the overarching cosmic order of the Dao. Harmonizing with the Dao through ritual will ultimately lead to cosmic balance, but also to personal fulfilment as the individual will find true metaphysical comfort in their enactment of ritual. This concept will be further explored in the final section of the current chapter.

1.3 The Importance of Emotional Sincerity and Harmonious Ease

Nevertheless, rituals that would be performed without genuine emotional commitment, while still potentially contributing to communal cohesion, would not allow for the harmonization with the Dao nor for the realisation of the good life. Ritual must stem from genuine emotional engagement with the Dao; it entails the concrete expression of one's goodness and the cultivation of one's virtues.

Consider, for instance, the ritual of the sacrifice. The sacrifice is one of the most important rituals within Confucian thought as it allows one to pay respect to the gods and the

²⁵ Diana Lobel, *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing of Life* (United States: Columbia University Press, 2017), 60

²⁶ Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 136

spirits of the after world, including one's own ancestors. It is therefore intimately tied with the notion of filial piety, which emphasizes the importance of family, including the veneration of one's ancestors (the importance of filial piety will be further explored in the final chapter on interpersonal relations). In the *Analects*, Confucius plainly asserts "If I am not fully present at the sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice at all."²⁷ If the sacrifice was merely a tool for social or political control, one's emotional disposition during the ritual would presumably not be of great importance. However, Confucius' remark here suggests that the ritual is deeply entwined with the personal and the emotional as one must at all times be fully present. Rituals, then, cannot be "imposed on individuals and the state from the outside"; it can only be issued "from the hearts of the people."²⁸ The ritual should not merely be a performative act that is external from oneself; it is a profound expression of one's inner emotions and one's true character. Therefore, when one lacks emotional sincerity, the ritual becomes an empty display rather than a genuine expression of one's character. Since rituals are fundamentally connected with the cosmic order, this would also result in a failure to harmonize with the Dao; therefore, the individual will also fail to access the metaphysical comforts it can offer. Hence, one might as well not perform the ritual at all.

Ritual requires "a sincere attitude, a reverential heart and a virtuous motive" as ritual is ultimately "a vehicle by which [...] the meaning of life [is] manifest".²⁹ For this reason, Confucius is much offended by the individual who is "not respectful when performing ritual, and who remains unmoved by sorrow when overseeing mourning rites"³⁰; the lack of genuine emotional commitment to the ritual reveals the person's moral character and their inability to harmonize with the rhythms of the cosmic order. Without heartfelt emotion or genuine

²⁷ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 22 (3.12)

²⁸ Xinzhong Yao, "Ritual and Religious Practice" in *An Introduction to Confucianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 194

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194-195

³⁰ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 28 (3.26)

sentiment, the individual will not be able to enjoy the transformative power of the ritual; the enactment of the ritual will not reach its true metaphysical potential and the individual will fail to access the deeper meaning of the ritual. Thus, emotional sincerity is paramount in the performance of ritual.

In addition to emotional sincerity, it is also essential to cultivate a sense of harmonious ease in the practice of ritual. This is reiterated in the *Analects* by Master You: “When it comes to the practice of ritual, it is harmonious ease that is to be valued.”³¹ If the individual rigidly complies to ritual, without emotional commitment or harmonious ease, “there will remain that which [they] cannot accomplish.”³² This kind of rigid adherence would result in too much of a mechanical practice and leave little room for the necessary deeper significance of the ritual. In the end, Confucius valued being completely at ease with ritual which would result in effortless joy; “a thorough immersion in ritual practice in which ritual becomes a dance in which one can gracefully lose oneself.”³³

1.4 The Joy of Ritual

This final section of the chapter will explore how the practice of ritual can result in profound joy and happiness. As Hagop Sarkissian explains, through the means of ritual, one can preserve and perpetuate “the core of a *dao* or guiding way of life”³⁴; ritual allows the individual to align oneself with the Dao. This will allow for a unique sense of metaphysical comfort that no external or material object can provide as those who live in harmony with the Dao “feel a profound sense of security, peace, and ease.”³⁵ Hence, Confucius asserts that “taking joy in regulating [oneself] through the rites [...]” is ultimately the most “beneficial

³¹ Ibid., 5 (1.12)

³² Ibid.

³³ Lobel, *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing of Life*, 77

³⁴ Hagop Sarkissian, “Confucianism and Ritual” in *The Oxford Handbook of Confucianism* (Oxford University Press, 2023), 486

³⁵ Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 131

[type] of joy”³⁶. The joy that arises due to the Dao’s metaphysical comfort encompasses several key aspects, which will be explored in this final section of the chapter. First, this section will consider how ritual allows the individual to express as well as regulate their emotions. Consequently, it will illustrate how the internal fulfilment of ritual surpasses the joys of external goods, including material possessions as well as social status. Finally, it will demonstrate how proper ritual conduct can ensure that the individual will never experience loneliness as it fosters a sense of belonging.

One important reason why ritual can contribute to the realization of the good life is that it allows for the expression of one’s emotions and feelings, while also regulating them in a comforting manner; in this way, the individual is neither overpowered by one’s emotions nor expected to withhold them. Ritual allows for “a deeper sense of freedom *within a structure*” in which we can genuinely enjoy the pleasures of life “in balanced measures.”³⁷ It allows for a comfortable way of life that re-enforces one’s personal inner world while preserving communal harmony. When personal emotions are expressed through ritualized behaviour, they become part of a broader, cosmic order, manifesting in a manner that is both harmonious and comforting.

Moreover, the internal fulfilment that ritual can provide surpasses the fleeting joy that external goods can provide; one can find joy in “plain food and drinking water”, even when one only has a “bent arm as a pillow”³⁸. This is due to the fact that the Dao provides a “special reservoir of satisfaction and happiness that [...] nourishes, satisfies, and delights.”³⁹ When engaging with ritual, one allows oneself to embody the Dao; as a result, one gains access to this reservoir of happiness and joy. Consequently, one no longer needs nor yearns for external

³⁶ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 194 (16.5)

³⁷ Lobel, *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing of Life*, 79

³⁸ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 69 (7.16)

³⁹ Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 133

goods as their pleasures are merely temporary, while the metaphysical comforts of the Dao are eternal. In the *Analects*, the metaphysical comforts of the Dao are exemplified in the character of Yan Hui, who is considered to be Confucius' exemplary student. Yan Hui could subsist on only "a basket of grain and gourd full of water"; while other people would not be able to endure this kind of hardship, Yan Hui was always joyful.⁴⁰ This is due to the fact that Yan Hui was at all times guided by ritual in his conduct, thereby receiving the metaphysical comforts of the Way; consequently, he was not dependent on material comfort in order to experience joy and happiness. An exemplary person, according to Confucius, "is not motivated by the desire for a full belly or a comfortable abode"⁴¹, but is only motivated by the desire to embody ritual and harmonize with the Way. Ultimately, the comfort provided by ritual conduct transcends the comfort provided by material goods.

The internal fulfilment of ritual also surpasses the fleeting joy that *other* external goods provide, such as socio-political standing. Confucius, therefore, advises to "not be concerned about whether or not others know you"⁴²; public opinion or personal recognition will not provide genuine joy or happiness. This passage aligns with the previously discussed argument that rituals must at all times be performed with genuine emotional commitment; when the individual is overly concerned with external rewards such as social recognition it prevents true emotional engagement with the Dao. When one harmonizes with the Dao without prioritizing external goods, true joy will arise as one is not dependent on social recognition or personal accolades.

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, ritual is fundamentally *interpersonal*. It allows individuals to engage with each other in a way that creates a sense of community and belonging. Ritual, in this way, can serve as a bridge between individuals; therefore, when the

⁴⁰ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 56 (6.11)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6 (1.14)

⁴² *Ibid.*, 7 (1.16)

individual “is reverent and ritually proper [...] everyone within the Four Seas is his brother.”⁴³

If individuals allows their behaviour to be guided by ritual, they will find interconnectedness with each other in the Dao, as social harmony and moral order are ultimately an expression of the Dao. This notion will be further explored in the third chapter of this thesis, which will be entirely devoted to interpersonal relationships.

Ultimately, engagement with ritual can alleviate the individual from a multitude of negative emotions, including anxiety, fear, worry and confusion. When one allows oneself to completely and utterly trust the harmonious rhythms of the Dao and conduct solely in accordance with ritual one will be alleviated from everyday worries. A person who has accepted their fate and moves in accordance with the Way will be freed from anxiety and fear; after all, “if you can look inside yourself and find no faults, what cause is there for anxiety of fear?”⁴⁴ Thus, according to Confucius, the Way of the exemplary person is threefold: “The Good do not worry, the wise are not confused, and the courageous do not fear”.⁴⁵ If one fully submits to the Way, there is no need for worries, confusion or fear.

In conclusion, this chapter has attempted to illustrate the importance of ritual to the Confucian understanding of the good life. I have argued that ritual (which includes a wide range of behavioural norms and practices) allows the individual to harmonize with the cosmic order, with the Dao, as one moves according to the mandate of the Son of Heaven. This transformative aspect of ritual is only possible when one acts with true heartfelt emotion and harmonious ease; only then can the individual foster a profound connection with the Dao. Aligning oneself with a larger, metaphysical structure provides the individual with a unique sense of metaphysical comfort that no external or material object can provide. Through ritual, the individual is able to express as well as regulate their emotions; it allows for a sense of

⁴³ Ibid., 127 (12.5)

⁴⁴ Ibid., 126 (12.4)

⁴⁵ Ibid., 96 (9.29)

internal fulfilment which surpasses the joys of external goods, and finally, it fosters a sense of belonging. When the individual fully submits to the rhythms of the Dao and acts in accordance with ritual, they have no cause to worry or fear and will find a true sense of joy and comfort.

Chapter 2: Music

“What can be known about music is this: when it first begins, it resounds with a confusing variety of notes, but as it unfolds, these notes are reconciled by means of harmony, brought into tension by means of counterpoint, and finally woven together into a seamless whole. It is in this way that music reaches its perfection.”⁴⁶

When Confucius discusses music, it quickly becomes clear that music is more than a simple matter of notes and melody. Music is not solely “bells and drums”⁴⁷; the bells and drums can facilitate an engagement with a more profound reality. Music, for Confucius, is inherently a moral force; it is closely linked with Goodness. Indeed, according to him, “A Man who is not Good – what has he to do with music?”⁴⁸ However, music also moves beyond the realm of the ethical; it is fundamentally connected to the natural and cosmic order of the Dao. It allows an experience that moves beyond the realm of the audible towards the realm of the metaphysical. During the time in which Confucius lived, people started to recognize certain parallels between musical patterns and “patterns within the cosmos itself”.⁴⁹ It is therefore reasonable to infer that Confucius “may have expected music to display fundamental patterns in the natural world”⁵⁰. Musical structures – including rhythm, melody, and harmony – mirror the natural order of the Dao, which unfolds through balanced and harmonious patterns: the cycle of day and night, the changing of seasons, and a continuous cycle of life and death. When the individual, then, engages with music, it allows them to align themselves with this larger metaphysical order. This will be the focus of the current chapter: I will illustrate how music can cultivate a deeper connection with the Dao and, consequently, can instil a sense of joy and pleasure. This sense of joy that one can derive from music is not

⁴⁶ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 27 (3.23)

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 205 (17.11)

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 17 (3.3)

⁴⁹ Kathleen Higgins, “Confucius’ Opposition to the ‘New Music’ (*Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*, no. 3, 2017), 309

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

fleeting nor superficial; it can be truly profound and long-lasting as the harmonization with the Dao allows for a deep sense of fulfilment and metaphysical comfort that has also been demonstrated in the previous chapter on ritual.

Music is, to some extent, a kind of ritual and therefore this chapter is in many ways a continuation of the previous chapter. Therefore, the first subsegment of the chapter, will provide an examination of the Confucian concept of music, which will also include an exploration of its relation to ritual. This will be followed by a consideration on the interplay between music and the Dao and how one can understand their relation to one another. Finally, the chapter will consider the joy and happiness that music can provide to the individual.

2.1 Music in Confucian Context

Music is often considered an inherent part of human life; it exists in every culture and every society throughout human history. It is difficult to ascertain what music was exactly like in the time of Confucius; however, from the textual evidence available, scholars currently suggest that “instrument mostly played melodies in unison or at the octave, with different instrument combinations performing repetitions.”⁵¹ The instruments utilized included string instruments, wind instruments and percussion instruments (e.g. flutes, bell chimes, etc.). Music regularly served as a form of entertainment due to its pleasurable qualities; it could accompany different kinds of festivities, celebrations and social gatherings. However, music was also integral to a diverse range of rituals and ceremonies, including court ceremonies, ancestral worship, and sacrificial rituals.

During this time (and even in China today), music was also considered “a tool in moral education” that was utilized in hopes of raising “society’s moral standard”.⁵²

Confucius, similarly, considered music to be closely intertwined with ethics and morality;

⁵¹Ibid., 312

⁵² Marina Wong, “A Comparison between the Philosophies of Confucius and Plato as Applied to Music Education” (*The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 1998), 111

therefore, it is unsurprising that Confucius considers certain music to be inherently good or bad. According to the Master, Shao music “is perfectly beautiful, and also perfectly good”, but Wu music “is perfectly beautiful, not perfectly good.”⁵³ This is because music should be “evaluated according to the moral representation of its content”; it is only truly ‘good’ if it is ethically pleasing and not merely because of its aesthetic qualities. Moreover, music can significantly shape the development of the moral character of the listener; therefore, it is of great importance to society’s moral education to promote music that is “morally and musically good.”⁵⁴ However, what exactly does *good* music entail? This will be discussed in the next segment of the chapter on the relation between music and the Dao.

Music can also be considered a form of ritual practice, in which meaning can be created that transcends its physical properties. This is particularly evident when music is utilized in ritual contexts such as ancestral worship and court ceremonies, but can be equally true for music that is played within a more intimate and personal setting. When the individual aligns themselves with the different sounds of music, they allow themselves to become part of something much grander. Through an immersive engagement with rhythm and melody, music can foster a sense of community and promote order and harmony. Consider the example mentioned in the previous chapter: the ritual of the sacrifice. The ritual of the sacrifice, whether performed to honour the gods or to honour one’s own ancestors, is inherently interpersonal; it is at its core about the fostering of interpersonal relationships, either within a large social order such as the state or the community or a smaller social order such as the family (including relationships with those who have already passed). Music, in this context, can create a more focused and emotionally charged atmosphere that allows for a deeper

⁵³ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 28 (3.25)

⁵⁴ Wong, “A Comparison between the Philosophies of Confucius and Plato as Applied to Music Education”, 111

engagement with the sacrifice; it engenders a shared emotional space in which individuals can experience a heightened sense of connection and belonging.

The practice and engagement with music also allows the individual to channel their feelings and satisfy their desires and needs⁵⁵. Through this process, the individual is able to express their emotions, while integrating these into a larger social order; this balanced form of expression is both relieving as well as comforting as the emotional experience is no longer solitary or isolating. Through the medium of music, personal emotions transform into a shared, harmonious experience that foster a sense of unity and comfort. In other words, music, can serve “as a channel through which emotions can be expressed in a way that is socially harmonious”⁵⁶; its communal aspect strengthens social bonds and reinforces a collective sense of self.

2.2 The Interplay between Music and the Dao

Ultimately, music can reach the realm of the metaphysical; similarly to ritual, it allows the individual to give their lives meaning as it enables them to recognize and realize their personal role in a much more profound and metaphysical order, i.e. the Dao. ‘Good’ music can only truly be considered *good*, if it can manifest “fundamental patterns in nature.”⁵⁷ The harmony created by the musical instruments with different sounds and pitches “is meant to mirror and guide the harmony between the people in their proper positions”⁵⁸ within the cosmos. Thus, when Confucius commends Shao music for being perfectly beautiful *and* good, it is plausible that he believes Shao music to elegantly convey the patterns of the cosmos, while Wu music, while perhaps being pleasant to the ears, is unable to reveal “the optimal

⁵⁵ Christian Helmut Wenzel, “Aesthetic Education in Confucius, Xunzi, and Kant” (*Yearbook for Eastern and Western Philosophy*, no.3, 2019), 63

⁵⁶ Higgins, “Confucius’ Opposition to the ‘New Music’”, 317

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 314

⁵⁸ Wenzel, “Aesthetic Education in Confucius, Xunzi, and Kant” , 63

order of things”.⁵⁹ When music is not in accordance with the Dao, it may disrupt the balance and harmony of the natural order. Music ought to serve as a guiding force which fosters a harmonious relationship between the individual and the community, as all become one in the Dao. Moving along with the music through dance and ritual performances allows one to embody this metaphysical order.⁶⁰ Human beings are ultimately “between heaven and earth” as they live alongside “the constellations, sun and moon, the four seasons, wind and rain”; music, then, can weave these different links of the cosmos together.⁶¹ The different elements of the universe – including human beings – coalesce much like the notes of a song come together in harmony and become “woven together into a seamless whole.”⁶² *Good* music should thus reflect the patterns of the Dao and guide the individual in realizing their own role within this cosmic order.

In a manner akin to ritual, music can be profoundly transformative when approached with *sincerity*; genuine emotional engagement in both the performance and listening to music will enable the individual to harmonize with the Dao. Similar to musical “notes [which] are reconciled by means of harmony”, all the various beings and elements of the world can be “woven together into a seamless whole” and find perfection in the Dao.⁶³

2.3 The Joy of Music

This section of the chapter will illustrate how the practice of music can result in a life filled with joy and happiness: “just as joy can give rise to music, music can give rise to joy.”⁶⁴ Through sincere emotional engagement with (‘good’) music, the individual can find their own place in the cosmos; this, then, offers the individual a distinct sense of metaphysical comfort

⁵⁹ Higgins, “Confucius’ Opposition to the ‘New Music’”, 315

⁶⁰ Wenzel, “Aesthetic Education in Confucius, Xunzi, and Kant”, 63

⁶¹ Wenzel, “Aesthetic Education in Confucius, Xunzi, and Kant”, 64

⁶² Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 27 (3.23)

⁶³ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 27 (3.23)

⁶⁴ Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 134

that brings about true joy. In order to explore the joys of music, several key aspects will be considered. First, the practice of music allows for a comfortable outlet for one's emotions; it allows the individual to express, process, and share their inner feelings in a way that aligns with the order of the cosmos. This is closely related to the second key aspect: music can also develop and foster a sense of community and a shared identity through a collective emotional experience of music; ultimately, all individuals are part of a greater metaphysical entity –the Dao – and music reaffirms this fundamental truth. Finally, music can also provide an experience that moves beyond ourselves as individuals towards a more spontaneous and harmonious sense of being. This allows for a sense of joy that is profound and enduring, which is ultimately grounded in the metaphysical comfort of the Dao.

Analogous to the practice of ritual, the practice and experience of music can allow for the realization of the good life as it helps to express one's emotions and inner feelings in a comfortable manner. As Confucius states in the *Analects*, one can “achieve perfection with music.”⁶⁵ It is a necessary component of the good life that one's inner world is neither suppressed nor overpowering; the individual must allow for the expression of their emotions without becoming consumed by them. Music, then, “is a way of channelling feelings and satisfying desires and needs.”⁶⁶ This includes “ugliness, weeping, and sorrow”, but also “elegant adornment” and “happiness.”⁶⁷ Through the balanced notes of music, the individual's inner feelings can find alignment within the natural order of the Dao; this allows for an engagement with emotions that is comfortable and harmonious, deepening one's sense of joy and happiness.

As an illustration, one might consider the *Book of Odes*. The *Odes* are mentioned repeatedly in the *Analects*; Confucius states that one must “find inspiration in the *Odes*.”⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 80 (8.8)

⁶⁶ Wenzel, “Aesthetic Education in Confucius, Xunzi, and Kant” , 63

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 80 (8.8)

This ancient Chinese poetry anthology is often considered one of the “Five Classics” in the Confucian tradition; it is customarily believed that the poems were composed around 1000 to 600 BCE. While the poems have been preserved in written form, they were often performed as musical pieces. Due to their “simple, repetitive structures” it is presumed that the *Odes* originated in “folk song”.⁶⁹ Confucius praised the first of the *Odes*, the “Cry of the Osprey”, in particular; according to him, “the ‘Cry of the Osprey’ expresses joy without becoming licentious, and expresses sorrow without falling into excessive pathos.”⁷⁰ It reflects the notion that, in order to attain the good life, the individual can utilize the transformative power of music to navigate their emotions, finding balance between emotion and restraint. Through the engagement with the *Odes*, one can experience joy, sorrow, and other human emotions in a manner that is virtuous, in harmony with the workings of the Dao, and without descending into excess.

The expression of emotion in a balanced and harmonious manner through engagement with music also allows for the development and fostering of a sense of community; the communal aspect of music strengthens interpersonal bonds and creates a deeper sense of harmony. By deeply engaging with music with genuine emotional commitment, music can serve as a bridge between the individual and their community; it allows for a sense of interconnectedness and a shared emotional experience. ‘Good’ music reflects the patterns of the Dao; therefore, “[t]he harmony between the musical instruments and their sounds and pitches is meant to mirror and guide the harmony between the people in their proper positions.”⁷¹ In other words, music can provide a sense of comfort as it guides the individual

⁶⁹ Martin Kern, “The Shijing (Classic of Poetry; Book of Odes)” in *Oxford Bibliographies*, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199920082/obo-9780199920082-0203.xml> (accessed 31-10-2024).

⁷⁰ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 25 (3.20)

⁷¹ Wenzel, “Aesthetic Education in Confucius, Xunzi, and Kant”, 63

in realizing their role within the cosmos; it transcends the individual experience and fosters a sense of belonging and communal unity.

Moreover, music can offer an experience that “involves gaining an expanded sense of self”⁷²; it can foster a more spontaneous and harmonious state of being, filled with joy, that moves beyond the self. It provides a rhythm that is balanced between emotion and restraint, which can offer an immersive experience as we allow it “to infuse us and [to lose] ourselves in its inviting rhythms and movements”.⁷³ Losing ourselves to music fosters a closer connection with the Dao as one moves beyond the self and experiences true metaphysical comfort and joy. It allows the individual to identify with and surround themselves to the “regulated patterns of sounds” that offers a profound “source of reassurance, solidarity, and joy.”⁷⁴ This immense sense of joy is illustrated in the *Analects*, when Confucius encounters the music of the Shao: “for three months after did [he] not even notice the taste of meat” because the music was “so sublime.”⁷⁵ This passage illustrates that the metaphysical comfort and joy of music transcends the fleeting joy of material products, including meat; the joy derived from the taste of the latter is temporary and superficial, whereas the joy derived from music offers something more permanent and profound.

In conclusion, this chapter has illustrated how engagement with music is an integral part in the pursuit of the good life. While it can serve as a form of entertainment and even as a tool for moral education, it can ultimately provide a more profound and metaphysical experience. I have first set out to define music within Confucian context – both historically and philosophically – which included an exploration of what ‘good’ music may entail.

Ultimately, I have argued that music should reflect the fundamental patterns of the Dao; if this

⁷² Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 135

⁷³ Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 134-135

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 136

⁷⁵ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 68 (7.14)

is the case, it can guide the individual in realizing their own role in the cosmic order. Through genuine emotional engagement with music, the individual will be able to harmonize with the Dao and this can provide profound joy and comfort. This joy and comfort can manifest in a multitude of ways – not dissimilar to the joys of ritual. First, music can create a comfortable outlet for the expression and processing of emotions in which they are neither suppressed nor do they fall into excess. Moreover, the communal aspect of music can foster a sense of belonging, in which people can create a shared emotional experience; simultaneously music guides the individual towards their own position within the community. Finally, music can expand one's sense of the self: through its immersive qualities it can allow the individual to feel joy and happiness that far surpasses the fleeting joys that material objects can provide.

Chapter Three: Interpersonal Relationships

“To have friends arrive from afar – is this not a joy?”⁷⁶

The final chapter of this thesis will explore the joy that arises from interpersonal relationships. Indisputably, interpersonal relationships are of great importance within Confucian thought. They can be a source of inspiration; they can serve as an opportunity to learn and grow; they reinforce our place in the world; and, naturally, they can also be a great source of joy and happiness. One’s friends, family, or even one’s foe can be a beneficial force in the individual’s life and their journey towards personal growth. Notably, when Confucius is asked to explain the term *ren*, a term that is often considered to be the central virtue of Confucian teachings, Confucius simply replies “Care for others.”⁷⁷ As Van Norden explains, “*ren* is the most important virtue for Kongzi” and his prompt answer suggests that “it is manifested primarily in caring for others.”⁷⁸ This emphasis on mutual care highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships to one’s personal development.

However, interpersonal relationships do not merely serve the individual’s ethical cultivation. At their core, the value of interpersonal relationships extends beyond the social and ethical sphere; it carries a profound metaphysical weight as “we become who we are through [interpersonal] relationships”.⁷⁹ Interpersonal relationships can serve as a pathway towards a deeper connection with the Dao; through interaction with others, the individual can find alignment with the Dao, which will allow for a sense of profound comfort and joy. Thus, Confucius considers it to be a “beneficial [type] of joy” to be “taking joy in [...] possessing many worthy friends”.⁸⁰ Therefore, when examining Confucius’ conception of the good life, it

⁷⁶ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 1 (1.1)

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 136 (12:22)

⁷⁸ Van Norden, *Introduction to Classical Chinese Philosophy*, 4

⁷⁹ Lobel, *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing of Life*, 58

⁸⁰ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 194 (16.5)

is essential to consider the role of interpersonal relationships in the cultivation of joy and happiness.

This will be the focus of the current chapter, which will examine the importance of interpersonal relationships within our understanding of the good life. First, this chapter will consider the concept of interpersonal relationships within Confucian context; this will include an exploration of the different kinds of relationships emphasized within Confucian thought. Second, this chapter will examine the relationship between interpersonal connections and the larger metaphysical order of the Dao. Finally, this chapter will return to the core focus of this thesis: the attainment of genuine joy and pleasure, specifically through the cultivation of interpersonal relationships.

3.1 Interpersonal Relations in Confucian Context

In order to achieve personal fulfilment, the individual is dependent on their relationship with others. Individuals are fundamentally interconnected; the individual is not considered an independent entity. Rather, the individual inhabits multiple roles in life – such as a student, a son, a father, an employee, and so on. Central to Confucian thought are the Five Relationships, often defined as: husband and wife, parent and child, ruler and subject, elder and younger sibling, and (elder) friend and (younger) friend. Each of these roles comes with their own specific responsibilities, e.g. children need to be obedient and respectful, parents need to offer care to their children. These relationships are “hierarchical, asymmetrical relationships”; however, they “reflect mutually entailing virtues.”⁸¹ These relationships and their responsibilities need to be clearly defined and properly fulfilled in order to maintain social order. Moreover, interpersonal relationships are intrinsically linked with ritual; ritual ceremonies function “to reinforce one’s place within the various social, political, and religious

⁸¹ Lobel, *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing of Life*, 58

hierarchies in which one was embedded.”⁸² For instance, in the *Analects*, Confucius asserts that “when your parents are alive, serve them in accordance with the rites; when they pass away, bury them in accordance with the rites and sacrifice to them in accordance with the rites.”⁸³ However, ritual is not merely about proper material transactions; the performance of ritual must at all times be accompanied by genuine emotional commitment. Care for one’s parents should not stem from mere moral obligation; rather, it should reflect “one’s affections and devotion to one’s immediate family.”⁸⁴ Ultimately, the good life – a life filled with joy and happiness – can only be realized through meaningful relationships; our happiness depends on interpersonal relationships.

3.2 The Interplay between Interpersonal Relationships and the Dao

Within Confucian thought, interpersonal relationships are an essential means of embodying and realizing the Dao. Interpersonal ritual activity will allow the individual to “confer meaning to [their] actions and allow a person to fully come into herself.”⁸⁵ Through the practice of ritual, the individual deepens their connection with the world around them, including the people they interact with. Everyday actions become more meaningful when they reflect one’s role within the family, the community, and even the cosmos at large; it can foster a profound connection with the harmonious order of the Dao. Interpersonal rituals, then, move beyond the social realm; they can facilitate a *metaphysical* awareness of one’s place in the universe. By fulfilling one’s social roles one will discover “an intimate, *familial* connection to all human beings”⁸⁶ which will allow the individual to become part of a larger cosmic order. One’s social behaviour, then, enables the individual to harmonize “with orderly patterns in the

⁸² Curie Virág, *The Emotions in Early Chinese Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 33

⁸³ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 9 (2.5)

⁸⁴ Virág, *The Emotions in Early Chinese Philosophy*, 34

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 33

⁸⁶ Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 131

natural world”⁸⁷; social interactions, when guided by ritual, are ultimately an expression of the natural harmony of the Dao. In other words, the “sphere of human culture” is deeply and profoundly “rooted in the cosmos”.⁸⁸

This interplay between the Dao and one’s interpersonal relationships is reinforced in one of the sayings in the first book of the *Analects*. In 1.2, Master You discusses the importance of filial piety and how filial piety can ultimately allow the individual to harmonize with the Dao. Filial piety is a central concept within Confucianism which emphasizes the importance of respect for and devotion to one’s parents. The relation with one’s parents represents the first and foundational interpersonal relationship that an individual forms; filial piety, therefore, is often considered one of the most important virtues within Confucianism. However, the value of this relationship extends beyond its immediate familial context. According to Confucian thought, it has an important metaphysical dimension as “filial piety and respect for elders constitute the root of Goodness”; therefore, if “the roots are firmly established, the Way will grow.”⁸⁹ This passage from the *Analects* highlights the fact that interpersonal relationships, especially familial relationships, are paramount for the realization of the Dao. The relationship between the individual and their parents serves as a foundation for the establishment of the Way. If the individual serves their parents and elders with respect, i.e. their ‘roots’ are firmly established, they can realize the Way. The fostering of interpersonal relationships is thus necessary in order to live in accordance with the Way; only then can the individual surrender to the natural flow of all things.

This is not solely true for familial relationships; the acquisition of platonic relationships is similarly important in one’s endeavour to realize the Dao. As Master Zeng asserts in the *Analects*, “The gentleman [...] relies upon his friends for support in becoming

⁸⁷ Lobel, *Philosophies of Happiness: A Comparative Introduction to the Flourishing of Life*, 60

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 1 (1.2)

Good.”⁹⁰ In order to properly align one’s actions with the Way, one depends on one’s platonic relationships as they can similarly allow the individual to realize their role in the cosmos; platonic relations can offer moral guidance as well as companionship in the individual’s attempt to realize the Dao. This principle is also reinforced in the first book of the *Analects*, when Confucius encourages the individual to “[draw] near to those who possess the Way in order to be set straight by them.”⁹¹ Engagement with those who are already realizing the Way allows the individual to deepen their understanding of the Way and to develop one’s capacity to follow along to its harmonious movements.

3.3 The Joy of Interpersonal Relationships

Philip Ivanhoe states in his work *Oneness* that most human beings acknowledge that “almost everything that makes us individually happy requires that we work cooperatively and harmoniously with others.”⁹² Happiness, according to this view, is inherently *relational*; it is “our intimate and integral interconnections with other people, creatures, and things” that is necessary for our personal well-being.⁹³ This is similarly true within Confucian theory; ultimately, individuals are fundamentally interconnected and united within the Dao. Through one’s interaction with others, one can preserve and perpetuate the Dao and find a unique sense of metaphysical comfort that will result in profound joy. This concept will be explored in this final section of the chapter through two interrelated perspectives: how interpersonal relationships are a necessary means to foster a connection with the Dao, and how this connection, in turn, allows for more meaningful interpersonal interactions. The first perspective will consider how interpersonal relationships allow for joy by providing a direct encounter with the dynamic nature of the Dao and its continuous chain of action and reaction.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 137 (12.24)

⁹¹ Ibid., 6 (1.14)

⁹² Ivanhoe, *Oneness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 11

⁹³ Ibid.

Through one's engagement with others, one embodies these actions and reactions of the Dao, which leads to a diverse array of joys and pleasures. The second perspective will consider how interpersonal relationships do not merely deepen the individual's connection with the Dao, but also how this connection, in turn, enables the individual to foster more profound human connection and interaction. When the individual is properly attuned to the flow of the Dao through ritual practice, they will be able to interact with others in a more natural and joyful manner. Ritual, then, can become a tool to enhance interpersonal relationships, which results in an increased sense of joy and pleasure.

In order to examine himself, Master Zeng is predominantly occupied in examining his interactions within interpersonal relationships. He wonders: "in my dealings with others, have I in any way failed to be dutiful? In my interactions with friends and associates, have I in any way failed to be trustworthy? Finally, have I in any way failed to repeatedly put into practice what I teach?"⁹⁴ This passage reminds the reader that knowledge of goodness and the Way is not sufficient; the individual must put into practice their knowledge and embody the Way, which is primarily realized through one's social relationships. In other words, the cultivation of the Way, and thus also the cultivation of true joy and pleasure, is dependent on interpersonal relationships; Confucius "does not prize self-sufficiency" as he "repeatedly observes that we always act out roles in contexts according to some normative pattern of practice"⁹⁵ (i.e. the Way). The joys of interpersonal relationships can thus arise when one realizes the collective realization and experience of the Dao; it is then that the individual realizes that "everyone within the Four Seas is his brother".⁹⁶

This notion revisits an idea which has been discussed in the first chapter of this thesis: the Dao (through the practice of ritual) acts as a bridge between individuals. If this notion is

⁹⁴ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 2 (1.4)

⁹⁵ May Sim, *Remastering Morals with Aristotle and Confucius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 209

⁹⁶ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 127 (12.5)

embraced fully, the individual will always experience interconnectedness with others within the Dao; through their interactions with one another they come to realize its harmonious flow. When Sima Niu in the *Analects* bemoans the fact that he does not have any brothers⁹⁷, he expresses a sense of loneliness and sadness. He desires a sense of belonging and interconnectedness. However, Sima Niu does not seem to realize that he does not need biological brothers in order to achieve a sense of kinship. The self is not an isolated entity; rather, it exists within an intricate and harmonious network of relations, which becomes one in the Dao. If Sima Niu is able to internalize this notion, he would realize that he can cultivate relationships beyond the bounds of blood relations. These relationships will cultivate a sense of profound joy as they are not merely grounded in familial obligation, but are grounded in the metaphysical reality of the Dao. This results in a sense of purpose and belonging that is neither fleeting nor superficial; even mundane interactions between individuals become meaningful and joyful.

The same concept applies to relationships that *are*, in fact, bound by blood. It can be alienating when familial relationships are driven solely by a sense of obligation. Even if the individual does, in fact, have brothers, they can still experience dissatisfaction and loneliness, particularly when dispute emerges. The individual might view their relationship with their brothers or parents as burdensome or unfulfilling; however, when the individual realizes that all interpersonal relationships, and especially familial relationships, serve as a pathway to deepen their connection with the Dao, each of these relations will become much more joyful and fulfilling, even when dispute emerges. For instance, Confucius emphasizes that the individual may “gently remonstrate with [their parents]”, however if this approach fails to deliver a desirable outcome, the individual “should be respectful and not oppose them, and follow their lead diligently without resentment.”⁹⁸ The Confucian tradition maintains that

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 35 (4.18)

obedience to one's parents – even when it conflicts with one's personal views – will ultimately lead to a sense of joy and pleasure. This is due to the fact that recognizing and embodying one's familial and social roles “allows one to take one's proper place in a harmonious universal scheme that [works] for the benefit of all.”⁹⁹ This allows for a sense of true metaphysical comfort as the individual transcends their personal interests and becomes part of a greater cosmic order. The individual's interactions with those that surround them – including their familial relations – becomes profoundly more meaningful. These interactions, which initially may appear restrictive and burdensome, can become a profound source of joy and comfort as they allow the individual to deepen their connection with the Dao.

In turn, the collective experience of an overarching cosmic order enables individuals to foster more profound human connection. It cultivates a sense of unity and solidarity as all individuals become one in the Dao; “the proper life [is] one in which disparate – and potentially conflicting – aspects of our individual and collective existence [can] be integrated and harmonized.”¹⁰⁰ When the individual allows their behaviour to be guided by the Dao through ritual practice (fused with genuine emotional commitment), they will be able to interact with others in a more natural and joyful manner. The individual aligns themselves to the natural flow of the cosmos; as a result, they are able to transcend their personal ego and their interactions with others become more natural and harmonious. This allows for a true sense of joy as each interpersonal interaction becomes an integral part of a greater whole.

In conclusion, this final chapter has illustrated how interpersonal relationships not merely contribute to the good life, but are, in fact, essential to it. According to Confucian thought, individuals cannot be reduced to the notion of the self; they are fundamentally interconnected with one another. As a result, the individual inhabits multiple roles in life, each

⁹⁹ P.J. Ivanhoe and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2005), XIII

¹⁰⁰ Virág, *The Emotions in Early Chinese Philosophy*, 31

guided by ritual practice, which allow the individual to take their proper place within the harmonious order of the Dao. While filial piety constitutes the root of this practice, the development of other non-filial relations such as friendship are also of great importance. All interpersonal relationships can facilitate a metaphysical awareness of one's place in the cosmos; through ritual-guided behaviour, the individual can harmonize with the patterns of the Dao and find profound metaphysical joy and comfort. When one becomes aware of this collective experience of the Dao, the individual can transcend the self and experience a sense of community and brotherhood as all individuals are fundamentally interconnected and united within the Dao. The individual's interactions with those that surround them become profoundly more meaningful; every one of these interactions provide an encounter with the dynamic nature of the Dao and its continuous chain of action and reaction. Furthermore, when the individual attunes themselves with the natural flow of the Dao, they are able to transcend their personal ego, fostering interactions with others that are profoundly more natural and harmonious. Ultimately, if the individual seeks to attain the good life, they must strive to cultivate meaningful human interactions, guided by ritual. Hence, when inquired about his true aspirations in life, Confucius responds that he ultimately wishes "[t]o bring comfort to the aged, to inspire trust in [his] friends, and be cherished by the youth."¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 51 (5.26)

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the integral connection between the Dao and our understanding of the good life within Confucian thought. While previous scholarship has mostly confined itself to the ethical and the political dimensions of Confucian thought, this thesis has attempted to move beyond these spheres, and instead considered the notion of the good life from a metaphysical perspective. With this aim in mind, this thesis has utilized Ivanhoe's work *Oeness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, which briefly explores the idea that, in order to live a good life, the individual must strive to live harmoniously in accordance with the Dao as this offers "a unique sense of metaphysical comfort."¹⁰² While Ivanhoe only briefly touches upon this subject, this thesis has provided a more extensive and in-depth analysis of the relation between the Dao and the good life through the exploration of ritual, music, and interpersonal relations. Ultimately, this thesis has argued that these three elements allow the individual to deepen their connection with the Dao; as a result, the individual experiences a sense of profound joy and metaphysical comfort, leading to the realization of the good life.

The first chapter of the thesis was devoted exclusively to ritual and its relation to the Dao. While initially, ritual may seem a mere expression of strict moral guidelines, this chapter has illustrated that ritual serves as a transformative practice that allows the individual to align themselves with the cosmic order of the Dao. When performed with genuine emotional commitment, ritual practice can preserve and perpetuate the Dao, which provides a unique sense of metaphysical comfort that no external or material good can provide. The final section of the first chapter has provided more tangible examples of the joys of ritual. First and foremost, ritual provides the individual with a comfortable channel for their emotions, where

¹⁰² Ivanhoe, *Oeness: East Asian Conceptions of Virtue, Happiness, and How We Are All Connected*, 131

individuals can engage with their emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them nor compelled to suppress them. Furthermore, the internal fulfilment derived from embodying the Dao through ritual practice transcends any material good. This has been exemplified by Confucius' student Yan Hui, who was able to endure all kinds of hardship due to the metaphysical comfort of the Dao that provided him with a reservoir of happiness and joy. Additionally, the profound joy derived from aligning oneself with the Dao also liberates the individual from the need for social recognition or personal acclaim. Finally, ritual allows the individual to create a sense of community.

The second chapter of this thesis was devoted to the significance of music in relation to the good life. It has provided a brief contextual analysis of the historical and cultural factors that have shaped the role of music within Confucian thought, including its importance to a diverse range of ritual ceremonies including ancestral worship and court ceremonies. Music can provide a deeper emotional engagement with ritual, while also generating a sense of community. Notably, the second chapter has illustrated that music cannot simply be reduced to its sensory pleasures; its rhythmic and melodic patterns mirror the natural order of the Dao. The engagement with music, therefore, can allow the individual to align themselves with this larger metaphysical order. It facilitates the individual's ability to recognize and realize their personal role within the order of the Dao, instilling their life with a deeper sense of purpose. This allows for a unique sense of metaphysical comfort. Akin to ritual, music can provide a channel for the balanced expression of one's inner workings, harmoniously blending emotion with restraint. Moreover, the engagement with music allows individuals to foster a sense of community. Finally, music provides an immersive experience in which the individual can move beyond their sense of self and lose themselves completely to the rhythms of the Dao.

The final chapter of this thesis explored the importance of interpersonal relationships in the realization of the good life. It has demonstrated that care for others is one of the most

important virtues within Confucian thought. It has also asserted that individuals cannot be reduced to the self; they are fundamentally interconnected. Through the embodiment of different roles in life – as a parent, a teacher, a friend, etc. – the individual can assume their rightful position within the harmonious order of the Dao. Interpersonal relationships, therefore, are paramount for the establishment of the Way and consequently for the realisation of the good life. Filial relationships establish the foundation for the realisation of the Dao, as they represent the primary and most fundamental relationship that the individual develops. However, platonic relationships are also of considerable importance as they can offer moral guidance as well as companionship in the individual’s pursuit of the Way. Ultimately, the final chapter of this thesis has posited that happiness and joyful living is fundamentally grounded in interpersonal relationships. It is through interactions with others that the individual can recognize the inner workings of the Dao; even the most mundane interaction thus become imbued with meaning. This creates a profound sense of belonging and joy. Thus, the realisation of one’s familial and social duties – even when seemingly unpleasant – will ultimately lead to happiness as it allows the individual to become part of the greater cosmic order of the Dao.

In the end, all of Confucius’ teachings are rooted in the fundamental principle of the Dao (or Way). In order to truly realize the good life, not merely for the individual experience but also for the greater collective, the Way must be put into practice. As the *Analects* posits, “The world has been without the Way for a long time now, and Heaven intends to use [Confucius] like the wooden clapper for a bell.”¹⁰³ This passage serves as a reminder to the reader that even during times of turmoil and disarray, such as those during Confucius’ own time, the Dao can be restored and, in turn, the good life can truly be realized.

¹⁰³ Confucius and Slingerland, *Analects with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*, 27 (3.24)

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