

Herbert Fingarette asserts in the first chapter of his book, Confucius—The Secular as Sacred, that there is a strong presence of magic in the *Analects*, an intangible power that a leader can draw on to directly accomplish his will with no further action on his part. While Fingarette may be a bit overzealous in identifying magic in Confucius's work, he nevertheless provides a keen insight into the nature of *li*.^{*} While still describing it in terms understandable to a Western audience, Fingarette lays out an interpretation of *li* that takes these “magical” passages in the text much more literally than most Western readers have in the past. This interpretation leads to a finer understanding of the importance of *li* to Confucius, his teachings, and his culture.

Fingarette opens his discussion with several example passages from the *Analects* that he believes exhibit a belief in magic. By “magic” he means “the power of a specific person to accomplish his will directly and effortlessly through ritual, gesture and incantation;” “he simply wills the end... [and] without further effort on his part, the deed is accomplished.”¹ Fingarette freely admits that several of these passages may be later additions to the *Analects* and not truly represent Confucius's beliefs, but maintains that Western critics are nonetheless mistaken in feeling that they must “explain away” the magical influences in the *Analects*. Instead, taking the passages in question at face value, which to Fingarette means accepting magical beliefs on Confucius's part, can give us a more complete understanding of the meaning and importance of *li* and *de*.

For most of the passages that he cites, I must side with Fingarette's close-minded Western philosophers in interpreting Confucius's words (or those of his disciples, as the case may be) as, at worst, poetic embellishments. For example, *ren* is a quality of a person, not a physical object.

* Several important terms from the *Analects* will be used in this paper, represented with their pinyin transliterations.
1 Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius—The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1972), p. 3.

How, then, does Confucius's saying in VII.30—"Is *ren* really far away? No sooner do I desire it than it is here"—represent a magical idea?² Confucius is simply describing the ever-present nature of *ren* in a man who possesses it; he emphasizes many times throughout the *Analects* that though achieving *ren* is difficult, exercising it is not. Furthermore, Fingarette cites several passages—XII.1, XII.19, and II.1—that use flowery phrasing to depict the power of the *de* of a strong leader. I do not feel the original text was intended to imply that *de* is a truly magical force. Instead, the language was simply a poetic illustration of the power of a charismatic leader well-versed in *li*. Confucius says in II.1 that the leader possessing *de* is like “the Pole Star which commands the homage of the multitude of stars without leaving its place.”³ While poetic license is clearly at work here, no one can deny the power of a charismatic leader with strong character. Fingarette's analysis of *li*, however, reveals that these passages' seemingly overblown depictions of *de* may not be very far from the truth; the influence of a truly *ren* gentleman in Confucius's time was very likely well beyond our standard modern understanding of a popular leader.

As for the remaining passages referenced in Fingarette's essay, there is a fine difference between “magic” as he finds it in the *Analects* and the definition that most readers assume for the word. By the definition above, delegation, ordering food at a restaurant, issuing a print command to a computer, or any number of other mundane work-directing tasks can be considered magical. By most people's reasoning, magic not only necessitates no further action on the part of the caster, but also no further intermediate action of any kind. The distinction may seem petty, but Fingarette exploits just this loophole in discussing these passages, the most significant ones to his analysis of *li*.

After deciding to take a more literal, “magical” perspective on *li*, Fingarette describes it through analogy with modern ceremonies, both physical and verbal. On a first pass through the

2 Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 90.

3 Confucius, p. 63.

Analects, the average Western reader is likely to see *li*, the complex and specific etiquette of rituals, speech, and conduct, as superfluous formality, an artifact of the writing's contemporary society that is outside the core message of Confucius's beliefs. It certainly comes up a lot, though, and Fingarette sees its significance beyond simple manners. He provides the example of the handshake, a queer ceremony of Western culture that is utterly transparent to the consideration of modern readers. "I see you on the street; I smile, walk toward you, put out my hand to shake yours," Fingarette describes. "And behold—without any... effort on my part to make you do so... we shake hands."⁴ For many people this is an automatic and unconsidered ceremony, but its complexity and subtlety can be astounding to one unfamiliar with Western culture.

Many properties of the handshake carry over to descriptions, which seem so needlessly explicit and extensive, that Confucius gives of the ceremonies involved in *li*: a handshake must have life in it; the participants must truly be involved for the handshake to have meaning, just as Confucius says that "unless I take part in a sacrifice, it is as if I did not sacrifice."⁵ (III.12) In the same way that a handshake between friends and one between a leader and a subordinate have a certain different quality, *li* also differentiates amongst ranks. A handshake may have different meanings in different contexts; to pass off what your friend thinks is a handshake of greeting as an implicit agreement to some contract is as absurd and unacceptable as the Three Families' attempted ritual use of the *yung* ode after their sacrifice, even though its ritual significance did not apply to them.⁶ (III.2)

There are other analogues of Confucius's descriptions of *li* in Western culture. By modern standards of Western etiquette, it is acceptable in all but the strictest occasions for the place settings at a formal dinner to have the same type of fork for the dinner and the salad. However, interrupting the host during a toast or beginning to eat before the guest of honor has begun are

4 Fingarette, p. 9.

5 Confucius, p. 69.

6 Confucius, p. 67.

quite out of bounds. The reasoning is the same in Confucius's judgment, in IX.3, of frugal and casual deviations from the traditional prescriptions of *li*: there is little meaning lost in using a silk ceremonial cap as opposed to a linen one, but ascending the steps before prostrating oneself changes the significance of the ritual and could be disrespectful.⁷

It is clear from the *Analects* that *li* was an expansive body of guidelines that carried great weight in government. It provided a complex social language for the statesmen of the time, a way to communicate feelings, decisions, and directions, as well as establish rank and reinforce the proper interactions between people according to their respective ranks. Because *li* was implemented in such a formal setting, especially in a feudal society with fairly strong distinctions between classes, and took such an important role in the functioning of the government, it needed to be strictly codified and taught explicitly, well beyond the standards of even the nit-pickiest of Western etiquette sticklers.

The major shortcoming of Fingarette's magical characterization of *li*, though, is in its application in government. He describes *li* in terms of the modern concept of “performative speech”, speech that does not describe or report action, but is itself action.⁸ Most performative speech is a variation of promise-making: promising something is not a report of some other action but the entire action in itself; agreeing to a verbal contract is exactly the action of commitment, not some secondary part of the process. Running a government, even by *li*, involves more than making promises, though. Orders must be given somehow. Confucius says in XV.5 that “if there was a ruler who achieved order without taking any action, it was, perhaps, Shun. There was nothing for him to do but to hold himself in a respectful posture and to face due south.”⁹ It would seem that Fingarette has explained, and yet preserved, the “magic” in this passage: the proper observance of *li* causes interactions to happen of their own accord, without direction or

7 Confucius, p. 96.

8 Fingarette, p. 12.

9 Confucius, p. 132.

compulsion.

We can visualize a cascade of commands issued through *li*, commands that are not truly commands as they involve no force, proceeding from the ruler to his deputies, all the way down to whomever the statesman is who must enforce the command. According to Fingarette, this is “magic”: the ruler needed only utter the proper ritual incantation, and soon enough his wishes were carried out. When we examine the mechanism of this occurrence, though, we see that this is just a quieter, less direct breed of the same delegation that all heads of state must employ. Furthermore, someone eventually had to do the work dictated by the ruler's decision—some minor statesman was at the end of the chain of command and he had to direct the desired activity in a very real, physical, time-consuming sense. Thus the ruler got his results through an indirect and wholly temporal process. Shun led an orderly state not because he was a conjurer, but rather because of his *de*. This allowed him to lead without difficulty, because his moral charisma and proper conduct in *li* lead his subordinates to carry out his wishes, and to lead properly, because he was a gentleman or perhaps even a sage: a man of *ren*, wisdom, and courage, a great man tempered by *li*, informed by *shu*, and guided by *zhong*. He may have had a mystical power over his kingdom, but Shun's abilities lay entirely within this world.

Clearly *de* is the vital attribute of an effective ruler, what Confucius wanted each of his students to turn out to be. *De* is often translated as “virtue” but its use in the *Analects* indicates a sort of moral and political charisma that draws people of all stations to a ruler who possesses it, as Mencius explained to King Hsüan.¹⁰ The root of *de* was probably considered a gift from Heaven, an inborn and native characteristic. However, one's *de* can be cultivated through study of *li* and development of *ren*. In fact, this cultivation is necessary for the individual's *de* to become significant at all; it does not grow of its own accord.¹¹

¹⁰ *Mencius*, trans. D.C. Lau (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 58.

¹¹ Confucius, p. 11.

Attaining *de*, then, relies on a variety of other practices and properties. The components of *de* are *ren* and *li*; a benevolent man's actions, tempered by the rites, command great respect and are virtuous (IV.13).¹² *Ren* is composed of *shu* and *zhong*; a sympathetic understanding of what should be done for others (VI.30), driven forward by the desire to do one's best and knowledge of the shame of failing to do so (II.13), is the path to benevolence.¹³ Of course, cultivating *de* is not so linear as fitting all the pieces together; each of the above characteristics of the gentleman necessitate long thought and interaction with others. Confucius did not even consider himself a gentleman, much less a sage, and yet he recalls in II.4 that it took him seventy years of his life to properly conduct himself with respect to *li*.¹⁴

Without Fingarette's clear exposition of the importance of *li*, one might have glossed over its role in the formation of a great ruler's *de*; with this insight, though, we can understand why *li* plays such a pivotal role in the creation of a statesman. A man could have a perfect sympathetic understanding of others and could wish to do his best by them, but without the guidance of the rites, he would have no chance at all to participate in the government, nor to gain the respect of the people around him. *Li* allows the proper functioning of society and government by providing a means of communication that maintains the social roles of all its participants. The *de* of a ruler may not be magical, but its incredible power in maintaining order in the state functions only by channeling the ruler's benevolence through *li*.

12 Confucius, p. 74.

13 Confucius, pp. 85, 64.

14 Confucius, p. 63.