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ANDREW LAMBERT*

FROM AESTHETICS TO ETHICS:
THE PLACE OF DELIGHT IN CONFUCIAN ETHICS

ABSTRACT

An exploration of the role of pleasure or delight (*le*樂) in classical Confucian ethics. Building on Michael Nylan's account of the role of pleasure in public spectacle and social order, I explore how the meaning of delight (*le*樂) derives from the features and effects of music (*yue*樂). Drawing on Dewey's aesthetics and accounts of music in Confucian texts, I explore a conception of Confucian ethics, in which delight—like states generated through everyday social interaction are foundational.

*The loving relationship with wife and children,
Is like the strumming of the zither and the lute;
In the harmonious relationship between older and younger brothers
There is an abundance of enjoyment and pleasure.
Be appropriate in your house and home
And bring joy to your wife and progeny.*

—*Book of Songs*, Ode 164

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the relationship between the ethical and the aesthetic, through a discussion of the role of delight in early Confucian thought. It explores how a conception of ethical conduct can be derived from the elevated interest in music and delight-like states found in the early texts.

This approach is motivated by several considerations. It builds on Henry Rosemont's insight that the cluster of concepts in these texts pertaining to ethical or practical matters is

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markedly different from those in conventional Anglophone ethics. The latter treats as foundational ideas such as “freedom” “objective/subjective” “rights” “reason” and “dilemma”;¹ these are conspicuously absent in the foundational Confucian text, the *Analects* 《論語》. Discourse about personal conduct in this and other early Confucian texts draws on different conceptual, including terms such as humaneness (*ren* 仁), ritual (*li* 禮) and appropriateness (*yi* 義). Some scholars have woven these concepts together into, for example, a version of virtue ethics or, in the case of Rosemont and Roger Ames, a theoretical framework that is putatively idiosyncratic to the early Confucians—role ethics.² In the same spirit of ethical theorizing, I wish to explore a further conception of good action, based on the aesthetic discourse and aesthetic sensibility so prominent in the *Analects*. This is one conception of ethics, among several, that appears in rudimentary form in the texts. Exploring it will advance debate—both within and beyond classical Confucian thought—about what can or should be recognized as ethical action.³ At the same time, familiar ideas such as exemplary person (*junzi* 君子), potency or charisma (*de* 德) and humaneness (*ren* 仁) are provided with alternative interpretations.

This approach is consistent with historical claims that the classical Confucian tradition is an aesthetic tradition. Xu Fuguan 徐復觀 (1904-1982), for example, noted that, historically, aesthetic vocabulary applied in the realms of music, art, and painting evolved into descriptions of the characteristics of outstanding men.⁴ Others have emphasized the aesthetic qualities that characterize the Chinese humanistic tradition as a whole. Zong Baihua 宗白華 (1897-1986) developed “*shengming meixue* 生命美學” or “life aesthetics,” which emphasized an aesthetic attitude towards life and the cosmos.⁵ Similarly, Li Zehou 李澤厚 (b.1930) narrates the evolution of a tradition that recognizes beauty as the highest value.⁶ Deriving a conception of ethics from aesthetics extends this intellectual lineage.⁷ The pursuit of aesthetic goods as an ethical goal or

aim of conduct, and the Confucian interest in musicality, are thus rooted in a socio-cultural tradition, a form of life. As discussed below, this includes large-scale public ceremony, and the personal attachments of clan-based hierarchical societies.⁸ In turn, the enjoyment of aesthetic goods justifies the demandingness of ritual and social roles—the costs of compliance being offset by their instrumental role in generating shared delight. As the traditional view states, ritual compels while music rewards.⁹

A third motivation for this approach is that early Confucian discourse about delight (*le*樂) can be enriched by utilizing John Dewey's conception of the aesthetic, developed in *Art as Experience*. Aesthetics is often treated as an investigation of the way in which things appear to the senses. But Dewey focuses not only on sensations but also on the structure and qualities that characterize conscious experience. Dewey distinguishes between two kinds of experience: “mere experience” and “an experience.”¹⁰ Mere experience is “inchoate” and fragmented, subject to “distraction and dispersal,” with attention scattered and focus minimal. In contrast, “an experience” describes those episodes of experience that are qualitatively different from mere experience; they are meaningful, self-contained and unified. These elevated or qualitatively distinct experiences are characterized by aesthetic qualities such as harmony, intensity, satisfaction, rhythm, completeness, and consummation.¹¹ These qualities permeate experience, and are also their own reward; they constitute delight. The achievement of such qualitatively distinguished experiences can function as a meaningful aim of conduct.

Dewey's account of aesthetic experience explains the extensive Confucian interest in delight. Specifically, Deweyan theory explains the conceptual overlap between delight and music in early Confucian thought: the ideal qualities or “delightful” experiences associated with music are similar to the qualities Dewey equates with qualitative higher experience: completeness,

unity, ease, flow and so on. This conceptual pathway suggests that the creation of such delight can be a guiding ideal for conduct, an ethics. Such delight—characterized as the quality of experience attained among participants through social engagement—is an end at which Confucian practice aims.¹² In the conclusion, I offer a few thoughts on how this conception of the good life might offer an alternative to the dominant model of liberal individualism, with its emphasis on the prudent realization of substantial private life goals.

In his recent book, Peimin Ni argued that in the *Analects*, the aesthetic is as important as the moral, and that the aesthetically pleasing becomes the morally commanding.¹³ Here, “aesthetic” means that the good life is an artistic life, characterized by praxis and intuitive judgment. While sympathetic to Ni’s general position, here I focus narrowly on how the aesthetic discourse in early Confucian thought can direct practical conduct and social interaction. I focus mainly on the character 樂 (*le* pleasure/delight, *yue* music) and treat this as an umbrella term for a cluster of aesthetic qualities with practical implications. While “pleasure” and “delight” overlap, I distinguish between them, with delight indicating a more complex psychological state or experience.¹⁴ In what follows, I use “delight-like states” to capture the complex nature of such delight, as a range of related feelings or experiences and, unlike crude pleasure, not a single feeling or phenomenological experience. The composite qualities or experiences might include: a sense of ease, a feeling of accord, consummation, rhythm, and so on. Distinguishing between them (i.e., narrowly defining “delight”) is not important since the goal is the more general point of how conscious experience can attain a certain satisfying structure or order, which can be described in aesthetic terms and treated as an aim of conduct. In the classical Confucian corpus, “*le* 樂” is indicative of such complex and desirable states. Finally, a key context for the creation of delight-like states is, I argue, social interaction. In the *Analects*, it is in the human world—i.e.,

everyday relations between people—that such meaningful and fulfilling experiences are most reliably produced.

Articulating this connection between delight-like states and good conduct requires several steps. First, to show the importance of pleasure/delight to good conduct and the good life; second, how personal cultivation and the idealized qualities of the *junzi* can be characterized as aesthetic, and instrumental to the creation of delight; and third, developing the second point, how the creation of delight-like states is analogous to the production and effects of music and musical harmony. Collectively, these suggest that delight-like states arise in the social world through the skilled coordination, much like musicians combine the elements of music to generate the aesthetic goods of music.

II. PLEASURE AND DELIGHT IN CLASSICAL CONFUCIAN THOUGHT

The importance of “*le* 樂” in the early Confucian texts can be shown in at least two ways: through a textual study of the character, and through a social or ethical theory in which *le* is central. Consider the first of these. Confucian ethical discourse is often associated with human nature. Yet the *Analects* has far less to say about human nature than music and delight. In fact, the prevalence of terms in classical texts relating to delight-like states is striking. This includes: to love/cherish (*ai* 愛), to savor (*xiang* 饗), happiness (*kuai* 快), liking (*huan* 歡), to be fond of (*hao* 好), contentment (*an* 安) and ease (*yi* 逸). In the earliest lexicon, the *Erya* 《爾雅》, the first chapter provides a gloss on “樂 *le/yao*”:

Pleasure or joy (*yi* 怡), to be pleased or glad (*yi* 懌), to delight at (*yue* 悅), happy or joyous (*xin* 欣), to give pleasure (*kan* 衍), to enjoy (*xi* 喜), to be pleased by (*yu* 愉),

relaxed or at ease (*yu/xu* 豫), contented or joyful (*kai* 愷), peaceful or happy (*kang* 康), pleasure (*dan* 耽) and delight (*ban* 般): these are delight-like states (*le* 樂).¹⁵

Here is a concept cluster of the kind Rosemont described above, anchored in and contributing meaning to the more common term “*le* 樂”, and collectively described as “delight-like states.”¹⁶

Notably, interest in delight/pleasure is a cross-school phenomenon in the Warring states, and not merely Confucian.¹⁷

Delight-like states are not merely prevalent in the texts, however; they are also often *practically important*. They often function as an ideal, a state to be realized or achieved, or a necessary condition of power or influence (*de* 德); furthermore, delight often stands at or near the top of hierarchies of moral ends or stages of self cultivation. *Analects* 6:20 formulates such a hierarchy, and delight takes priority: “To like something (*hao* 好) is better than to understand it, and to delight in it (*yao* 樂) is better than to like it.” Similarly, in the *Xunzi* 《荀子》 the success of ritual is construed as: “[All rituals] begins with coarseness, are brought to completion through good form, and end with pleasure and satisfaction.”¹⁸ In the *Wuxingpian* 《五行篇》 also, although not one of the five cardinal virtues, delight is repeatedly cited as necessary for potency or moral force (*de* 德). For example:

If a *junzi*'s inner heart lacks concern (*you* 優), then it will lack wisdom (*zhi* 智). If it lacks wisdom, it will lack joy (*yue* 悅). If it lacks joy, he will not be at ease (*an* 安). Not being at ease he will lack delight (*le* 樂) and without delight he will lack potency.¹⁹

The *junzi* or cultivated person is often characterized as “beautiful” or appealing to others, further highlighting the aesthetic qualities that cultivation generates.²⁰ Further textual examples of both the prevalence and importance “*le* 樂” appear below. However, since my primary aim is a

speculative reconstruction of the relationship between delight-like states and ethical conduct, I focus on the second way of arguing for importance of delight-like states—by locating them within social and ethical theory.

III. NYLAN ON PLEASURE AND GOOD CONDUCT:

SPECTACLE BRINGS SOCIAL UNITY

One of few scholars to highlight the importance of delight/pleasure in classical Confucian thought is Michael Nylan. She theorizes how “*le* 樂”—which she translates as pleasure²¹—functioned in social theories up to the Han Dynasty.²² Nylan argues that a central concern of the time was: “how to convert the *consuming pleasures* [of rulers]—pleasures that by definition required vast expenditures of wealth, time, and physical energy—into *sustaining pleasures* that would support rather than corrupt the state, the family, or the person.”²³ Consuming pleasures included “massive palaces, terraces, or parks; fine horses and dogs; lovely women;...exquisite foods and wines; captivating music; fine rhetoric,” and these were could be summarized as the pleasures of “sensual gratification” or “feelings of pride of ownership.”²⁴ Such pleasures could be harmful, however. They could diminish individual pleasure in the long term, undermine the ruler’s position, and ultimately endanger the state. Sustaining pleasures were preferable, and involved the ability to “discern the long-term utility...and value of things, circumstances and people.”²⁵ In short, according to Nylan, the classical Confucian thinkers distinguished between better and worse kinds of pleasure, and their effects on both ruler and state.

Nylan also locates the discourse on pleasure within a wider historical context: breakdown of the centralized authority of the Zhou dynasty. The key method of securing order and power had deteriorated: royal sacrifices in which the sacrificial meats and ceremonial tripods were distributed among vassal state rulers. These reproduced personal allegiances to the emperor in

material form. The problem arose of how to instill allegiance among vast new populations not inclined by hereditary ties or custom to uphold the interests of the central court.²⁶ As traditional social structure, in which court ritual reinforced social hierarchy, broke down, new ways to generate solidarity and authority were required. This led to “a different model of sociability and reward,” in which pleasure was the dominant value.²⁷ Nylan describes the new grounds for solidarity and rulership as the emergence of a “display culture”—ceremonies and events in which pleasure was shared through the medium of “public spectacle”:

The intended result was to generate in as many people as possible the distinctly pleasurable sense that they shared in the great honor bestowed by the edifying public or semi-public spectacle, even when they were excluded from direct participation and its tangible rewards, including the distribution of largesse by the ruler, community conferrals of honors upon the aged, village banquets, and mourning processions. Only such edifying spectacles, it was thought, could in effect grant suitably scaled pleasures to people of widely ranging standings and ranks, while highlighting the awesome authority accorded the ruler as giver of spectacles.²⁸

Such spectacle gratified the senses, and the human need for symbolic meaning, status, and security.²⁹ Being honored, the thrill of attendance, the pride of membership, and the peace of mind in belonging to a powerful state: all are pleasurable. The displays “justified” the lifestyle of the ruling elite, while manifesting generosity and fairness towards commoners and consolidating the ruler’s authority. Public spectacle thus both satisfied every social strata’s need for pleasure.

Nylan’s account focuses on one kind of delight-like state: a *naturalistic theory of pleasure*. Here, pleasure originates in naturally occurring desires, aroused through the contact of the senses with external objects. Desire is directed at things such as sex, food, material

possessions, and military conquest.³⁰ The desire for such pleasures is part of human nature. The task, well documented in the *Xunzi*, is to manage desires that cause unhappiness and conflict, to train them. For example, prudence—deferring short-term pleasures for more satisfying pleasures in the longer term—becomes important. Similarly, the natural desire for wealth should be cultivated so that the wealth pursued benefits the people: the king should share his parks with the people.³¹

However, pre-Qin Confucian approaches to delight are more varied than Nylan's account recognizes. There are other ways of conceptualizing pleasure or delight, some not reliant on desire-based theories. Consider the figure of Yan Hui in the *Analects*.

The Master said, “What a worthy man was Yan Hui! Living in a narrow alley, subsisting on a basket of grain and gourd full of water—other people could not have born such hardship, yet it never spoiled Hui's joy (*le* 樂). What a worthy man was Hui!”³²

Delight has little to do with desire here. It indicates the attainment of an ideal state of character and mind, aligned with the Confucian way, and no longer emotionally susceptible to material hardships. Neo-Confucians such as Cheng Hao read this as someone who accepted all of life's situations with equipoise, without self-centered desires, and who was integrated into the wider cosmic order (*tian* 天).³³ In such a state, joy arises in the heart-mind. This is independent of natural desires for possessions and status, or the practical goals of the ruler. Indeed, Yong Huang argues that the Cheng brothers see such joy as central to moral conduct, “because it is a joy to perform moral actions.”³⁴ Here, joy motivates moral conduct by providing this inner reward.³⁵

Yan Hui's joy highlights the different Confucian perspectives on delight-like states, and their differing relationships to moral conduct. Thus, while Nylan's account makes clear the

importance of delight-like states to early Confucians, her account of pleasure is quite narrow. We can consider other sources of delight-like states in the texts, beyond desire, and how these inform conceptions of human flourishing and good conduct. What follows is such an alternative account.

IV. DELIGHT: CREATED BY EXEMPLARY

PERSONS THROUGH SOCIAL INTERACTION

This alternative conception builds on Nylan's insight: that *shared social events* are integral to the generation of delight-like states. In Nylan's account, participation in public spectacle gives rise to pleasure, and so to human flourishing (well-regulated desire) and the good society (social cohesion). In the alternative account, the significance of social interaction is understood differently; it gives rise to a different kind of delight. Drawing on Dewey's notion of "an experience," well-coordinated social interaction generates certain kinds of inner experiences among participants, characterized by aesthetic properties such as completeness, satisfaction and a sense of ease. For example, participants in a ritual act with a sense of purpose, successfully complete their intended actions, attain a sense of accomplishment, and enjoy the ceremony as a whole. Such experiences or delight-like states have a complexity or composite nature that natural desire lacks, and when conscious experience attains such forms or qualities it is intrinsically satisfying. Furthermore, such aesthetic goods can also be attributed more broadly, to the shape of a life as a whole.³⁶ A life that consists of serial well-ordered, subjectively satisfying social interactions—manifested in the accompanying mental or psychological experiences—can be considered to have balance, completeness and be well-formed. This is also a kind of human flourishing.

Can the early Confucian texts such as the *Analects* be read as valuing such delight-like states? I believe they can. This is consistent with key Confucian themes, especially the emphasis on exemplars and models. In what follows, I argue that the refined sensibility of the cultivated person or *junzi* be understood aesthetically; and one of the tasks of such exemplars is to skilfully work with the features and resources present in social interactions to produce delight-like states in the experiences of participants. Furthermore, the linkage between “*le* 樂” and “*yue* 樂,” or delight and music, suggests mechanisms for how such aesthetic experiences are created. Coordinating social interaction is similar to the creation of musical harmony.

4.1 The Social Context: From Formal Ceremony to Everyday Social Life

The creation of delightful episodes of experience is also rooted in the Confucian faith in a shared cultural tradition. This bequeaths a rich social grammar—a common storehouse of individual units of social expression, such as words, actions, motifs or objects used selectively in varied social situations—which provides much of the material from which such delightful experience is crafted. Here, too, we can build on Nylan’s insight. Grand formal ceremony and pleasurable spectacle serve as a foundational model for conduct. With the decline of the central Zhou authority, however, and the (limited) spread of education, people’s lives outside the royal court became more significant. Personal cultivation became a more generalized ethical ideal (“the noble man”) and not merely a means of rulership (“the nobleman”). The *Analects* conveys this extension in the readiness to teach anyone sufficiently committed to learning. Along with such social change, so the social context or framework within which delight-like states arise evolves. Arguably, the focus shifts, from formal ceremony of the Zhou, to more general ritual norms and roles, and even to more common social settings and everyday interactions. The

realization of delight-like states in these less-scripted interactions (though still often guided by some ritual or convention) is a task primarily undertaken by charismatic exemplars.

This shift in social context can be detected in the texts. The increased focus on everyday social affairs (alongside the cosmic dimension) and on affective states therein is highlighted by the *Doctrine of the Mean* 《中庸》: “The Master said: Focusing the familiar affairs of the day is a task of the highest order. It is rare among the common people to be able to sustain it for long.”³⁷ Delight is not mentioned here, but it is clear from the opening passage that the emotions—including joy (*xi* 喜) and delight (*le* 樂)—are central to conscious action, such that bringing them into harmony and “proper focus” enables the exemplary person to successfully respond to “the familiar affairs of the day.” Such harmonious balancing in the context of social interaction is integral to “the advancing of the proper way in the world.”³⁸

Delight-like states also become important within family and kinship relations. *The Classic of Family Reverence* 《孝經》 describes the filial model ruler: “He speaks, having thought whether the words should be spoken; he acts, having thought whether his actions are sure to give pleasure”³⁹ “In his general conduct to them, he manifests the utmost reverence. In his nourishing of them, his endeavor is to give them the utmost pleasure.”⁴⁰ Although this is a later text prescribing behaviour for a ruling elite, the delight sought is distinct from the formal ceremonial creation of it. Similarly, sage-king Shun found no delight in “being the object of men's delight, with the possession of beauty, riches, and honours.” What was prized was being “in accord with his parents” (*shunyufumu* 順於父母).⁴¹ Notably, accord (*shun* 順) is also a delight-like state, where a sense of accord is a satisfying inner state.

The idea that social interaction and events are the locus for delight-like states has its roots in the *Analects* 《論語》. In passage 5:26, asked by Zilu what he would *most* like to do,

Confucius focuses on pleasant affective states realized within social relationships, “I would like to bring peace and contentment to the aged, to share relationships of trust and confidence with my friends, and to love and protect the young.” Contentment (*an* 安) and love or cherishing (*huai* 懷) are also delight-like states. This focus on personal attachment appears through the *Analects*, but perhaps the most explicit account of how delight is the valued outcome of everyday personal attachments is found in *Mencius* 《孟子》 4A27:

Mengzi said, ‘The most authentic expression (*shi* 實) of humaneness is serving one’s parents. The most authentic expression of a sense of justice and appropriateness is going along with one’s elder brother. The most authentic expression of wisdom is knowing these two things and not abandoning them. The most authentic expression of ritual propriety is regulating and civilizing (*wen* 文) these two. The most authentic expression of music is taking joy (*le* 樂) in these two. When there is joy, they grow. When they grow, how can they be stopped? If they cannot be stopped, then without realising, one’s feet begin to step in time to them and one’s hands dance according to their rhythms.’⁴²

Strikingly, the fullest development of filiality and well-ordered family relations gives rise to joy; and, as the spontaneous dancing and bodily expressions make clear, it is an intense joy. We could read this passage as a simple “jumping for joy,” an outpouring of emotion. But why the outpouring? Arguably, the cause is a sense of accord, fittingness, coherence and achievement that bring forth such delight.

4.2 *Personal Cultivation as Aesthetic Cultivation*

If the achievement of delight-like states in everyday social and familial contexts is a goal of conduct, then we might expect an account of personal cultivation that is aesthetic in nature,

directed towards to such experiences. Indeed, we find such an account in the *Analects*: “Be awakened by poetry, be established by ritual, be perfected in music.”⁴³ Completion of this process enabled Confucius at seventy to “follow the heart’s desires without overstepping the boundaries.”⁴⁴ We can read each of the three ‘steps’ as a stage of aesthetic cultivation. These are, of course, ways of transforming the subject; but they also become means by which the subject transforms the social world and the experiences of others.

“Be awakened by poetry” refers to mastering language and all kinds of literary forms.⁴⁵ This ensures a more sophisticated conceptual grasp of the world around and explains why Confucius’ advocated reading the *Songs* 《詩經》. Furthermore, the ideas acquired through poetry belonged to a shared literary tradition. The ideas of the classical texts and the history of the ancients are not merely descriptive or objective; they are imbued with shared attitudes and values. A learned person can leverage the emotive power of these shared images and motifs to evoke experiences in others.

“Be established by ritual” expresses the training of character and internalizing of social norms, as when certain conduct towards parents become habit. Ritual, however, also involves practical mastery: learning to appropriately manipulate objects, including people, by understanding relevant particulars and applicable laws or norms. This includes the six arts and practical disciplines such as charioteering and archery, as well as agriculture; but ritual is also a means to being practically effective in the social world. Ritual stimulates awareness of social context, including people in the surrounding environment, and empowers the subject to direct objects or events within that context—to skillfully maintain relations with others, avoid resentment (*yuan* 怨), use material objects to generate delight (e.g., gift giving), and so on. Ritual is also immediately aesthetically pleasing to others. It creates graceful bodies, while manners and

tact evoke high evaluations of character; hence, humaneness is often associated with beauty (*mei* 美).⁴⁶

Both literary knowledge and ritualistic know-how are necessary for authentic, sustainable delight. However, they are not sufficient for the “ultimate perfection or supreme realization of the human personality.”⁴⁷ Perfecting or completion (*cheng* 成) requires music. In what sense does music complete the process of cultivation, and how is music related to delight-like states?

Several kinds of connection are possible. One, seen in the *Xunzi*, is a causal relationship between music and emotion. Certain tunes or notes induce particular emotions in listeners.⁴⁸ In this account, music creates social harmony by inducing shared feelings among a community of listeners, somewhat like a national anthem. More generally, music (and ritual) can cultivate good (or bad) character,⁴⁹ or instill virtues.⁵⁰ Music is also associated with knowledge: one with mastery of music can comprehend a person’s character from a piece of music.⁵¹ Music also increases a subject’s capacity for emotional response, making a person more sensitive to the emotions of others.⁵² Music can thus produce delight in various ways: by inducing shared pro-social feelings among listeners, by cultivating pleasant character and inviting admiration of it, by enhanced sensitivity to the delight of others, or simply through the sheer delight of listening to music—which caused Confucius to not know the taste of meat for three months.⁵³

Here, however, I focus on another linkage between complete personal cultivation, achieved through music, and delight-like states. This starts from “*le* 樂” (delight-like states) and “*yue* 樂” (music) sharing a single character. This approach understands the generation of delight (*le* 樂) by direct analogy with the generation of music (*yue* 樂). Exposure to music ensures the acquisition of concepts or the cultivation of inner states and experiences, which guide judgments instrumental to realizing delight-like states in everyday social interaction.

4.3 The Role of Music in Personal Cultivation

In this account, “completed in music” means: through exposure to (good) music, certain properties of the music condition or shape the subject, altering her inner life. That is, qualities or properties of music become concepts or qualities that structure the subject’s practical and normative judgments. As a result, the concepts or experiences that guide evaluation and practical judgments in social life can reflect properties found in (good) music. These include: harmony, rhythm, novelty, balance, surprise, consummation or resolution, ease, comfort and so forth. Take rhythm as an example. Rhythm is not simply metronomic regularity, but is change managed or introduced alongside consistency or regularity. Rhythm also involves creating expectancy and then providing satisfaction or completion.⁵⁴ Both of these features are simultaneously explicitly musical and concepts or intuitions around which action can be organized. Indeed, the *Xingzimingchu* 《生自命出》 suggests that music is a model for understanding the mind, with musical phenomena used to explain mental life and conscious experience.⁵⁵ Analects 3:23 illustrates the idea:

Confucius, when talking with the Grand Music Master of Lu, said, “In my understanding of music, the piece should be begun in unison (*xi* 翕). Afterwards, if it is pure (*chun* 純), clear (*jiao* 皦) and without break (*yi* 繹), it will be *complete* (*cheng* 成).⁵⁶

In this passage, the desirable qualities that “complete” music can be understood as desirable inner states or qualities of experience, sensitivity to which marks “complete” personal cultivation. They are qualities or sensibilities that can direct action. Unison or accord (*xi* 翕) implies cohesion and mutual fit. Purity or simplicity (*chun* 純), initially experienced towards a note or musical phrasing, informs an analogous action-guiding concept in experience: what is

striking, impactful, or poignant. Clarity or brightness (*jiao* 曠), implies the quality of standing out, of a focal point around which other notes or musicians—or thoughts and people—can be arranged. Finally, being without a break or uninterrupted (*yi* 繹) translates into the concept or experience of flow, momentum, or smooth transitions, which distinguish successful social interaction. In summary, immersion in music can thus come to structure inner life and guide practical judgment.⁵⁷

Qualities or experiences such as accord or completeness are intrinsically satisfying. They are the constitutive elements of delight-like states—the kind of qualitatively distinctive experiences discussed earlier. Thus, someone cultivated through music (as well as ritual and poetry) is disposed to act on the world under the guidance of this practical and normative framework, aiming to realize delight-like states more broadly. As discussed above, in the Confucian context, this means realizing them in social contexts, through interaction with people. This is a task for the *junzi*, an expression of their power or potency (*de* 德). *Mencius* 5B1 illustrates the point: harmonious music and social influence merge in the description of Confucius as the “perfect ensemble” or “complete concert” (*jidacheng* 集大成). This passage describes how historical figures approached the task of leading the people, with Confucius as the supreme exemplar:

With Confucius there was the perfect ensemble. The perfect ensemble begins with the sound of the bronze bell and ends with the sound of the jade chimes, the bronze bell anticipating the harmony at the beginning of the concert, and the jade chimes bringing the harmony to a conclusion at its close. The harmony at the opening is the work of wisdom; the harmony at the close is the work of sageliness. Wisdom is like skill (*qiao* 巧) and sageliness is like strength (*li* 力)...⁵⁸

Here, the fullest “completion” of social harmony is described musically, and it requires skill and practical wisdom. This suggests a second connection between music and delight like states. The first, as noted, was that music sensitizes a subject to experience the world in a certain way and to seek to replicate the delight-like states of musical experience in social interaction. In addition, the *skills and habits* acquired through musical training are needed realize this goal. Some these can be described as follows.

One quality is *attentiveness*. The production of music requires training attention on fellow musicians. At a minimum, this means keeping time; and when less structured performances deviate from a score or key attention to fellow musicians is necessary to ensure the above-noted qualities of harmony, flow, and so on. In the creation of delight, attention means observing reactions and what pleases or delights. The *Analects* lauds the keen observation of conduct and personal demeanor, and learning through comparisons with those close at hand.⁵⁹ Related to attention is *deference*, or a considerateness towards others, by not dominating a performance by playing with too loudly or vigorously. Xunzi notes, “Music...is something one uses to practice courteous deference and yielding at home.”⁶⁰ Not obstructing or inhibiting the contributions of others, while expressing positive interpersonal sentiments through deferential acts are prominent in the *Analects*, alongside avoiding competition and contentiousness.⁶¹

As Nicholas Geir notes, *imagination* is required in the space between the fixed written score and its “translation” into a performance of it.⁶² In conduct too, space appears between customary norms or rules and actions fitted to particular circumstances. One function of the imagination, *timing* (*shi* 時) is both a musical term and a quality of Confucian exemplars:⁶³ making appropriate contributions at the right moment. This includes heightening enjoyment by delaying notes, using silences, and controlling narrative to build towards a climax. Such skills

translate into the creation of delight-like states in social interaction, through humor, timely interventions in conversations, avoiding inopportune moments, and so on.

Musical performance and composition involve *experimentation* or *improvisation*, partly through trial and error, to arrive at a fitting blend of inputs or contributions.⁶⁴ Under such conditions, action proceeds tentatively, without a settled goal; actions performed or notes played do themselves often suggest a way forward, though the subject remains ready to respond to other actions or notes. Experimentation can also involve taking the initiative, possibly to draw out contributions from others that would otherwise not be forthcoming; indeed, some argue that risk-taking and showmanship are integral to musical performance.⁶⁵ Various other personal qualities might be explored, but this sketch illustrates how the skills and dispositions acquired through music can be employed in social interaction to create delight.

In summary, exposure to music provides key sensitivities and concepts, which guide judgment. As argued earlier, such capabilities are then applied to everyday social interactions; the aim is to generate delight-like states. This is an idealized account of conduct, an ethics.⁶⁶ This approach honors the extensive concern with music and delight-like states in the early Confucian texts, as well as the commitment to well-conducted relationships, in family and in everyday social encounters. *Analects* 11:26 captures the spirit of this approach, if not the details, encapsulated in Confucius' admiration for Zengxi's account of the ideal life:

[I]n the company of five or six young men and six or seven children, to cleanse ourselves in the Yi River, to revel in the cool breezes at the Altar for Rain, and then to return home singing.⁶⁷

V. ASSESSING AN ETHICS GROUNDED IN SHARED DELIGHT

Treating the shared experience of delight-like states as a practical ideal suggests a novel conception of the Confucian ideal of harmony. This involves the coordination of all the elements of a social interaction and event, so as to produce delight-like states among participants.⁶⁸ As the poet uses words to bring about certain aesthetic experiences in the audience, so the *junzi* uses a wider range of skills to coordinate participants and generate delight in social interaction. This is a substantial ethical task since, unlike naturally-arising pleasures, delight-like states are complex, the product of practical excellence, and must sometimes be created from scratch.⁶⁹ In this way, exemplary persons “establish others in order to establish themselves.”⁷⁰

Admittedly, delight is not a simple good in the texts. Good and bad types of pleasure or delight are distinguished.⁷¹ However, delight still constitutes the basis for one form of idealized Confucian conduct, since the account presented is of a particular higher-order conception of “*le* 樂,” which contrasts with the indulgences and crude pleasures of ‘bad’ delight. Also, the capacity to generate delight-like states is also only one aspect of charismatic power or potency, alongside effects such as inspiring loyalty,⁷² and inducing shame.⁷³ But my aim here is to explore a novel conception of ethical action, which extrapolates a distinctive concept-cluster in early Confucian thought. It is not the only conception of ethics present in the texts; what matters is that it coheres with or informs key Confucian values, such as ritualized conduct, humaneness, commitment to personal attachments, musicality and refinement (*wen* 文).⁷⁴

In conclusion, it is worth considering the conception of the ethical that emerges when delight-like states are made the goal of conduct. Despite pleasure’s association with egoistic hedonism and hedonistic utilitarianism in ethics, the Confucian discourse on delight suggests a different ethical framework. This approach does not reduce to egoistic hedonism, since the delight created is inter-subjective or shared, the product of relational properties, rather than

aligning with a single person's pleasure; its grounds are in the situation, and it partly coalesces around social norms and customary acts. In addition, it is an outcome of cultivated responses rather than a crude subjective feeling. Furthermore, the creation of delight carries a sense of obligation, not self-interest. While not necessarily experienced in the same way by all participants, all must have some share of delight; otherwise qualities such as accord, harmony, consummation and so on will be missing from participants experience, and the implicit task is not completed. This sense of duty reconciles the texts' demands to abide by social norms and roles, which some ethicists find oppressive, with a less-scripted and more personal response to particulars that several defenders of Confucian ethics identify in the texts.⁷⁵ Making delight an ethical task bridges these two interpretive approaches.

Reading the texts through the phenomenon of delight-like states hints at new approaches in meta-ethics. Treating delight as a quality of social interaction is not consequentialist, since the basic unit of its creation is the social event or social interaction. These are self-contained, and approached serially as subjects move from one social interaction to another. Each is treated on its own merits and in isolation, rather than subjected to an aggregating calculation.

Furthermore, focusing on the aesthetic experiences realized through shared social events shifts the locus of what makes an action right. It lies not in (virtuous) character or altruistic motivation per se, nor in reason-based justification of action, but rather in the quality of interaction attained, which is distinguished by qualities or features of experience. Yet this in turn is rooted in the practices and conventions of social life, and the discovery of which arrangements and responses can generate delight. As a result, moral knowledge is not a matter of certainty within the individual mind that is exercised as a moral judgment; the epistemology is more tentative and humble, arising through the attentive and sensitive treatment of particular social

encounters. Furthermore, since a human life can be understood to consist of multiple such social interactions and events, encountered on a serial basis in everyday life, so human flourishing consists in the sustained coordination of such interactions over a person's lifetime. Instead of liberal individual's prudential pursuit of personal projects, goals that define the self, this flourishing is built from the innumerable social interactions that make up each day across a single life. Not all interactions and ethical issues can be approached through this idealized framework; but perhaps a single paradigm of "ethics" is not necessary in order for people to act and live well.

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ENDNOTES

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¹ Henry Rosemont, *A Reader's Companion to the Confucian Analects* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 17.

² Ames and Rosemont, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Moral Vision for the 21st Century?* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016).

³ This approach also draws upon the emerging field of everyday aesthetics and its implications for ethical theory. See Yuriko Saito's *Everyday Aesthetics* (New York: OUP, 2010), Saito's *Aesthetics of the Familiar* (New York: OUP, 2017) and Thomas Leddy's *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2012).

⁴ Xu Fuguan 徐復觀, *The Spirit of Chinese Art* 《中國藝術精神》 (Taichung: Tunghai University, 1966), 150-57; see also Tu Weiming, "Embodied Knowledge: Body, Heart/Mind, and Spirit in Confucian Aesthetics," in *Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies Newsletter* vol. 5 no. 2 (2006).

⁵ See Chen Wangheng 陈望衡, "The life-aesthetics of Zong Baihua" "宗白华的生命美学观," in *Jianghai Xuekan* 《江海學刊》 (2001, issue 1), 101-7.

⁶ Li Zehou and Jane Cauvel, *Four Essays on Aesthetics: Toward a Global View* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2006).

⁷ Similar recent studies include Michael Nylan, *The Chinese Pleasure Book* (New York: Zone Books, 2018); Nicholas Geir, "The Dancing Ru: A Confucian Aesthetics of Virtue," in *Philosophy East and West* vol. 51 no. 2 (2001); and Chen, Shaoming and Liu, Huawei, "On Pleasure: A Reflection on Happiness from the Confucian and Daoist Perspectives," in *Frontiers of Philosophy in China*, vol. 5 no. 2 (2010), 179-195

⁸ On the influence of clan and social hierarchies on Confucian thought, see Li Zehou, *A History of Classical Chinese Thought* 《中國古代思想史論》, trans. Andrew Lambert (New York: Routledge, 2019), chapter 1.

⁹ Scott Cook, "Record of Music: Introduction, Translation, Notes, and Commentary," in *Asian Music* vol.26 no. 2 (1995), 14.

¹⁰ John Dewey, *Art As Experience*, (New York: Pedigree, 1980), 35.

¹¹ Ibid. 17, 36, 38, 115, 326 and passim.

¹² Dewey notes, "The material of aesthetic experience...is social...Individuals are what they are in the content of their experience because of the cultures in which they participate." *Art as Experience*, 326.

¹³ Peimin Ni, *Confucius: The Man and Way of Gongfu* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), xiii, 67, 113.

¹⁴ Dewey also distinguishes between feelings of pleasure and complex experiences of "happiness and delight," *Art as Experience*, 17.

¹⁵ "怡懌悅欣衍喜愉豫愷康夙般，樂也" *Erya* 《爾雅》 Sec.1, "Old Expressions" "釋詁," my translation.

¹⁶ On possible distinctions among various pleasure terms, see Michael Nylan, "On the Politics of Pleasure," *Asia Minor* vol. 14 no. 1 (2001), 73-124, especially 75-6, and Ulrike Middendorf,

“Again on Qing: With a Translation of the Guodian *Xingzimingchu* 《性自命出》” in *Oriens Extremus* vol. 47 no. 5 (2008), 97–159. Middendorf analyzes classical Chinese terminology using contemporary psychological analysis of emotion.

¹⁷ See the *Zhuangzi* chapter “Perfect Enjoyment” 至樂 and the “The Great and Most Honored Master” 大宗師 chapter. For Zhuangzi, the highest joy is abiding with endless change: 若人之形者，萬化而未始有極也，其為樂可勝計邪 “This body undergoes a myriad transformations...does it not thus afford occasion for joys incalculable?” trans. Legge, cited via the Chinese Text Project: <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/perfect-enjoyment>.

¹⁸ “On Ritual” “禮論” trans. Knoblock (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 60.

¹⁹ *Wuxingpian* 《五行篇》 sec. 2:

“君子无中心之忧则无中心之智，无中心之智则无中心之悦，无中心之悦则不安，不安则不乐，不乐则无德。” Other delight-like states are also important in these causally-related steps to cultivation, including happiness (*yue*悦) and a sense of ease (*an*安). See Kenneth Holloway trans., “The Five Aspects of Conduct,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 15, No. 2 (2005), 179-198.

²⁰ Section 10 of the *Xingzimingchu* (henceforth, *XZMC*): “The noble man beautifies his emotions” (君子美其情); Xunzi’s “Human Nature is Bad” “人性惡” chapter notes that uncultivated emotions (*qing*情) lack beauty (*bumei*不美); see Knoblock, *Ibid.*, 160.

²¹ For Nylan’s reasons, see “Politics of Pleasure” n.7, 75.

²² See also Nylan’s “Mencius on Pleasure,” in *Polishing the Chinese Mirror: Essays in Honor of Henry Rosemont*, eds. M. Chandler and R. Littlejohn (Chicago: Open Court, 2007), 1-26; and Nylan, *The Chinese Pleasure Book*.

²³ Nylan, “Politics of Pleasure,” 73. Italics added.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, n.14, 78.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See *Mencius* 1A7. Therein, rulers blame their failures on the inability to overcome certain desires: a fondness for (female) beauty, for martial valor, and for material goods including parks or estates.

³¹ *Mencius* 1A2.

³² *Analects* 6:11. See also 7:16. All translations, Ames and Rosemont, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Random House, 1998)

³³ See Yong Huang’s *Why Be Moral: Learning from the Neo-Confucian Cheng Brothers* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015).

³⁴ Yong Huang, “‘Why Be Moral?’ The Cheng Brothers’ Neo-Confucian Answer,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics* vol. 36 no. 2 (2008), 321.

³⁵ For Huang, joy can guide moral action because “moral joy” is a distinctive kind of joy, which is characteristic of humans, while the immoral joy is not distinctively human. Jeeloo Liu understands Yan Hui’s joy as a serene state of mind from which all actions flow and which elides the distinction between self and other. Conference presentation, “Confucianism: Joy along the Way,” Rutgers University, Oct 31, 2017.

³⁶ See Sherri Irvin “Aesthetics as a Guide to Ethics.” *Aesthetics Today: A Reader*, ed. Robert Stecker and Theodore Gracyk (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 370-377.

³⁷ *Zhongyong* 《中庸》 Sec. 3, trans. Hall and Ames, *Focusing the Familiar* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001). “*Yong 庸*” means everyday or commonplace, and originally denoted de-husking rice. A focus on the everyday is implicit in the title.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Sec. 1, 83.

³⁹ *Xiaojing* 《孝經》 “The Government of the Sages,” 聖治 chapter, trans. Legge, cited via the Chinese Text Project: <https://ctext.org/xiao-jing/government-of-the-sages>. Accessed August 2020. Italics added.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, “Record of Acts of Filial Piety,” “紀孝行.”

⁴¹ Mencius 5A7.

⁴² Irene Bloom trans., *Mencius*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011): 84, translation modified. See similar expressions of joy in Great Preface to the *Book of Songs* (trans. Legge, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1960), 34; and in the XZMC, “[When man] is delighted, he thereon is excited; when excited, he thereon is aroused; when aroused, he thereon is singing; when singing, he thereon sways himself about; when swaying himself about, he thereon is dancing; with dancing [the highest expression of] delight is finished,” quoted in Middendorf, “Again on Qing,” 156.

⁴³ *Analects* 8:8: “興於詩，立於禮，成於樂。” *Analects* 7:6 has a similar message: “Set your intention upon the way, rely on its virtue, lean on humaneness, and *wander in the arts*.” Three-stage cultivation is also seen in the XZMC’s account of the three arts (*sanshu* 三術), see Middendorf, “Again on Qing,” 153. My discussion of 8:8 is informed by Li Zehou’s account in *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*: 47-50.

⁴⁴ *Analects*, 2.4.

⁴⁵ Li, *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 49.

⁴⁶ See, e.g., section 10 of the XZMC.

⁴⁷ Li, *Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*, 50.

⁴⁸ *Xunzi*, “Discourse on Music.” On how music produces physiological and behavioural changes, see Middendorf, “Again on Qing.” Exactly what effects music has on listeners seems to be partly determined by culture and context as much as intrinsic properties of the music. See Aniruddh Patel, *Music, Language and the Brain* (New York: OUP, 2008).

⁴⁹ XZMC, sec. 11, “If one observes the Lai and Wu [dances], then one will be as though balanced and thus creative. If one observes the Shao and Xia [dances], then one will be as though assiduous and thus frugal” (Middendorf, *Ibid.*, 155).

⁵⁰ The “Office of Spring” “春官” chapter in the *Rites of Zhou* 《周禮》 notes that music can instill six virtues: centrality (*zhong* 中), harmony (*he* 和), respect (*zhi* 只), moderation (*yong* 庸), piety (*xiao* 孝), and friendship (*you* 友).

⁵¹ Recall Confucius learning the zither in the *Records of the Grand Historian* 《史記》. Confucius comprehends the composer’s character by listening to his music: “characterized by majesty with profound thoughts, a gentle, venerable person but with lofty ideal”; quoted in Joanna Liu, “Art and Aesthetics of Music in Classical Confucianism,” in *Dao Companion to Classical Chinese Philosophy* (Toronto: Springer, 2014), 237.

⁵² See Liu, *ibid.*, 236.

⁵³ *Analects* 7:14.

⁵⁴ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 150, 254.

⁵⁵ As Middendorf puts it, “Music provides an iconic representation of the affective movements of the mind which is more appropriate to the dynamic flow of emotional experience than symbolic description through verbal labels which often imply steady states,” “Again on Qing,” 147. On how sounds interact with the mind, see XZMC, sec. 11.

⁵⁶ Analects 3:23: 樂其可知也：始作、翕如也。從之、純如也、皦如也、繹如也、以成。

⁵⁷ This effect might not require that music be studied formally or actively practiced; regular exposure to music with these properties might result in acquisition of the relevant concepts, which then guide action in non-musical contexts. There is precedent here, concerning how music affects other nominally separate realms of human cognition and action, and without awareness or acknowledgment of such influence. For example, musicologists have identified a link between the relative duration of component sounds of a spoken language (such as English or French) and the forms of music produced within the respective linguistic tradition. Classical composers raised in an English-language environment (e.g., Elgar) produce musical melodies with more contrastive intonation or rhythm, mirroring the rhythms of spoken English. French composers (E.g., Debussy) used less contrast in duration between neighboring units of sound, echoing the character of spoken French. The experimental metric is called the “normalized pairwise variability index” (nPVI); see Patel, *ibid.*, 131-135, 161-168. See also Low, Grabe, & Nolan, “Quantitative characterisations of speech rhythm: Syllable-timing in Singapore English” in *Language and Speech*, vol. 43 (2000), 377-401. Such experiments suggest how language influences music, rather than how music influences concept acquisition and practical judgment. Nevertheless, the persistent linkage in early Confucian thought between music and ethical conduct hints at unarticulated intuitions or convictions about how music can influence personal sensitivity and action more generally.

⁵⁸ *Mencius* 5B1, trans. Bloom.

⁵⁹ *Analects* 2:10, 7:22.

⁶⁰ Hutton, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 219.

⁶¹ *Analects* 3:7, 15:22.

⁶² Geir, “Dancing Ru,” 285.

⁶³ *Analects* 14:13.

⁶⁴ *Analects* 3:23, quoted above, could be read as an account of improvisation.

⁶⁵ David Clowney and Robert Rawlins, “Pushing the Limits: Risk and Accomplishment in Musical Performance,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, vol.12 (2014).

⁶⁶ Central to the approach developed here is the apparent hierarchy of values expressed in *Analects* 6:20: “知之者不如好之者，好之者不如樂之者” “To like it is better than to understand it, and to delight in it is better than to like it.” Translation my own. Traditionally understood to be referring to the way (*dao*道), this passage makes delight a fundamental value of the Confucian way of life.

⁶⁷ *Analects* 11:26. trans. Ames and Rosemont.

⁶⁸ A similar, idealized account of social interaction is Xunzi’s account of the village wine ceremony in “Discourse on Music” “樂倫,” Hutton, 222. Consider also the *Mencius* dialogues on delight in Book 1, on the importance of sharing pleasure (1B2) and how pleasure is enhanced when shared (1B4). Compare also the metaphor of harmony as soup-making in the *Zuo Zhuan* 《左傳》, “Zhao Gong *er*shinian” “昭公二十年.”

⁶⁹ Consider, albeit anachronistically, the care and attention involved in organizing a surprise birthday party.

⁷⁰ *Analects* 6:30.

⁷¹ *Analects* 16:5, 18:4; *Mencius* 6B15.

⁷² *Mencius* 1B15.

⁷³ *Analects* 2:3.

⁷⁴ As Nylan notes, the *Xunzi* describes the beauty (*mei*美) of the exemplary person as the “perfect and ultimate pattern (*wen* 文)” for self and society, “Politics of Pleasure,” 117-18.

⁷⁵ See Geir “Dancing Ru,” and Hall and Ames, “Getting It Right: On Saving Confucius from the Confucians,” *Philosophy East and West* vol. 34 no. 1 (1984).