

Virtues, Roles and Rites: *A Confucian View on Consumer Ethics*

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ABSTRACT. The consumer ethics literature focuses mainly on the consequences of consumption, the principles that should guide it, and the virtues consumers should possess. This article presents a complementary view based on the crucial value Confucianism bestows on social rites as ways to attain moral excellence. Social rites are relevant elements for the achievement of moral self-cultivation in different aspects of life, including the acquisition, use and disposal of consumer goods and services. We illustrate our proposal through some examples of consumption practices, particularly gift exchange, as an ethical context that embodies social rites and in which ethical virtues may unfold.

KEYWORDS. Consumption, rites, virtue, gift giving, self-cultivation, moral excellence

I. INTRODUCTION

Consumption is increasingly presented in social and academic discourses as an area of moral concern. As a result, research on consumer ethics has grown remarkably. The extant literature has paid attention to worrisome consequences of overconsumption, such as the impoverishment of inner life, increased social inequality and the depletion of environmental resources (Barber 2008; Finn 2019). It has also focused on duties that should guide right consumption, such as sustainability and fairness (Lewis and Potter 2011; Norman 2017). Other scholars have studied how consumption decisions foster or hinder virtues and vices in

consumers (Harrison, Newholm, and Shaw 2005; Garcia-Ruiz and Rodriguez-Lluesma, 2014). Taken as a whole, these three research traditions – consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics – provide valuable insights into how our current levels of consumption impact human flourishing and natural and social environments.

The extant literature has paid scant attention to other philosophical perspectives that may contribute significant resources to evaluate our current consumption practices from an ethical point of view. Among these theoretical lenses, Confucianism looms large both because of its remaining power and the reach of its influence and for the relevance of its insights. Some studies have explored how a Confucian background affects values and attitudes towards current consumption practices (Ackerman, Hu, and Wei 2009; Karimova *et al.*, 2020; Monkhouse *et al.* 2013; Ramasamy, Yeung and Chen 2013; Swaidan 2012). Consumers belonging to this cultural context embody values such solidarity, harmony, a sense of community and group orientation, respect for hierarchy, thrift, a sense of shame, and persistence. Accordingly, they engage in ethical activities such as recycling or protecting the environment (Lu, Huang and Chang 2014; Wang and Juslin 2009) and regard profiting from questionable practices as wrong or unethical (Chung, Eichenseher and Taniguchi 2008). These studies, however, have glossed over the Confucian emphasis on social rites (*li*), a concept that is central to his ethical framework and “[...] immediately relevant to the question of consumption” (Sigurdsson 2014, 137). Confucian views on consumption manifest a consistent inclination to consider wealth and what it carries with it as subordinate to virtue and morality. In general, Confucians tend to be reluctant consumers and generally rather frugal (Sigurdsson 2014, 135). However, they would not see anything wrong with material wealth as such: “Wealth is desirable and should be pursued, as long as one does not pursue it by violating morality” (Fan 2010, 233). In this pursuit, ritual propriety plays an important role, as Confucius himself states rather clearly in the *Analects*: “Poor but enjoying the way; rich but loving ritual propriety” (1.15).

The purpose of the present contribution is to fill this gap, presenting an ethical view of consumption based on Confucian philosophy which, while complementary to the three perspectives presented above (for his relation to consequentialism, deontology and virtue ethics, see Im 2010; Tsai 2010; and Harris 2010, respectively), provides novel guidance regarding which patterns of consumption may be morally justified, rebuked or praised. We begin with a presentation of the concept of social rites (*li*) and its relevance in the Confucian ethical tradition. Second, we explore the existence of social rites in contemporary consumption practices. The extant consumer culture literature has pointed to the capacity of rites to foster social ties but has mostly ignored their ethical value. We explain how Confucianism may help to fill this void. To illustrate, we analyse gift exchange as a specific consumption practice that embodies ethically laden social rites. Our last section discusses a Confucian view of the ethics of consumption, in which social rites feature relevant elements for the achievement of self-cultivation through the acquisition, use and disposal of goods and services.

II. SOCIAL RITES IN CONFUCIAN ETHICS

Confucianism – developed by Confucius (551-479 BC) – formed the social and cultural backbone of China and other South-Eastern countries for centuries. It offers a program for moral self-cultivation that deems character development centrally important (Angle and Slote 2013; Ivanhoe 2000; Van Norden 2007). In Confucianism, moral excellence consists not only or mainly of carrying out particular kinds of behaviour but also of acquiring and developing certain sensibilities, attitudes, and dispositions with social, moral and aesthetic value as one's own. Social roles and rites (*li*) play a crucial role in moral development (Ames 2011; Fingarette 1972; Provis 2020).

The term *li* denotes the customs and rites associated with specific roles and relations. It refers to all those 'objective' prescriptions of

behaviour, whether involving ritual, etiquette, ceremony, manners, propriety, or general deportment, that bind human beings and spirits together in networks of interacting roles within the family and in society (Provis 2020; Ames 2011, 170ff.; see also Schwartz 2009, 67ff.). *Li* requires performing appropriate behaviours in proper manners at the proper time, according to the role one holds in a given social relation.

Etymologically, the term *li* refers to religious rites (Fingarette 1972). “The character *li* in many passages of the *Analects* (e.g. 3.4; 3.25; 3.17; 9.3 and 17.11) denotes proper customs, acts, or established social norms, the purposes of which are to govern religious sacrificial acts or sacred ceremonies appropriately” (Shun 1993, 458). However, Confucius’ use of this term extends beyond the meaning of traditional religious ceremonies. He uses “[...] the language and imagery of *li* as a medium within which to talk about the entire body of authentic tradition and reasonable conventions of society” (Fingarette 1972, 6). One of the five Confucian classic works, the *Book of Rites*, demonstrates the diversity in *li*: “They [*li*] are practiced by means of offering, acts of strength, words, and postures of courtesy, in eating and drinking, in the observance of capping, marriage, mourning, sacrificing, archery, chariot-driving, audiences and friendly missions” (Legge 1885, 388, in Kim and Strudler 2012, 562). Rites include, for example, the public manner of addressing a superior, an equal or an inferior in extending greetings, speaking, taking a seat, drinking tea, the wearing of ceremonial caps, fasting clothes and mourning clothes, mourning, weeping and lamentation, and any expression of the self towards others (Bell 2008, 40ff.). They mediate interactions not only with others but also with nature and even with material objects.

A strong relation exists in Confucian ethics between the observance of rites (*li*) and ethical excellence (*ren*¹) (Shun 1993). When enacted in the appropriate spirit, the observance of rites provides a means of cultivating and expressing ethical excellence. The meanings and qualities rites embody – not the materiality of objects or scripted actions involved – infuse them with value (Ivanhoe 2000). For this very reason, Confucius

complained about those practicing rites while lacking the appropriate spirit: “Irreverence when performing rites, and being unsorrowful in the conduct of mourning – how am I to contemplate these things?” (*Analects* 3.26). “Talking of *li*, talking of *li* – does it mean no more than presents of silks and gems?” (*Analects* 17.12). Giving silks and gems is worthless when unaccompanied by sincere appreciation. Presenting one’s commiserations with seeming indifference does not bring comfort to the mourner.

Rite practices shape virtuosity because ethical excellence “[...] is not intelligible and cannot be shown to have a validity independent of rites” (Shun 1993, 472). To illustrate, when asked to clarify the meaning of filial piety, Confucius replied, “[...] when [parents] are alive, serve them in accordance with the rites; and after they are dead, when you bury them, do so in accordance with the rites and, when you sacrifice to them, do so in accordance with the rites” (*Analects* 2.5). Rites relative to filial behaviour go beyond more or less appropriate means towards the expression of affection or reverence. They make up the very content defining the appropriate attitudes and behaviours between parents and their offspring. “Rite is the expression of propriety through one’s roles and relations” (Ames and Rosemont 2016, 116). Being a good son or daughter consists of living the filial rites prevalent in one’s society, whereas not enacting them amounts to being a bad son or daughter. Rites shape virtues, so that these may be exercised in an appropriate way: “If one is cautious but does without rite, then one becomes timid; if one is bold but does without rite, then one becomes reckless; if one is forthright but does without rite, the one becomes rude” (*Analects* 8.2).

Ethical excellence, however, remains underdetermined by the rites that enact it because other alternative manifestations may express it as well. Different rites are present in different societies and even within a given society. “Advocacy of the ideal allows room for departing from or revising an existing rule of *li*” (Shun 1993, 473). On some occasions, old rites may fall into disuse or be replaced by new rites. While

overwhelmingly sympathetic to received rites, Confucius did not reject innovation and change when accompanied by a good reason. *Analects* 9.3 reads thus:

The Master said, ‘A linen cap is prescribed by the rites, but nowadays people use black silk. That is thrifty and I follow the multitude. To do obeisance below is prescribed by the rites but nowadays people do obeisance after ascending. This is arrogant and, although I go against the multitude, I follow the rule of doing so below’.

According to Confucius, rites may evolve, but only when the spirit animating them is understood and followed. Despite a long-standing prescription to use a linen cap, Confucius holds that thriftiness constitutes good grounds to use a silk cap. However, the intention to change the rite of bowing expresses arrogance, hence contravening the humility and respect that should underlie the very rite of bowing.

Some ordinary rites regulate consumption. Food, clothes, chariots, bows, and, in general, the goods necessary for any practice may ease or hinder social relations and the performance of their attendant (ethical) obligations (*Analects* 10.6, 10.7, 10.8, 10.23, 10.24, and 10.25). For example, food at a funeral should be frugal (*Analects* 7.9). This practice expresses condolence towards the mourning. Furthermore, it also purports to have a deep and direct impact on the person refraining from eating copiously, as it may remind them that they belong to a society shared with those in mourning. It may also remind them of the importance of family and friends and of the fragility of human existence. It may also affect those witnessing this practice, who may gain an awareness of their common fate and reciprocal solidarity as mortal human beings living in an inhospitable world. Rightly interpreted, this simple practice may appear as “[...] an impressive manifestation of humanity (*ren*)” (Ivanhoe 2000, 6).

Given that everyday life requires constant and regular consumption, *how* one consumes bears substantially on how ethical our lives are. From a Confucian perspective, what and how we eat, how we dress, what sort

of things we acquire, and how we acquire them are all crucial to our personal cultivation. It is here that *li*, the customs of self and interpersonal behaviour come into the picture. The level of consumption is dependent on, and thus secondary to, the appropriate action as guided by rites (Sigurdsson 2014, 137).

In the next section, we study the presence and meaning of rites in consumption practices, as well as Confucianism's distinctive contribution to an enhanced understanding of the role those rites play in consumer ethics.

III. THE ROLE OF RITES IN CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

The existence of rites in consumption practices is no new topic in the consumer culture literature (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; Cappellini and Parsons, 2012; Curasi, Arnould, and Price 2004; Epp and Price 2008; Moisiso *et al.* 2004). Consumption rites are ways of organizing and assimilating experiences using marketplace resources to communicate tacit norms and values, as well as manage social relationships (Curasi *et al.* 2004). As with any other kind of rite, they consist of “[...] a sequence of related acts, involving two or more persons, and together having symbolic significance, through which the actors recognize the importance of the event and take a stance regarding the event” (Kim and Strudler 2012, 564). An “[...] afternoon visit to a coffee shop may become a mother-daughter rite that celebrates and socializes a shared identity – the finish for a girls’ day of shopping” (Epp and Price 2008, 53). Generational transfers of heirlooms, such as a golden watch or an engagement ring, draw meaning from and serve to strengthen relationships and roles within the family (Curasi *et al.* 2004). Sports fans also engage in pre-, post-, and during-game rites (Belk *et al.* 1989), such as singing hymns, wearing their team’s cap or sharing drinks with other fans to celebrate their joint commitment. Participation in rites channels the creation, revision, reinforcement and passing on of a social identity, a membership in a given community.

Consumer culture literature, however, has paid scant attention to the ethical dimension of such rites. The Confucian tradition is in a position to bridge that gap. In Confucianism, rites provide normative orientation from social as well as ethical points of view, which Confucius perceived as inextricable (Ames 2011; Van Norden 2007).

Rites' ethical power stems from their ability to show the respect due to those one relates to: “[...] those who have propriety respect others,” says Mencius (4B 28), one of the classical sources in Confucianism. “One may show respect for another person by engaging in appropriate rite behavior” (Kim and Strudler 2012, 563). Participating in rites fosters respect in those who count themselves as members of the same community. Consumption practices provide an occasion to show (or withhold) mutual respect through the observance of specific rites. Undervalued in Western culture, Confucianism holds the ethical values of rites, respect and civility.

The Value of Civility

The importance of civility in the acquisition, use and disposal of consumption objects and experiences is a specific contribution of the Confucian tradition to consumer ethics. Civility stands for “[...] the communicative aspect of proper rites” (Kim and Strudler 2012, 567). As stated earlier, by participating in proper rites, people express mutual respect, cultivate virtues and contribute to social harmony. For this reason, consumer ethics should pay heed to the role rites play in consumption practices. It would be worthwhile for example, to debate and promote some rites to ‘civilize’ the use of cell phones, which often runs counter to the most basic norms of respect and courtesy to the extent that it was necessary to come up with the neologism ‘phubbing’ (composed of ‘phone’ and ‘snubbing’) to objectivize these behaviours. Examples abound: incoming calls interrupting face-to-face conversations; private discussions taking place in the public domain via cell phones, which force bystanders to become privy to others’ personal and intimate issues; message exchanges over a group of friends’ gatherings; and

similar behaviours (Turkle 2016). Technology may help us strengthen our social relations (computers, conferencing software and a camera allows us to connect with friends, for example), but it may come at the cost of harming other relations or ourselves. Absent shared practices governing and guiding us in matters such as mobile use, technology has created many ways not only to communicate, but also to isolate, offend, and insult one another, intentionally or not. For this reason, some transport companies and municipalities are trying to regulate the use of devices during trips. Confucius would hold that civility is sorely needed: “[...] respect for others, manifested through deference, is of paramount importance to flourish as a harmonious society” (Steidlmeier 1999, 123).

Within the Confucian tradition, the ethical strength of civility relies on the sacred character of rite. Originally, the term *li* referred to religious ceremonies, but it expanded gradually to include traditional norms governing human conduct in ordinary areas of life (Provis 2020; Schwartz 2009; Shun 1993). Confucius’ novel and creative insight was “[...] to see those spontaneous and voluntary acts of courtesy in ordinary daily interactions in terms of a particular revelatory image: holy rite, sacred ceremony” (Fingarette 1972, 7). Even when it involves strictly human transactions, the entire body of *li* somehow still involves a sacred dimension. “*Li* are not bare patterns of behavior but patterns of behavior which are, as it were, the bearers of religious, ethical and aesthetic meanings” (Schwartz 2009, 72). Regarding something as sacred consists of thinking that “[...] the proper attitude towards it is respect, awe or reverence” (Van Norden 2007, 102). ‘Sacred’ as an ideal is imbricated with a sense of belonging to a community and with respect due to those participating in the rites (Kim and Strudler 2012).

The Secular as Sacred

The consumer culture literature has also studied the presence of the sacred in consumption practices (Belk *et al.* 1989; Cherrier 2009; Woodruff 2014). Many contemporary consumers treat supposedly profane objects

and entities with respect, awe and reverence. Examples include flags, sports stars, national parks, museums, and art collections. In different ways and to different extents, these objects prompt consumers' feelings of deep appreciation, transcendence, sadness and repugnance when they are not treated as they should be. For example, for a music lover attending a concert or for a gourmet sitting down to a fine meal, "[...] irreverent behaviors, such as interruptions, inappropriate noise, or too casual an attitude towards the focus of attention at these times, are considered not only rude but sacrilegious" (Belk *et al.* 1989, 10). Different practices call for different rites. Reverential behaviours at a rock festival may strike some as odd, but they certainly count as sacred to participants. These behaviours may include ecstatic dance, lighting matches, and purchase of tour t-shirt relics. Here, the quiet, seemingly uninvolved partaker is the inappropriate one (Belk *et al.* 1989).

In general, Western thought and practice have often regarded the sacred as an extraordinary reality that is separated from profane and ordinary life. In Durkheim's (1965) view, for example, the sacred tends to appear when a specific class of people carry out specific actions in a hallowed place in relation to an object considered sacred before or on account of those actions. Because of these rites, participants experience entrainment with the collective such that they bind with others and acquire a sense of moral renewal. However, from a Confucian perspective, the sacred and the profane are not temporally and spatially exclusive of each other; both are part of the everyday world (Ames 2011), which includes the acquisition, use and disposal of consumption goods. Rites in consumption make it possible to manifest due respect to those with whom we share a significant social relation.

Some rites may count as decent and ethically excellent, whereas others may not. Ritual homicides and harassment behaviours at work exist, for example. Some consumption rites may also be ethically questionable. Ritual induction of animal abuse or alcohol consumption among teens also exists. In *Analects* (7.14, 8.8, 15.11), Confucius distinguishes between

the music that affects character positively and the one that hurts it (as we may currently cherish Bach’s work or deplore music exalting gratuitous violence or racism, for example). For this reason, he recommended some kinds of music while rejecting others to educate characters (Ivanhoe 2000, 6). For Confucius, harmony marks the difference between decent and indecent rites: “[...] in the practice of the rites, harmony is regarded as the most valuable thing” (*Analects* 1.12). A rite is decent and good as long as it embodies respect and facilitates social harmony. In other words, decent rites are those that foster human flourishing and create positive relationships among participants (Ames 2011; Provis 2020). Only in decent rites may the sacred emerge. On the other hand, rites that foster disrespect or lead participants to behave against harmonious relations do not count as decent and should be avoided.

To further illustrate how contemporary consumer ethics can benefit from classical Confucian insights, the next section will analyse the practice of gift exchange as a consumption practice in which social rites play a key role.

IV. THE PRACTICE OF GIFT EXCHANGE

Gift exchange is a social custom that is common throughout the world and includes specific social rites. Gift exchange has been conceptualized as the evaluation, selection, and transfer of material and nonmaterial objects in a spontaneous mode or in fulfilment of an obligation (Godelier 1999). The term ‘gift’ refers to exchanges of products and services that connect people, usually conforming to an expression of respect, and strengthen relationships among them (Mauss 1925). In China, the practice of gift exchange has developed for thousands of years and, while certainly associated with the Confucian tradition, cannot be considered a ‘pure’ Confucian custom today (Chan, Denton, and Tsang 2003; Joy 2011). However, as long as social rites play an important role in gift exchange, Confucianism may help us better understand its ethical dimension, not only in China but also in any other society where it may be practiced.

In gift exchanges, rites and virtues come to the fore that help make and sustain human communities by fostering the reciprocal orientation of their members. In this process, the practice of gift exchange displays three sequential phases: giving, accepting and reciprocating.

The Art of Giving

In Chinese culture, gifts involve the circulation of goods in the service of social ties (Chan, Denton, and Tsang 2003; Qian, Razaque, and Keng 2007). Gift exchanges follow rites of etiquette that an ethically appropriate person is expected to follow in social interactions. These rules, based on gender and rank, are rites of greeting and visiting that promote mutual consideration, as opposed to self-gain or competition. Gift giving shows respect for another person and strengthens relationships. To approach another person and bring nothing is unusual, to say the least. Gift giving expresses deep ideals, expected behavioural patterns, and entrenched norms of mutuality and ‘right relationships’ between people.

Individuals may gain or lose face during gift exchanges. Face (*mianzi*) is an individual’s public image gained by performing specific social roles recognized by others (Hwang 1987; Redding and Ng 1982). It is the respectability or deference that a person can claim for himself from others by virtue of his or her relative position in the social network and the degree to which he or she is judged by others to have functioned adequately and acceptably in general conduct and position (Qian *et al.* 2007). In Chinese culture, face, as a form of respect for others, is of paramount importance and often manifested through actions such as deference, avoiding public disagreement, honouring others within a group, and gift giving.

In the Chinese cultural context, gift giving functions (i) as an expression of friendship and good feelings and (ii) as an instrument for building and expanding social networks (*guanxi*). The selection of a gift must calibrate the nature of the relationship between giver and receiver (Joy 2011). When gifts are given as an expression of friendship and good feelings, they

reinforce the affective sentiments and emotional commitments that accompany long-standing and intimate social bonds, such as those found between close friends, a teacher and student, and certain favourite relatives (Hua, Wei, and Yuan 2000). Central to these relationships is the concept of sharing and mutual support: the parties concerned are ethically obliged to give, receive and give in return. The refusal to share (i.e. to reciprocate immediately with a gift) creates social distance. When the relation with the receiver is not close or intimate (among schoolmates, for example), calculation takes precedence over sentiment, which is more important in the contexts of close friends and extended family. In these less emotional relations, concern about price surfaces because offering a cheap gift causes one to lose social face. However, offering an expensive gift places pressure to reciprocate on the receiver. Size also matters, particularly when other people witness unwrapping. Although individuals may hint as to what they would like to receive, they must also be discreet, as must be the person buying the gift. Otherwise, both the giver and the receiver risk violating the rules of surprise, mystery and premeditation because they should pretend they do not attach any importance to the quality and price of the gift.

Guanxi relations, which are more explicitly instrumental, have a tactical dimension, though affect, loyalty, duty and trust may also be involved (Chen and Chen 2004; Qian *et al.* 2007). By definition, *guanxi* relations develop between potential friends. Hence, a certain amount of etiquette and propriety in conduct are necessary. Emotional bonds are often minimal; gains and losses are calculated so that balance is maintained (Joy 2011). When one party receives a favour from another party, the former is expected to reciprocate at some point in the future. Otherwise, the *guanxi* cannot be sustained. *Guanxi* relationships depend on the creation of subtle psychological obligations and indebtedness among gift exchange partners. The objective of gift giving in this context is to forge trust for long-lasting relationships and mutual help. Gift exchanges facilitate the movement from outsider to insider status. Giving and losing face is crucial to this relationship.

From a Confucian perspective, gifts are the material manifestation of *li* (Hua *et al.* 2000). Confucianism emphasizes propriety (or courtesy) in maintaining harmony within hierarchical social networks. *Li* also applies to gift exchanges: the appropriateness of a gift depends on the particulars of the case, such as when, where and how it is given. To illustrate, *lisbi* (in Cantonese, or *hongbao* in Mandarin), which is money given in a red paper packet, is a common gift choice for birthdays, marriages, and during the Lunar New Year but not for other occasions. It is also common for the senior party in a relationship, such as fathers, bosses or older people, to give *lisbi* to their junior counterparts, such as sons and daughters or employees. Because *lisbi* implies status, presenting *lisbi* to one's senior is inappropriate and would be viewed as not conforming to *li*. Correct timing in gift giving is also *li*. Major occasions for gift giving are those related to family, such as births, deaths, and marriages. There are also seasonal occasions, such as the Winter Solstice, the Dragon Boat Festival, the Mid-Autumn Festival and the Lunar New Year; occasions related to business, such as the opening of a new shop; and many other occasions, such as visiting the sick, thanking someone for their hospitality, visiting friends and relatives upon returning from a journey, attending dinner with people one does not know very well, and seeking favour from an individual or an institution. All these situations provide occasions to show due respect through the observance of specific rites.

Two cardinal principles of social interaction, the principle of sincerity and the principle of balance, are relevant for the practice of gift exchange (Smith 1983; Gu 1990). Both are rooted in Confucian tradition and are relevant from an ethical point of view. The principle of sincerity requires that all social deeds be enacted sincerely because they are inherently polite. The principle of balance refers to a sense of appropriateness in social interaction and exchange. It calls for special attention to the counterpart's 'face needs'. Both principles apply to gift circulation and ensure that the exchange is acceptable. For instance, the selected gift should be sufficiently expensive to match the income of

the giver but not as luxurious as to make the receiver liable to be considered greedy.

The Rite of Acceptance

The acceptance of gifts is also subject to a specific rite. When presented with a gift, one is generally expected to refuse politely several times before accepting. These refusals are generally accompanied by statements such as “I do not deserve a gift,” “You should not have gone to so much trouble on my behalf,” or “This is not necessary” (Chan *et al.* 2003, 50). By refusing the gift (temporarily), the recipient may seem ungrateful or even rude to the uninformed outsider. However, what the recipients are in fact doing is not only showing their modesty and lack of greed (both of which are highly desirable virtues in the Chinese culture) but also observing the principles of sincerity and balance (Hua *et al.* 2000). The giver is expected to repeat the offer several times to show that her intention is genuine, whereas the recipient of the action is supposed to seek confirmation of the initiator’s genuine intention (principle of sincerity). This sequence requires careful monitoring of the other person’s verbal and nonverbal cues in face-to-face interaction, proceeding with circumspection until one discovers the mutual balance point, and remaining ready to withdraw and to alter one’s action to meet the other’s face needs (principle of balance).

In this careful exchange, the gift giver is expected to continue pressing the gift on the recipient while providing plausible reasons for taking it until the gift is finally accepted. Rather than making the offering of the present immediately, givers prepare the ground with what conversational analysis calls a ‘presequence’, a reason that justifies the gift (Hua *et al.* 2000, 88). Unmarked gifts may seem arrogant. Therefore, givers tend to provide an appropriate reason for giving the present. In doing so, the giver not only justifies her subsequent act but also facilitates acceptance from the potential gift recipient. Furthermore, the giver’s strategy often

includes doubt about whether the gift will benefit or suit the recipient. The offeror appears more modest and less persistent by giving the recipient an opportunity to decline the offer (Qian *et al.* 2007). However, the effect is often the opposite because declining the gift might give the impression that the gift was no good or that the giver did not make an appropriate choice.

Acting appropriately in line with one's social position is a way to claim sincerity and conformity with regard to social order. Nevertheless, it is clear that the line between mandatory giving, gifts, flattery, and bribery blurs on occasions when calculation is prominent in people's minds (Steidlmeier 1999). Sometimes alleged gifts are actually ways of building indebtedness on the part of the receiver to the point that they can be considered forms of extortion and bribery. Certainly, implicit in the act of accepting a gift is “[...] an agreement in trust to repay in kind at a later date” (Joy 2011, 251). Accepting a gift is a decision that is too important to make lightly because it implies not only instrumental but also expressive and ethical responsibility.

The Norm of Reciprocity

Along with the principles of sincerity and balance, Chinese culture has a sense of reciprocity and proportionality between those who exchange gifts (Schwartz 2009). Reciprocity represents a gold rule that governs nearly all interpersonal relationships, including the exchange of gifts and favours between individuals and groups. It implies the social and ethical obligation to return gifts and favours in comparable kind and quantity and in proportion to those received. Absent these gift-giving norms, social bonds would suffer.

Reciprocity is often problematic because there is no clear definition, scale or measure to determine what kind of gifts must be given in exchange to reciprocate the original gift. These gifts are subject to the prudential judgment of individuals. Making a good decision requires

guessing correctly when choosing a present for someone in a given situation so that the social bond that unites the giver and the receiver is realized and properly performed. Gift givers and receivers may err because the specific things that are appropriate for exchange are not fixed or determined in advance. There are traditional formats according to which gift exchanges are usually performed, but they are only expectations and not determinants of what individuals must or must not do (Hua *et al.* 2000). Reciprocity and proportionality are the criteria that help givers and recipients identify the limits between an ethically acceptable gift and a bribe depending on the particulars of the case. Therefore, if one does not manage a gift exchange properly, it may have a negative impact on social life. Confucianism illuminates these situations by pointing at the importance of understanding the rites (*li*) about when, where or how to give as well as turning to practical wisdom when rites are lacking or uncertain (Chen and Chao 2004; Hourdequin 2013).

When gift decisions are incorrect, by default or by excess (i.e. the gift is too poor given the relationship that unites the giver with the recipient or compared to the gifts received previously), it is common for people to ‘lose face’ (Monkhouse *et al.* 2013, 322). The feeling of shame that accompanies losing face is a sign of the ethical content that the gift exchange holds within the Confucian tradition.² From this ethical perspective, giving wisely and prudently is appropriate and even necessary to behave as a good friend, a good neighbour or a good citizen. Courtesy rules overlap with ethical obligations. As an ethical commitment to do the right thing, gift exchange acts as part of the good life of the individual and contributes to the maintenance and strengthening of harmony in social relations and to the tradition in which those social relations are embedded.

Thus far, we have argued that Confucius’ potential contribution to consumption ethics is distinct from that of other traditions because of its emphasis on social roles and rites, which convey the expression and cultivation of specific virtues such as politeness, modesty and gratitude and prevent greed, arrogance and flattery. With the example of gift exchange,

we have tried to show how, on occasion, rites structure ordinary consumption practices and how Confucianism identifies those rites as socially and ethically relevant.

In the last section, we conclude our argumentation by discussing how Confucianism contributes to a better understanding of the way in which consumption plays a part in moral self-cultivation.

V. CONSUMPTION AND SELF-CULTIVATION

Enacting rites with the appropriate spirit helps achieve the correct ‘what’, ‘when’ and ‘to whom’ as concerns consumption according to the particulars of the case, thereby avoiding excesses and errors. As Confucius holds (*Analects* 17.12), offering “presents of silks and gems” is not enough, as they should be given in an appropriate way (Schwartz 2009, 73). New rites foster ethical excellence insofar as participants carry them out in the appropriate spirit – namely, expressing and cultivating the virtues relevant to the relationship in question.

This centrality of virtues to moral development has led some scholars to categorize Confucianism as a virtue ethics, akin to Aristotelianism (Angle and Slote 2013; Koehn 2020; Van Norden 2007). Aristotelean ethics underlines the centrality of virtues to right action and the achievement of ethical excellence. Confucian ethics is also an ethics of excellence that values virtues highly. Both traditions are views on human flourishing seeking to inspire people to become better persons. Both describe a way of ethical education according to which, first, we need to learn from others what virtues require from those who inhabit positions and circumstances similar to ours. We then need to learn to extend that knowledge to other, different situations. Both traditions agree that this practical knowledge about how to judge and act appropriately does not consist of mechanical rule-following (Ames 2011; Kupperman 2010) but of ongoing ethical self-cultivation (Ivanhoe 2000). Both approaches, however, differ significantly (MacIntyre 1991; 2004). Aristotelianism understands ethical excellence as

a life lived according to virtue (NE 1098b20ff.). Confucianism also sees ethical excellence as the goal but understands it as the appropriate performance of one's roles within the family and the community (*Analects* 1.2; Ames 2011). We attain ethical excellence only in our roles and relations because “[...] our lives are radically contextualized, situated and relationally constituted” (Ames 2011, xv). Ethical life is possible only “[...] within particularistic personal ties” (Bell 2008, 76). Those obligations and the practices and norms associated with them are the primary guides to ethical life (Ivanhoe 2000). To be genuine, human flourishing must be rooted in familial roles and relations. Enacting these roles within the family affords individuals to transpose “[...] these developed ethical sensibilities to the larger community” (Ames and Rosemont 2016, 111).

For Confucius, living excellently in family and community “[...] requires the ongoing cultivation of an aesthetic, ethical and religious imagination that will enable one to pursue an optimal appropriateness in all that one does” (Ames 2011, 165). The rites offered by tradition may normatively guide this wisdom about what is appropriate. Therefore, the “[...] true nature of human morality cannot be properly cultivated and realized without appreciating rites” (Fan 2012, 149). As the *Analects* (15.18) put it, “[...] the gentleman regards righteousness as essential stuff and the rites are his means of putting it into effect”. In the Aristotelian tradition, virtues lead the person to an ethically good life. In contrast, in the Confucian tradition, social rites point the path towards excellence (Ames and Rosemont, 2016). The subtleties of gift exchange have allowed us to explore this difference.

On occasions, however, acting according to the appropriate rite is not straightforward. In the case of gift exchange, there is no clear definition of what counts as reciprocal, nor of when and how one should reciprocate a gift. Making a good decision requires not only understanding extant rites but also the cultivation of practical wisdom. Furthermore, many aspects of life are not covered by clearly identifiable rites, and distinguishing between ethical and unethical behaviour may be hard.

On those occasions, practical wisdom is required to bridge the gap from requirement to action. Like Aristotle, Confucius holds that the wise person becomes the rule. For Aristotelians, an action is good, right, or desirable to the extent that it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances (Hursthouse 1999). For Confucians, “[...] an act, attitude or character cultivation is good, right, obligatory or desirable to the extent that it is what a sage would do in the circumstances” (Kim 2014, 571). Discriminating on each occasion “[...] what is fitting or what is appropriate is the most important factor for being an excellent person” (Yu 2010, 291). The wise person is the one who can discern.

As in the case of gift exchange, both traditions consider consumption as an occasion for moral self-cultivation. From a Confucian perspective, consumption practices afford occasions to exercise civility and due respect through the enactment of appropriate rites. From an Aristotelian perspective, consumption provides opportunities to develop virtues (NE 1117b–1123a) and obtain access to those other practices that make up an ethically good life. Aristotle, however, did not acknowledge the moral relevance of civility, nor did he connect the ethicality of an action to the social rites to which it may be associated. For Aristotle, the formality of the rite plays no part in making an action appropriate for the agent or for their social context (MacIntyre 1991).

Aristotle understands virtue as the individual cultivation of the self, whereas the Confucian ideal of ethical excellence refers clearly to communal interaction, to a sense of community. People cultivate themselves to be truly good or humane through participation in social intercourse governed by proper social conventions. Dressing, for example, has its own ritual and ethical import. Confucius expressed his concern over what might happen to society if people began folding their robes to the left instead of to the right (*Analects* 14.17). While we may today deem this worry inordinate, the essential point of his teaching still seems current, as he is arguing for the need to wear proper attire in certain ritual contexts. Currently, most people accept the legitimacy of standards of attire in cases such as weddings and

funerals. Many also understand that, in general, certain ways of dressing are more appropriate in a given set of circumstances. For instance, we expect bankers or politicians to present themselves in public with a certain look and demeanour to convey a sense of trustworthiness and wisdom. We also tend to make judgments about character based on the attire of those we meet on a first date. Insisting on the ritual character of attire may seem to some as an attempt to cling to a bygone era in which formality took precedence over substance. However, from a Confucian point of view, the insistence would be far from meaningless because it would presuppose and reinforce a shared sense of what is locally appropriate. As Ivanhoe puts it, “[...] attire can be a way to express certain attitudes, and consciously expressing attitudes by wearing certain attire can contribute significantly to the formation of character” (2000, 7). Through an Aristotelian lens, dressing appropriately falls under the virtue of elegance. For Confucians, dressing properly would be a matter of respect and courtesy. In fact, for early Confucians, “[...] there is no sharp distinction between politeness and ethics” (Ames and Rosemont 2016, 117). The Confucian and Aristotelian perspectives, though different, seem clearly compatible.

The practice of consumption rites constitutes an integral part of the larger project of self-cultivation. Rites intend not only to elicit particular kinds of behaviour but also to instil in the practitioner certain sensibilities, attitudes and dispositions needed for a harmonious, meaningful and flourishing society. Confucius believed that apparently meaningless details of life contributed significantly to the cultivation of character and that one should enact them with this belief in mind. With practice comes a deeper and fuller understanding of rites and their meaning. Practicing rites played a central role in Confucius’ method of self-cultivation: they shaped the character of those who practiced them, expressed and further refined the virtue of those who knew them well and influenced those who participated in or observed a given ceremony (Ivanhoe, 2000). “Without the structuring and educative effects of *li*, *ren* (the highest ideal of personal excellence) could not be attained” (Schwartz 2009, 82).

The Confucian vision of human flourishing and ethical life are importantly different from Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* (Ames and Rosemont 2016, 110). However, both traditions offer resources to understand and promote consumption practices fostering an ethically good life and social harmony. Aristotelians have a good deal to learn from Confucians about the importance of rites and about the relationship between respect for ceremonial forms and the practices of virtues in general (MacIntyre 2004; Van Norden 2007). On their part, Confucians could learn from Aristotelians about “[...] the kind of justification that an ethics of excellence needs to supply” (MacIntyre 2004, 162) to circumvent the risk of parochialism (Ames 2011).

In our current consumer society, both virtues and rites may stand as guiding criteria, relevant normative orientations to bound a deceiving ‘consumer sovereignty’ justifying overconsumption and unsustainable consumption practices. Virtues and rites stand as good reasons to desire (or to not desire) consumer goods and are useful for discerning what is most appropriate on any given occasion for the pursuit of an ethically good life. In so doing, the Confucian tradition offers valuable ethical resources for a society in need of an enhanced consumer ethical system.

VI. CONCLUSION

What can classical Confucian philosophy contribute to the ethics of contemporary consumption? The extant consumer ethics literature has mainly focused on the consequences of overconsumption, the principles that should guide right consumption, and the virtues and vices that consumption practices foster or hinder in consumers. In this article, we have argued that Confucianism adds to the field a distinctive, relevant and timely theme to broaden academic conversation on consumer ethics. This theme is the centrality of social rites in moral self-cultivation. The consumer culture literature acknowledges that social rites are not alien to consumption practices. We argue that those rites play an important role not only in building,

maintaining and growing social ties (as consumer culture literature says) but also in manifesting and developing human flourishing (as Confucianism firmly holds). Confucianism brings to the fore the relevance for consumer ethics of topics such as respect, courtesy, gratitude, civility, and a vision of ordinary consumption practices as a context where care and attention to others may unfold. Certainly, the risks and perils of excessive control (Provis 2020) and parochialism (Ames 2011) are real, but the Confucian relational and aesthetic approach to moral excellence may both enrich the academic debate on consumer ethics and provide guidance not only to Chinese or East Asian consumers but also to people from other cultural backgrounds (Sigurdsson 2014) who strive to improve the ethical standards of their consumption patterns.

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NOTES

1 The term *ren* is used in Confucian texts either (i) narrowly, to refer to the particular quality that Western scholars tend to translate as 'benevolence' (*Analects* 9.29; 14.28) or (ii) more broadly, to denote an all-encompassing ethical ideal that includes all desirable qualities (*Analects*

14.4) (Shun 1993, 458). Ames and Rosemont describe this latter meaning of the term as “(shared) human flourishing” (2016, 113ff.). Here, we refer to this latter meaning of the term.

2 The integrative nature of the moral experience means that a socially responsive ‘sense of shame’ is of high value in Confucian culture. Shame is a powerful expression of moral awareness (*Analects* 2.3; Ames 2011, 172).

