

Is Self-Regulation a Burden or a Virtue? A Comparative Perspective[†]

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Abstract: Like all moral traditions, Confucianism demands that individuals conform their behavior to standards of virtuous conduct. The relevant standards in Confucianism are supplied by the strictures of ritual propriety (*li* 禮), a set of rules outlining how one should comport oneself in a vast array of life circumstances, including specific forms of speech, types of clothing, expressions and demeanor. Insofar as it requires learning and abiding by a large number of rules, observing ritual propriety can be seen as a significant imposition on one's life, demanding that one constantly monitor and regulate one's overt demeanor and behavior in all aspects of personal and private life. This requires *self-regulation*, a phenomenon that has been explored extensively in experimental psychology. Evidence suggests that efforts at self-regulation (of the kind demanded by the Confucian tradition) are doomed to fail because they exhaust a cognitive resource of limited supply; self-regulatory strength is finite and easily depleted. What's more, conscious attempts at self-regulation can lead to many undesirable consequences, such as social isolation and alienation. However, more recent empirical data also suggest that such effects are not inevitable, and that one's cultural background may be an important mediator of the costs of self-regulation. East Asians, in particular, seem to have greater overall self-regulatory strength. I offer some considerations as to why this may be so, and what insights it may afford to theories of virtue.

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It was during my second year of graduate studies at Duke University that I began thinking about the various burdens and impositions demanded by Confucian ethics. I was giving a ‘brownbag’ talk to my fellow PhD students about the concept of ritual propriety (*li* 禮) in the *Analects* of Confucius—referring to the strictures of proper behavior that permeate Confucian ethical concerns. Ritual propriety delineates how one should comport oneself (forms of speech, clothing, demeanor, etc.) in a vast array of life circumstances (family life, social life, formal ceremony, etc.). I argued that one of the chief functions of abiding by norms of ritual propriety was to signal one’s values, attitudes, and commitments to others in a clear and predictable fashion, allowing others to easily (even effortlessly) grasp them. This, in turn, would make it possible to coordinate one’s activities in social life with minimal friction. Such signals would be especially important, I argued, in strategic encounters, or exchanges in which conflict (especially moral conflict) was possible. Thus, while the weightiness of ritual propriety in the *Analects* might seem strange to us, I argued that, when properly understood, it was meant to advance valuable goals of social cohesion and harmony.

During the Q&A session that followed my presentation, a fellow PhD student from South Korea offered the following comment, which I now paraphrase from memory:

You can only see the good side of ritual propriety, but that’s because you don’t know what it’s like to live in a society that emphasizes it. Those rules and norms are just ways to force people to do things and accept certain restraints on their personal lives. They are tools to bully people around and force them to be compliant and respectful even when these attitudes are not merited. So I don’t think it’s a good thing at all.

This was discouraging. In my colleague’s experience growing up in South Korea, ritual propriety provided more burdens than benefits, and served to stifle one’s behavior and limit one’s scope of self-expression.

This started my reflections on the role of imposition in Confucian virtue ethics. What sorts of burdens does it place on individuals? What skills, strengths, and talents would one need to flourish with it? Are the burdens reasonable? What I offer in this paper are some thoughts about this issue, focusing on the Confucian notion of ritual propriety. I argue that the main burden of ritual propriety lies in demanding that individuals constantly monitor and regulate their overt behavior in social life. This requires *self-regulation*, which has been explored extensively in experimental psychology. Many studies suggest that efforts at self-regulation are doomed to fail because they deplete a cognitive resource of limited supply; hence, asking individuals to self-regulate may be a self-defeating proposition. Moreover, evidence suggests that individuals who consciously attempt to regulate their conduct in social life suffer many undesirable social consequences, such as social isolation and alienation. However, the empirical data are not as neat as a cursory glance might reveal. Emerging evidence suggests that difficulties arising from efforts at self-regulation are not inevitable, and that self-regulation need not be especially burdensome imposition. In the end, I suggest that there are many benefits that might balance out (or even outweigh) the costs exacted by an ethics that requires such self-regulation.

I

From our own perspective in a Western liberal democracy, Confucian ethics might seem burdensome because of two of its central features: filial piety and ritual propriety. The virtue of filial piety (or filiality, *xiao* 孝) is one of the most important in the Confucian canon (Hsieh 1967; Li 1997; Wong 2008), referring to a rich set of obligations and expectations that attend virtually all aspects of family life. For example, parents and elder siblings have obligations to nurture the younger members of the family who, in turn, must be devoted and obedient. As parents age their children must care for them out of love and gratitude for the care they have received. So far, so good. Yet parental care is just one of many filial obligations. Bearing offspring, for example, was thought to be a filial obligation; in Mencius 4A26 we are told that “among the three unfilial things, to have no posterity is the worst” (Van Norden, Mengzi, 100). Moreover, though children may remonstrate with their parents when appropriate, they must desist and obey without resentment should their

counsel falls on deaf ears (*Analects* 4.18).¹ Confucian ethics emphasizes that families are naturally hierarchical, requiring one to be subordinate to the elders in one's family. The parent/child dyad is perhaps the most salient, but in traditional Confucian morality all family members would be related in a strict hierarchical fashion: wives to husbands, children to parents, and younger siblings to elder siblings. Families thus prepare one to enter society with an understanding of oneself as a person nested within networks of hierarchical relationship dyads with attendant duties and obligations. (The sentiments expressed by my fellow grad student above in part reflect how such hierarchical relations extend to all aspects of social life.) No discussion of imposition in Confucian ethics could neglect to consider these aspects of filial piety. However, I will not focus on them in what follows. Many have argued that the extreme emphasis on filial duties and deference to social superiors are aspects of Confucianism that ought to be reformed or jettisoned; without mitigating these sources of imposition, Confucianism risks irrelevance to modern concerns (e.g. Hall and Ames 1989; Ivanhoe 2006; Liu 2003, 2007).² Instead, I will focus on the demands of ritual propriety (*li* 禮), another hallmark of Confucian ethics, and one about which Western philosophers seem far more sanguine (see, e.g. Fingarette 1972; Hall and Ames 1989; Wong 2000).

Ritual propriety refers to general norms governing appropriate behavior in social, familial and political stations. Paradigmatic examples of ritual propriety include norms governing religious rites such as ancestor worship, as well as formal ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, and visits to court. More generally, though, ritual propriety refers to the appropriate manners, customs, strictures, and protocols of social, political, and familial life. Ritual propriety would indicate, for example, appropriate dress for ceremonial occasions as well as appropriate conduct for a boss or a worker, a guest or a host. Insofar as it requires learning and abiding by a large number of rules, ritual propriety can seem an imposition on one's life. What's more, simple compliance with such rules was considered a mere starting point. Confucius recognized a wide gap between observing the norms of ritual propriety on the one hand, and acting virtuously on the other. The latter requires appropriate dispositional attitudes; there must be an appropriate emotional "presence" (3:12, 3:26), as emotional authenticity trumps procedural formality (3:4, 17:11). Further still, propriety must be observed effortlessly, naturally, and spontaneously; the virtuous exemplar will not appear "troubled" (9:28, 14:30). And finally, there is the matter of matching propriety to occasion, for which there is no algorithm. Knowing when to observe propriety—and, importantly, when not to—was requisite to the exercise of virtue. In all these ways, then, observing ritual propriety can be seen within the tradition as an imposition requisite to the realization of virtue.

Given these qualifiers, we can pose the following general form of imposition in Confucian ethics (which will be the focus of the remaining discussion): In any particular situation, one must regulate one's behavior out of consideration both to the general demands of ritual propriety that may apply in that situation (for example in one's role as a guest or host, senior or junior, kin or neighbor) as well as to the particular person(s) at hand and the way one is situated with regards to them. It requires a continual awareness of oneself in one's context, including how one's behavior and expressions might be perceived by one's audience. In other words, properly meeting the demands of ritual propriety—a central component of Confucian ethical practice—requires a continual process of self-monitoring. I call this the *general form* of imposition in Confucian virtue ethics, because it cuts across the various other types of demands that it has (for example, to be upright or filial or compassionate).

II

We find this emphasis on self-monitoring reflected clearly in many passages in the *Analects*. Consider, for example, the following:

¹ Controversially, both Confucius and Mencius maintain that, in at least some cases, filial morality requires one to favor one's family even when doing so necessitates concealing their misdeeds, such as criminal behavior (e.g. *Analects* 13.18; Mencius 5A3; 7A35).

² For an overview of recent work in this area, see Sarkissian (2010).

16.10 – Confucius said, “The gentleman focuses on nine things: when looking, he focuses on seeing clearly; when listening, he focuses on being discerning; in his countenance (*se* 色), he focuses on being amiable; in his demeanor (*mao* 貌), he focuses on being reverent; in his speech, he focuses on being dutiful; in his actions, he focuses on being respectful; when in doubt, he focuses on asking questions; when angry, he focuses on potential negative fallout; and when presented with the opportunity for profit, he focuses upon what is right.”

In this passage we have rather specific advice on how to properly conduct oneself in the company of others, and how to behave in ways commensurate with ritual propriety. Two things are paramount: proper *discernment* of one's situation and audience, and fine *awareness* of how one might be interpreted by others. I will consider each in turn.

Discernment: Discernment requires proper understanding of another's general mood, as well as any specific intentions or preoccupations the person might have—especially any that might be in place because of situational demands or constraints. Put another way, it requires an ability to *read minds*. To the extent that our emotional lives are transparent, this should not be too difficult a task; indeed Confucius directs attention to this transparency of emotions (1:3, 5:5, 5:10, 5:25, 6:16, and 8:4), and commands his disciples to remain attentive to related clues (2:10, 7:28, 9:24, 11:21, and 12:20). Hence, we are told that a moral exemplar “examines what is said, is a keen observer of others' demeanor, and thoughtful in deferring to others” (12:20). By ‘mind reading,’ then, I mean inferring motives, meanings, and intentions from words, gestures and expressions. Virtuous conduct and the demands of maintaining social harmony require constant fine-tuning of one's own behavior, and so mind reading is indispensable to realizing it.

Self-awareness: One must be conscientious of oneself as an actor in the social world. This explains why the *Analects* is a preoccupation with seemingly minute matters of conduct, such as one's posture, countenance, tone of voice, choice of words and attire, and overall comportment.³ Crucially, as we will see below, these aspects of one's visible person were thought to affect how *others* behave and thus how interpersonal situations unfold. A virtuous person must be aware of how they influence others' attitudes and behavior, and this in turn requires monitoring one's overt signals—such as one's expressiveness or demeanor (*rong* 容 / *mao* 貌), countenance (*yan* 顏 / *se* 色), and tone of voice (*ciqu* 辭氣).

A common reaction to such impositions is to consider them overly burdensome. Confucius himself seems to admit as much. Those aiming for virtue “must be strong and broad, for their burden is heavy and their course is long. They take being exemplary (*ren* 仁) as their task. Is this not heavy? They carry this burden until their dying day. Is this not long?” (8.7; see also 6.22). Much of this burden, I argue, consists in continual self-regulation and self-restraint—stifling, prolonging, or re-channeling one's personal impulses or desires out of consideration for those in one's company and the general norms of proper behavior that apply to the situation. Consider *Analects* 9.1:

Yan Yuan asked about being an exemplary person. The Master said 克己復禮—“Restrain yourself and turn back to observing ritual propriety.”

The reflexive pronoun *ji* 己 here refers to one's personal or private self—that is, one's private interests or desires. What one must overcome are precisely those private impulses, desires, and inclinations that one may naturally have out of respect for accepted norms of proper behavior.

³ Book ten of the *Analects*, for example, is devoted entirely to detailed observations of Confucius's overt behavioral mannerisms in various social contexts.

This can be suffocating. Early critics of Confucian ethics claimed that such subordinations to the interests of others and the demands of ‘proper behavior’ were just various forms of self-imprisonment, and hardly indicative of a person who had progressed in moral life.

This is not what I would call getting somewhere. If a man is caught in a place where he can't get out, is that what you think is getting somewhere? Then the pigeons and doves in a cage must be supposed to have got somewhere too. And to have such inclinations for (ritual) sounds and colors blocking you up from the inside, and leather cap or snipe feather hat, memorandum tablet in the belt and trailing sash [the accoutrements of a nobleman] constricting you from the outside; to be inwardly squeezed by the bars of your pen, outwardly lashed by coil upon coil of rope, and complacently in the middle of the ropes suppose that you have got somewhere, amounts to claiming that the condemned man with his chained arms and manacled figures, or a tiger or leopard in its cage, has got somewhere too. Whoever subordinates his true nature in order to be ‘exemplary’ (*ren*) and ‘right’ (*yi*)... is not what I would call a fine man (Graham 1981, slightly modified).

In this memorable passage of the *Zhuangzi* (a Daoist text compiled not long after the *Analects*), regulating oneself and stifling one’s natural inclinations and desires to what is ritually proper is likened to incarceration; endorsing such behavior is treated as a form of self-delusion. If conventional norms of propriety are simply artificial constraints on one’s individuality—if they only serve to limit one’s exercise of individualism—then there seems little good reason to abide by them.

III

That Confucian ethics places great and weighty impositions on individuals by demanding self-regulation is clear. And if we examine what costs are exacted by such self-regulation, the literature in experimental psychology seems to give us little reason to doubt this assessment. According to this literature, prolonged or serial attempts at self-control often fail owing to something called “ego depletion,” which refers to a general state of cognitive fatigue that results from such efforts (Muraven and Baumeister 2000; Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister 1998). Self-regulation is an important human capability, crucial to fulfilling any goal-directed behavior and for fulfilling any number of individual needs, and manifests itself in such behaviors as resisting impulses and delaying gratification. It can be understood as any effort to channel, guide, reshape, or override basic behavioral tendencies, habits, emotions, and automatic reactions. Colloquially, it can be characterized as willpower (Baumeister and Tierney 2011). It has, therefore, been studied extensively.

The results of several research programs indicate that, perhaps unsurprisingly, individuals seem to have a finite supply of self-regulatory resources which can be depleted by any task requiring controlled, willful behavior (such as adhering to norms of proper behavior). The result is that if one is then faced with subsequent tasks also requiring self-regulation, one’s performance on these tasks will be poor, perhaps even disastrous. In the standard ego depletion paradigm, participants are asked to perform a task intended to exhaust some of their self-regulatory resources. For example, subjects are asked to view a disturbing video clip while making sure to inhibit their emotional responses, or asked to persist at a frustrating or demanding paper and pencil task, or (perhaps most sadistically) to avoid eating a tasty treat that is placed in front of them in the experimenter’s room. Upon completion of this initial task, participants are asked to perform another, unrelated task also requiring self-regulation—for example, solving a challenging puzzle. The routine result is that subjects’ performance on these latter tasks is markedly worse than control groups (Muraven and Baumeister 2000; Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister 1998). (This finding is confirmed by everyday experience, such as the eating binge that frequently follows the end of a diet; after exerting willpower over a long period of time and resisting urges to eat foods one desires, one ends up in a state of overall regulatory weakness.)

Indeed, there are many potentially negative consequences of depleting one’s self-regulatory resources. The literature on emotional self-regulation in Western (mostly American) society suggests that frequent suppression of emotions in one’s daily life is correlated with many undesirable consequences, such as isolation from one’s social group, lower levels of social support, lower ratings of likeability, a decrease in successful interpersonal coordination, and greater emotional distance (Butler et al. 2003; Gross and John

2003). Even during one-off interactions, suppressing one's natural emotions tends to distract one's attention away from other individuals present, leading to decreased responsiveness to their words and actions. This (inadvertently) signals to others a lack of interest or concern—perhaps even hostility—causing them to withdraw in turn, reduce their overall friendliness, and making them unwilling to continue the interaction (Butler, Lee, and Gross 2007). Such experiments suggest that there are high costs to pay for self-regulation. Of course, there are doubtlessly costs to pay for refusing to self-regulate as well; *some* form of self-restraint is necessary for social existence to be possible at all. Nonetheless, to the extent that meeting the ideals of Confucian ethical conduct requires a continual process of self-monitoring and self-regulation, one might wonder whether it is a good thing to do—especially with regards to one's overall psychological health.

Here, however, it is important to note that one's culture is an important moderator of the development of self-regulatory resources (see, e.g. Trommsdorff 2009). Individuals in Western liberal democracies are comparatively lax in imposing norms of self-regulation in everyday exchanges. It is not that we in the West don't value self-regulation, but rather that we have values of freedom of self-expression that are weighty and tend to trump norms requiring such conformity to rules of good behavior. Suppression of emotional response normally occurs in a defensive context, to protect oneself when one feels a lack of trust in one's company (Butler, Lee, and Gross 2007). East Asians—that is, members of collectivist societies committed to observing norms of ritual propriety—engage in self-regulation in a much *broader range* of social situations and with greater overall *frequency*.⁴ Thus, one might think that the costs accrued to individuals in these societies are proportionally greater.

In fact, the evidence suggests otherwise. East Asians show far less of these deleterious consequences: they are less likely to be distracted by efforts at self-regulation, to withdraw from others, and to create unfriendly or hostile environments (Butler, Lee, and Gross 2007). More generally, East Asians seem to have higher reserves of self-regulatory strength, showing little evidence of ego-depletion in a number of paradigmatic experiments. For example, in one study, Seeley and Gardner (2003) invited participants of Western and East Asian backgrounds to participate in a study on self-regulation. During the first phase of the study, subjects were given a standard ego-depletion task—namely, they were asked to think of a white bear, and then to suppress any thoughts of white bears. (This requires self-regulation.) A control group was instructed to think about whatever they liked. Over the next five minutes, all subjects were instructed to speak out loud freely into a tape recorder, and to knock on their cubicle wall whenever they happened to think of a white bear. This was the self-depletion task. Next, they were then asked to squeeze a handgrip exerciser. Those in the control group (whether East Asian or Western) performed similarly in the handgrip test. However, those in the manipulation group—namely, those who were asked to think-and-then-not-think of white bears—showed a significant difference based on cultural background; whereas Westerners performed worse than average, East Asians performed better).

While more work needs to be done in this area, experimental evidence suggests that East Asians, who engage in self-regulation regularly, suffer comparatively little costs in doing so. This suggests that it is a resource that can be strengthened over time (e.g. Muraven and Baumeister 2000; Muraven, Baumeister, and Tice 1999). Another possibility is that East Asians take a different attitude toward self-regulation itself. From one perspective, demands to regulate oneself in social contexts might seem like an undesirable imposition. Yet in societies that place comparatively greater weight on it, self-regulation is seen in a different light. For example, in a review of the literature on emotional expression in Chinese culture, Michael Bond (1993) argues that individuals in Chinese cultures such as Hong Kong are particularly adept at adjusting their emotional expressions and responses as a function of their audience). Given that one's actions always affect others in some way, special attention is paid not to disrupt interpersonal harmony. Self-regulation not only serves to comfort others, but also to improve one's own immediate environment and thus, indirectly, one's *own* levels of comfort and ease. According to this way of looking at self-regulation,

⁴ I should note that this comparative claim does not apply to situations such as watching a movie, where one is not the focus of anyone's attention. In these types of situations, there is no difference in overall expressiveness between East Asian and Western subjects, and no tendency toward suppression among East Asians (see, e.g. Tsai, Levenson, and Cartensen 2000).

... one can be serving oneself as one serves others. In fact, many Chinese report that a moderate emotional demeanor promotes harmony by giving others space to express themselves more easily. One restrains oneself so as not to impose on others, thereby allowing the relationship to develop more mutually--not out of an expressive House of Commons, but as two streams slowly merging. By restraining oneself out of consideration for others, one protects one's internal balance from strong responses that reciprocation from one's partner may induce (Bond 1993, 256).

Here, we are reminded of two important passages in the *Analects*.

14.42 – Zilu asked about the gentleman. The Master said, “He cultivates himself in order to be respectful.” “Is that all?” “He cultivates himself in order to comfort others.” “Is that all?” “He cultivates himself in order to comfort all people.”

1.12 – Of the things brought about through the practice of ritual propriety, [social] harmony is the most valuable. Of the ways of the former Sage Kings, this is the most beautiful.

Being virtuous on this conception involves being considerate of how one may be affecting others in one's context, allowing them to express themselves freely and comfortably without feeling the need to exercise self-restraint. Put another way, the imposition of self-restraint is done so as to relieve others of the imposition of self-restraint.

IV

Indeed, according to the *Analects*, self-regulation also allows one to exercise effective moral power, shaping situations and channeling the trajectory of one's interactions with others toward morally laudable goals by eliciting favorable attitudes and responses from other people. Master Zeng, a disciple of Confucius, expresses such thoughts to his own students on his deathbed:

8.4 – There are three things in our *dao* [teaching] that a nobleman values most: by altering his demeanor (容貌) he avoids violence and arrogance; by rectifying his countenance (顏色) he welcomes trustworthiness; through his words and tone of voice (辭氣) he avoids vulgarity and impropriety.⁵

The nobleman changes others by regulating himself. In general, the message seems to be the following: as one becomes aware of oneself as a source of influence on one's immediate situations, this allows one to begin affecting the trajectories of one's interactions toward morally desirable outcomes. This ability to shape situations and influence others through non-coercive self-regulation can help us understand the concept of *de* (德), referring to moral power or moral charisma. Individuals who regulate themselves and attend to the aesthetics of their conduct out of consideration of others were seen to have a power of effecting significant changes in others; at the limit, others would be literally ‘transformed’ by their presence.

12.19 – The power (*de* 德) of a gentleman is like the wind, the power (*de* 德) of a petty person is like the grass—when the wind moves over the grass, the grass is sure to bend.

9.14 – The Master [Confucius] expressed a desire to go and live among the Nine Yi Barbarian tribes. Someone asked him, “How could you bear with their uncouthness?” The Master replied, “If a nobleman were to dwell among them, what uncouthness would there be?”

⁵ In some recent work, Nancy Sherman has emphasized the importance of such factors in early Stoic ethics. See, for example, Sherman (2005) and Sherman (2007), chapter three.

These claims might seem like hyperbole, but small changes to one's own conduct and signals can have profound impact on the behavior of others. In fact, many such effects have been measured.⁶ For example, highly expressive individuals are able to affect the moods of others even in the absence of verbal communication—by just being in their presence (a very *de*-like quality) (Friedman et al. 1980).⁷ Slight changes in verbal cues can also shape behavior in significant ways. For example, verbal tone can sometimes outstrip verbal content in affecting how others interpret verbal expressions (Argyle, Alkema, and Gilmour 1971); a slightly negative tone of voice can significantly shift how others judge the friendliness of one's statements, even when the content of those statements are judged as polite (Laplante and Ambady 2003). In game theoretic situations with real financial stakes, smiling can positively affect levels of trust among strangers, leading to increased cooperation (Scharlemann et al. 2001). Other subtle cues, such as winks and handshakes, can enable individuals to trust one another and coordinate their efforts to maximize payoffs while pursuing riskier strategies (Manzini, Sadrieh, and Vriend 2009). All of these are plausible instances of self-regulation and analogous to the kinds of subtle behavioral cues that are the focus of the *Analects*, where they are characterized as being important sources of moral power.

In sum, one's choice of words, emotional expressions, mannerisms, tone of voice, posture—each of these variables can trigger behavior patterns in others, to which we respond in kind, in a continual process of impact and adjustment. Consider again *Analects* 9.1, above:

Yan Yuan asked about being an exemplary person. The Master said 克己復禮—“Restrain yourself and turn back to observing ritual propriety.”

The passage continues: “If for the span of a single day you are able to restrain yourself and turn back to observing ritual propriety, everyone else would become exemplary too.” Engaging in self-regulation may seem like an imposition on one's freedom to express oneself, yet when done skillfully its effects on others would make it more likely that any and all situations one entered would be amenable to agreeable outcomes. By proactively introducing signals that foster an environment amenable to cooperation, one can enhance the probabilities of positive outcomes emerging, making the impositions of Confucian ethics potentially rewarding. Self-regulation is conceived within the tradition itself as a potent source of virtue.

V

Finally, it is important to qualify in what ways and to what extent observing ritual propriety is an imposition. First, it is not clear that one needs to self-regulate in each and every interpersonal interaction. Demands for self-regulation will be most acute in a couple of situation types. One such situation type is when one is in the company of unfamiliar individuals; the less familiar the audience, the more important such self-regulatory management (Bond 1993). Initial forms of greeting and address, preliminary remarks, and other initial moves have disproportionately strong influence on our cognitions of one another. Moreover, there is a pronounced asymmetry between the impact of negative impressions and positive ones (Fiske 1980). We are quicker to form and recall negative impressions, and are also more likely to do so. We also tend to be more certain about our negative assessments of others (Carlston 1980), take less time to arrive at them (Lingle & Ostrom 1979), and require less information to be convinced of them (Yzerbyt & Leyens 1991) relative to positive impressions. Finally, once a negative character evaluation is made, we tend to seal it away from revision or interference (Ybarra 2001). Given these facts, carefully observing norms of self-regulation at the outset of new relationships can be understood as perhaps being meant to mitigate or stave off such undesirable consequences.

⁶ See also Sarkissian (2010).

⁷ This is in line with the literature on emotional contagion. Hatfield, Cacioppo and Rapson (1994) outline a three stage process on how this proceeds: 1) people automatically and continuously mimic others in interpersonal contexts, synchronizing facial expressions, mannerisms, tone of voice, posture, etc., 2) such mimicry elicits the relevant emotional states in the individuals at hand through a feedback mechanism and 3) emotions are thereby transmitted and ‘caught’ by other individuals.

Another situation type is when one is the main focus of an entire group's attention. Here, the importance of self-regulation is heightened in proportion to the greater impact one can have on others through their shared focus. Self-regulation in such situations requires that one conceive of oneself from the audience's point of view and to regulate oneself in ways that will meet or satisfy their expectations. Indeed, individuals in East Asian societies that emphasize self-regulation have different types of memories depending on whether or not they are the focus of attention: when they are, they remember the experience or episode more from a third-person perspective than a first-person perspective (Cohen & Gunz 2002). (Westerners show no such tendency to adopt external, third-person perspectives on themselves when the focus of attention.)

Finally, whether or not self-regulation will be seen as an unwelcome imposition will hinge greatly upon the individuals for whom one is self-regulating. It may be very difficult to self-regulate for individuals one finds undeserving of such constraints. However, this need not always be the case. If others themselves self-regulate, then complying should be rather easy, perhaps even effortless. One way to think of the ways in which self-regulation can be seen as a multi-person project is through the notion of *mutual ethical bootstrapping* (Sarkissian 2010). By being mindful of the ways one's own behavior might impinge upon another, we can prompt or lift one another toward our joint moral ends. Whether any individual will be able to meet her ethical aims on any particular occasion will hinge on the actions and manners of others in her presence, which in turn will hinge on her own, in a common, reciprocal environment. Regulating oneself affects how others react, and thereby the kinds of reactions an individual faces in turn. The bootstrapping is mutual.

VI

I began by noting that there is an important question to ask when assessing the viability of any particular ethical system—namely, what particular impositions and burdens does it place upon individuals? I have argued that the general form of imposition in Confucian ethics consists of self-regulation out of consideration of others and social harmony. Self-regulation requires an ability to carefully discern others' expectations and intentions and to control and channel one's own signals and expressions. Within the tradition, this type of imposition is thought to be requisite to maintaining harmonious relationships. While burdensome, such impositions also represent pathways to improve oneself and one's moral environment, allowing one to exercise a certain kind of moral power.

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