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Review of Woodruff: Ritual and Reverence

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Ritual and Reverence in Ancient China and Today

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It is a sad commonplace that works in moral philosophy rarely do much to make their readers more moral. Unusually gifted classroom teachers can sometimes make a difference in students’ lives, though, and now and again there appears a piece of philosophical writing that makes a similar impact. Paul Woodruff has written an extraordinary book that has a chance of joining this select company. Reverence wears its scholarship and philosophy lightly; in addition to lucid exposition and argument, it employs anecdotes, readings of a range of poems, and in one chapter a question-and-answer format in order to engage readers in the very real, very contemporary concerns that motivate the book. Woodruff believes that we have largely forgotten how to talk about reverence, even though its practice has not disappeared, so his sources for the theory of reverence are largely ancient, both Greek—his specialty—and Chinese. He weaves together classical text and contemporary issue in masterful fashion, producing a book that is both philosophically challenging and potentially transformative. I will comment mainly on its philosophical themes, but I urge one and all to experience the book’s power.

Reverence, says Woodruff, is a virtue: indeed, one of the most important of virtues. It is the “well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have” [8]. He characterizes the “belief in human imperfection” as the “central
belief of reverence” [199], and this makes sense, even though reverence is not primarily about beliefs. The idea that we are limited or imperfect informs each of the three feelings through which reverence is expressed. It is easy to see how this works with awe; respect and shame are more complicated, requiring further discussion below. Woodruff offers the following initial formulation of the interrelationship among the three:

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe to be outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting human beings, flaws and all. This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment. [3]

He continues by saying that this syndrome was recognized the Greeks before Plato, and that “the immediate followers of Confucius thought much the same.”

Woodruff’s tying of reverence to specific thinkers immediately makes one wonder what word or words he is translating as reverence, if it was known in Greece and China. Comparative philosophers will also ponder the words “much the same”: is there really a single virtue called “reverence” that, without our previously realizing it, can be found in both Greek and Chinese traditions? Or are there two, more loosely related ideas?

Woodruff’s answer is that there is a single virtue, but that it is realized and theorized somewhat differently in different contexts. Indeed, he does not insist that the concept of reverence he finds in ancient Confucianism is the only Confucian concept of reverence. He relies only on the Analects and Mencius as sources, and readily acknowledges that his picture is partial and simplified [230]. He makes similar qualifications with respect to his Greek sources. His “reverence,” then, is in the first instance a rational reconstruction built upon different traditions’ ideas/terms as well as his own philosophical reasoning. In the Greek case, he says that the concept he is exploring is “named both by hosiotês and its near synonym eusebia, which is
frequently translated as ‘piety’” [225–6]. Once we know this, it is easy to see that his topic was discussed in Greek texts, and to ask how those texts fit the awe-respect-shame schema he has identified.

Rather than pursue this topic, on which see particularly Woodruff’s Chapter Five, I am going to spend some time on the corresponding question with respect to the Chinese texts he studies. Woodruff writes:

Like ancient Greek hosiotês, Confucian li leads human beings to accept their proper niche between the divine and the animal. The ethical consequences are similar; both virtues act as restraints on human power, and both work to protect the weak. The main difference is obvious: Ancient Greek culture harps on the cognitive aspect of this virtue—on knowing human limitations—while Confucian practices build an implicit sense of those limitations through the careful observance of ceremony. [104]

I will discuss Woodruff’s implication that Chinese and Greeks had a similar notion of the “divine,” together with the related idea that objects of reverence tend to be “transcendent,” in a few moments. First, let us reflect on Woodruff’s suggestion that as a virtue, li is a version of reverence. He says that “I take it that li refers by turns to proper ceremony and the virtue that lies behind it” [231]. Further: “In translations of the Analects, reverence comes across as something like ‘ritual,’ which is not recognizably a virtue at all…. Li does involve ritual, but Confucians insist over and over again that there is more to it. What has been lost in all the standard translations is the reverence that has to be in the minds of those who practice li” [41].

We can distinguish two aspects of Woodruff’s contention: first, that standard translations miss something critical when dealing with li, and second, that what they miss is specifically reverence. Woodruff gives Analects 8:2 as an example, citing Leys’ rendition of the first line as exemplifying the problem he has identified: “Without ritual, courtesy is tiresome.” Slingerland’s new translation makes a similar choice: “If you are respectful but lack ritual you will become exasperating.” On the other hand, some other well-known translations seek to bring out the
distinctiveness of li, albeit without any reference to “reverence.” Here is Lau: “Unless a man has the spirit of the rites, in being respectful he will wear himself out.” Ames and Rosemont offer “Deference unmediated by observing ritual propriety is lethargy”; the Brooks give us “If he is respectful without propriety, he becomes wearisome.” With reference to these last three translations, we can ask: is reverence the “spirit of the rites”? Are “ritual propriety” or “propriety” synonyms for “reverence”?

Woodruff’s answer, I presume, would be “yes”: “li” (i.e., ritual propriety) is the name given in these texts to this culturally specific version of reverence—one that puts the importance of ceremony in the foreground, unlike the Greek version. My assessment of Woodruff’s answer will come in several steps. First, can we find a close correlate to the awe-respect-shame structure in early Confucianism? Second, does viewing li as a particular variety of reverence to lead to a better understanding of li? Finally, in what ways is our broader understanding of reverence enhanced by making the connection to the Chinese concept?

On the first point, it seems clear that awe, respect, and shame are all important feelings for Confucians, and that they are variously interrelated, both with one another and with li. Awe is an apt characterization for the feeling that tian engenders: it is always beyond our full grasp, calling for ever greater efforts to fully realize one’s heart and nature, in the language of Mencius 7A:1. (I will deal with the issue of the fully realized person, the sage, below when I discuss transcendence.) Silence, often associated with awe, characterizes both tian and our appropriate attitude toward tian. Similarly, respect and other related notions are closely tied to li. As Woodruff notes, Mencius tells us that the feelings of modesty and deference are the beginnings of li (2A:6), while the feelings of gong and jing—which might both be translated “respect”—are li itself (6A:6). Many other passages throughout the Analects and Mencius make similar
connections between *li* and *gong* and/or *jing*. Finally, shame is also an important theme in these texts, and one that is variously tied to awe, respect, and to *li* itself. I will say more about it below.

Suppose we grant Woodruff that the general pattern of interrelationships among feelings that he identifies with reverence also exists in Confucian texts. My second question is whether thinking of these Confucian ideas in terms of reverence helps us to better understand them. We should certainly grant Woodruff’s contention that *li* cannot be understood merely as superficially following rituals—a point familiar from any number of commentators. But what in particular is gained from seeing *li* as a version of the virtue “reverence”? Since a central aspect of reverence is the idea that we respect one another insofar as we hold ideals in common [190], I will focus on what we gain from seeing *li* as structured around an awe-inspiring “object of reverence.” Here is an excerpt from *Mencius* 4A:1: “When the city walls are not intact and arms are not abundant, it is no disaster for a state. When wasteland is not brought under cultivation and wealth is not accumulated, this, too, is not disaster for the state. But when those above ignore the rites, … then the end of the state is at hand.”iii A related passage is *Analects* 12:7, which instructs a ruler to give up on arming the people, and even feeding them, before letting go the people’s “confidence” in him. “Since antiquity there has always been death, but if the people lack confidence, he cannot stand.”iv Why are the rites and confidence so important?

The beginning of an answer adverts to the robust stability of a society organized around ritual principles, as opposed to depending on a code of rewards and punishments (see *Analects* 2:3), but this is rather superficial. Why is such a structure so robust? Is it really the ritual versus law distinction that is so important? Mustn’t all but the most utopian societies have criminal laws to deal with those not socialized properly? Seeing reverence, rather than simply rituals, at the heart of the Confucians’ insight answers these questions. Woodruff writes:
When leaders are reverent, they are reverent along with their followers, and their common reverence unites them in feelings that overcome personal interests, feelings such as mutual respect. These feelings take the sting from the tools of leadership—from persuasion, from threats of punishment, from manipulation by means of rewards. This is because there are no winners and losers where there is reverence. Success and failure are dwarfed by the magnitude of whatever it is that they hold in awe together. [176]

Understanding *li* in terms of shared reverence—and the concomitant shared awe of *tian* or of the culture’s founding sage-kings—makes sense of the idea that the people’s confidence (or “trust”) in their rulers depends on something quite distinct from weapons or even food.

The third and final side to my assessment of Woodruff’s claim that we should understand *li* in terms of reverence is to ask what this equation does for our understanding of reverence itself. Here the answer is obvious: neither Greek accounts, nor Woodruff’s modern reconstruction in terms of awe, respect, and shame, make explicit reference to the idea of ceremony or ritual, but ceremony is at the heart of the practice of reverence, as the Chinese saw. Woodruff writes persuasively about the importance of seeing many of our daily activities in ceremonial terms. We should vote in elections not just because we might influence the outcome, but also because voting is a ceremony that expresses reverence for the abstract ideal that “ordinary people are more important than the juggernauts that seem to rule them” [21]. Meetings are ceremonies that bring people together, despite their differences, and express reverence for an ideal of unity [27]. In general, reverence, often as expressed through these ubiquitous ceremonies, lie behind the civility that holds our communities together.

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that our ability to collectively hold one or more things in awe is vital to Woodruff’s account of reverence. These are the “objects of reverence.” They are things that remind us of human limitations. Woodruff writes: “You must believe that there is one Something that satisfies at least one of the following conditions: it cannot be changed or controlled by human means, is not fully understood by human experts, was not
created by human beings, and is transcendent” [117; see also 66]. I have already mentioned one of his candidate lists of objects of reverence: “God, truth, justice, nature, even death.” Whatever the merits of this idea for Greece, or for ourselves today, this list—and the idea of an object of reverence more generally—may make us worry that reverence is not, after all, an appropriate category through which to understand Confucianism, and is not as universal as Woodruff believes it to be. These worries stem from the well-known argument by Roger Ames and the late David Hall that “the notion of transcendence is irrelevant in interpreting classical texts in China.”vi Is reverence actually a deeply Eurocentric notion?

To begin with, it is worth recognizing that Ames and Hall’s argument is not uncontested.vii The issue depends in part on precisely how one defines transcendence, though Ames and Hall argue that even loose and informal talk of transcendence “more often than not lead[s] to serious confusion by permitting the uncriticized importation of the stricter senses of the term.”viii My own view on this matter is that Ames and Hall are largely correct: there is no separate realm of self-interpreting self-sufficiency in early Chinese thought. *Tian* is fundamentally continuous with humanity, and attaining the perfection of sagehood is a metaphysical possibility. I will not argue for this conclusion, though, because I believe Woodruff’s idea of reverence still makes sense in a world without transcendence. Even if Ames and Hall are indeed right, that is, this is no barrier to viewing *li*, and Confucian ethics more generally, through the lens of reverence.

Reverence would not make sense in a world with no mystery, in which nothing was beyond our ken, or in which all ideals were readily attainable. As Woodruff himself shows, though, ancient China is not such a world. He cites *Analects* 9:11: “Yan Yuan said: ‘…The Master is good at leading one on step by step. He broadens me with literature and restrains me
with *li*, so that if I wanted to stop I could not do so. But, having done all I can, [the goal] seems to rise sheer above me. I long to go after it, but I cannot find the way”’ [146]. Woodruff comments most aptly: “You feel, when you are in awe, that you are human, that your mind is dwarfed by what it confronts, that you cannot capture it in a set of beliefs, and that you had best keep your mouth closed and your mind open while awaiting further disclosure” [147]. Yan Yuan is in awe of the way (*dao*), or of *tian*; they do indeed dwarf him. But this is perfectly consistent with seeing that he is nonetheless a part of the way, of *tian*; this is part of what it means to say that one is “human,” in the Chinese context. One is imperfect, yes, though in principle perfectible. The “in principle” here is a metaphysical possibility but tantamount to a practical impossibility. Confucian writings place their sages only in the distant past or the elusive future, not in the present, so ideals retain their mystery and their power. The Confucians therefore give us a way to embrace reverence without transcendence. This is an important difference between Greek and Chinese concepts of reverence, to be sure, but this is just to return to Woodruff’s point that there is no single, culturally unmediated, idea of reverence—even while all the varieties share crucial structural similarities.

Let me now turn to the issue of shame, about which I have said little so far. One of the many strengths of Woodruff’s book, from the perspective of a comparative philosopher interested in Confucianism, is the way that seeing shame as related to reverence answers a significant criticism that could be lodged against the Confucian stress on shame. In *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum argues that demands for perfection lead to a rejection of dependence. She invokes psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s analysis of “B”:

“During the analysis, it emerged that B had suffered from rigidly anxious and unresponsive parenting in early life. His mother required perfection of herself, and interpreted any neediness on the part of the infant as a signal that she had not achieved the desired perfection (which she saw as commanded by a quasi-paternal idealized
husband)…. As B makes contact with these memories of a holding that was stifling, the patient gradually becomes aware of his own demand for perfection in everything—as a corollary of his inability to permit himself to be a needy child. Because his mother wanted perfection, he could not allow himself to be dependent on, or to trust, anyone. ‘Imperfect for me means being rejected,’ he finally tells Winnicott. And then: “I feel that you have introduced a big problem. I never became human. I missed it.”

Being human—having normal pleasures and fears, having complex and fulfilling relations with others—depends on not insisting on being independent from others. Developmentally, Nussbaum builds on Winnicott to suggest that parental “holding” can either create the sense that neediness is alright, or that “perfection is the only tolerable state.” An over-emphasis on shame, which “involves the realization that one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate,” is a natural concomitant of the stifling sort of “holding” that Nussbaum is criticizing. Nussbaum concludes that we should focus on developing capacities to make reparation, rather than on shame.

The problem with this way of thinking about shame is that it relies on a notion of actual human perfection, rather than the stress, central to reverence, on human imperfection. One ought not expect oneself to be perfect, even if striving for perfection is something that we ought always to be working on together. Woodruff writes:

Without reverence, we may feel shame as the pain of being exposed to other people for having violated community standards—and this is not a virtuous response, because it may have nothing to do with right and wrong. But when reverence is in play, we feel shame when exposed in our own minds to shortcomings vis-à-vis the ideals toward which we stand in awe, and this reaction does belong to virtue. [63]

Woodruff adds that feelings like shame (and respect) can go wrong: in the Iliad, Hector “lost his life, and the war, because he was ashamed to face his troops after a minor defeat” [73]. Insofar as shame is felt as part of the virtue of reverence, though, one will only feel shame when one should. Again, humans are imperfect, and we should not demand perfection of ourselves. Shame pushes us to live better, and to be better people, but—contrary to poor “B”—Confucians
recognize that living better crucially involves an opening up to others. Reverence, recall, combines shame and respect. We respect others for their commitment to shared ideals, and they respect us. This reciprocal relation helps to mitigate the sting of shame—indeed, it is part of the mechanism through which reverence regulates when it is, and when not, appropriate to feel shame at all.

We do not talk much today about reverence. It is a word we tend to confine to a religious context, when we think of it at all. At least among my acquaintances, irreverence is much more likely to be admired than reverence, as when a pompous superior, or politician, is irreverently (but appropriately) satired. My acquaintances, I feel confident, would find “reverence” to sound too conservative, even rigid.

Woodruff has explicit and excellent replies to most of these worries. His discussions of the relations between reverence, faith, and religion are extensive and insightful, going beyond what I can summarize here. Suffice it to say that on his view, reverence is sometimes connected to religion and sometimes not, and our religious beliefs and practices are sometimes reverent but sometimes not—especially when reverence for God is replaced by unblinking faith in a particular human interpreter of His will. As for irreverence, Woodruff suggests that we are using “irreverent” for qualities that are not irreverent at all. Reverence, recall, rests on an insight into human imperfection. As Woodruff puts it, “Reverence and a keen eye for the ridiculous are allies: both keep people from being pompous or stuck up. So don’t think that this book is an attack on laughter” [5]. As for reverence being conservative, Woodruff distinguishes between “narrow reverence,” which would mean following tradition no matter what, and true reverence. Narrow reverence is an “imposter virtue” since it will be “no better than the tradition in question, good on some points and bad on others. So it cannot be a virtue, and if it cannot be a virtue, it
cannot be reverence” [70]. At the same time, there is an appropriate way of being reverent to a live tradition, namely maintaining it through renovation, rather than preserving it like a monument [71].

I will close with a challenge to Woodruff, because it seems to me that there may yet be a sense in which reverence can be, in some circumstances at least, too conservative. In the book’s final chapter, Woodruff writes movingly of the normative nature of the “home” as “the center for a web of respect across generations…. We may have to visit homes of a different culture before we realize that the places where family pictures hang, or where grandmother’s unused teacups gather dust, are shrines” [206-7]. At the same time, “if routine is all there is at the place that used to be home, that place has come to be a trap for those who are lodging there” [207]. Reverence—as always, for shared ideals—and the accompanying ceremonies of daily life are necessary to animate a true home.

With this framework in mind, Woodruff turns to a more specific case. “In ancient Greece, the people who had the most power and the most freedom to leave home are men. But reverence keeps powerful men mindful of their homes, of the respect they owe to others in the home, and of gaps in their own good judgment” [209]. As for the women, “reverence gives to those who are oppressed the promise that there are greater powers than human ones, and that there are limits even men are not permitted to overstep” [210]. In addition, Woodruff suggests that in the Dionysian call to women to envision themselves as fawns frisking in the dewy skies, we can see an invocation of “adventure” which need be in no tension with reverence. “Home,” he says, “is not—or at least not always—the place to be, and reverence does not simply bow to a traditional assignment of roles” [211].
The idea that reverence limits the powerful and humanizes hierarchy is another theme of the book that I cannot pursue now. But we must ask: is this always enough? Is it enough to grant virtuous women the possibility of the occasional adventure, while asking them to be submissive at home? Or mightn’t we want to endorse a genuine irreverence in such circumstances? Perhaps oppressed individuals should reject the shared ideals, reject a charitable and patient approach to renovation, and lash out. In a fascinating essay in feminist moral psychology, Diana Meyers has argued that “a selection of generally disparaged emotional attitudes—namely, hypersensitivity, paranoia, anger, and bitterness—can be seen to facilitate moral insight into culturally and institutionally entrenched practices of domination and subordination.”

Meyers worries that a serene and trusting temperament will “secure complacency about conventional moral beliefs and unwitting complicity in maintaining a morally objectionable status quo.”

Can Woodruff successfully rebut these concerns by claiming that the “rancorous emotional attitudes” put forward by Meyers are actually, at least in certain circumstances, reverent? Or are there times when reverence must be set aside—when we must do more than mock our failures to live up to our ideals, and instead uncompromisingly, uncooperatively criticize the ideals themselves? Whatever we decide in the end, I think it is clear that Woodruff’s book deserves our very highest praise. It is a model for comparative philosophers, from which specialists on all sides can gain enormously. The book is not an academic monograph, though, but a powerful and engaging essay that deserves a wide audience. We philosophers should strive to write more such books.

Endnotes

ii. See [105]. It is worth noting that the term “xin,” rendered by Woodruff as feelings, might well be translated in this context as “disposition,” making it even clear that we are talking about a virtue rather than mere occurrent feelings.


vii. For one example, see Neville, op. cit., pp. 147-54.


x. Ibid., pp. 195-6.