

The Confucian Conception of Self: Collectivist or Relational?

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Abstract

In this paper, I clarify the Confucian conception of self by distinguishing it from common misrepresentations, most notably its conflation with collectivism, as critiqued by Jana Rošker. These distortions, arguably rooted in the application of inappropriate Western frameworks, portray the Confucian self as self-effacing and subordinate to society. Drawing on key sinological and philosophical work, including that of David Hall, Roger Ames, and Jana Rošker, I argue instead that the Confucian self is relational and processual: constituted through one's roles and relationships, not erased by them. I develop this interpretation in two stages. First, I show through conceptual analysis how the Confucian self integrates individuality and interdependence by situating personhood in a shared awareness of social roles. Second, I analyse the *Analekts* and *Mencius* to show how the ideal of *ren* (仁) embodies ethical self-cultivation as a dynamic, ongoing process. I conclude that the Confucian self is best seen as a shared or social self-consciousness of roles and relations.

Keywords: comparative philosophy, Confucianism, relational self, *Ren* (仁), self-cultivation

Konfucijanska pojmovanje sebstva: kolektivistično ali relacijsko?

Izvleček

V tem članku pojasnjujem konfucijansko pojmovanje sebstva, tako da ga ločujem od pogostih napačnih predstav, predvsem od njegove povezave s kolektivizmom, kot ga kritizira Jana Rošker. Te izkrivljene predstave, ki verjetno izhajajo iz uporabe neustreznih zahodnih okvirov, konfucijanski jaz prikazujejo kot skromnega in podrejenega družbi. Na podlagi ključnih sinoloških in filozofskih del, med drugim Davida Halla, Rogerja Amesa in Jane Rošker, trdim, da je konfucijsko sebstvo relacijsko ter procesno: oblikujejo ga človekova vloga in odnosi, ne pa da bi ga ti izbrisali. To interpretacijo razvijam v dveh stopnjah. Najprej s konceptualno analizo pokažem, kako konfucijsko sebstvo združuje individualnost in medsebojno odvisnost, tako da osebnost umesti v skupno zavest o družbenih vlogah. Nato analiziram deli *Analekti* in *Mencij*, da pokažem, kako ideal *ren* (仁) uteleša etično samokultivacijo kot dinamičen, neprekinjen proces. Skleпам, da

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je konfucijsko sebstvo najboljše razumeti kot skupno ali družbeno samozavest vlog in odnosov.

Ključne besede: primerjalna filozofija, konfucijanstvo, relacijsko sebstvo, *ren* (仁), samokultivacija

In this paper, I seek to clarify the nature of the Confucian conception of self by very clearly distinguishing it from possible misrepresentations, most notably its collation with collectivism, as identified and critiqued by Jana Rošker (2023). Such misrepresentations, rooted in the inappropriate application of Western conceptual frameworks, often view the relational self as entirely sacrificing individuality, in favour of societal demands. By contrast, the relational self in Confucian thought is neither an autonomous individual opposed to society nor a self-effacing cog within a collectivist whole. Instead, it represents a dynamic and processual identity, which is constituted through specific roles and relations.

With the aim of explaining this conception of self, I first explore sinological and comparative philosophical discourse, drawing on David Hall and Roger Ames' (1997) pivotal work to clarify the unique vocabulary and conceptual structures underpinning the Confucian self. I then critically address the collectivist misconception (for example, that view propounded by Donald Munro (1979)), showing that it involves an inappropriate imposition of a Western conception of the individualist-collectivist dichotomy. Building on Rošker's notion of Confucian relationism, I argue that the Confucian relational self integrates individuality and interdependence without diminishing either. This section, therefore, lays the theoretical groundwork for understanding the Confucian self as a processual and relational identity. The second section shifts focus to a detailed engagement with primary Confucian texts. Here, I analyse how the concept of *Ren* (仁) underpins the relational self and reflects its processual nature. Drawing directly from key passages in the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, I illustrate how the cultivation of *Ren* (仁) embodies the essence of becoming a relational self. This analysis highlights *Ren* (仁) as a practice-oriented ideal that intertwines personal growth with communal harmony. I conclude that it is unfair to conceptualize the Confucian relational self through the lens of self-effacing collectivism; rather, it should be conceptualized as a shared or social self-consciousness of roles and relations.

The Confucian Relational Self

First, I will set out what the Confucian relational self is in relation to previous literature on this in the sinological and comparative philosophical fields. Hall

and Ames' review of this from their *Thinking from the Han* (1997) can mark a useful starting point as it disambiguates between different uses of several key terms and their different interpretations over time in these fields of literature. This is important because "the interpretative vocabulary associated with Chinese constructions of what we would identify as 'self' or 'persons' is radically distinct from the primary semantic contexts forming the major interpretive constructs in our tradition" (Hall and Ames 1997, 23), creating potential for confusion if terms are not properly defined.

One potential (mis)conception of the Confucian relational self is worth laying out in considerable depth as it is quite widespread.¹ As Hall and Ames note, the "selflessness" or "self-abnegation" of the Chinese is often pointed to, with this "generally understood in the sense that the Chinese have selves like we do but have chosen to yield them up in the service of society or state" (Hall and Ames 1997, 23). For example, Munro (1979, 40) argues that "selflessness ... is one of the oldest values in China, present in various forms in Taoism and Buddhism, but especially in Confucianism". In doing so he construes "the Confucian model as a collectivism in which individual interests are insignificant except where they are of service to those of the group" (Hall and Ames 1997, 23). This conception implicitly presupposes an individualist dichotomy of individual as opposed to state, because it has established a conceptual boundary between them, with the individual seen as giving up *their* interests in favour of *society's*. As Hall and Ames (1997, 25–26) summarize: "to be selfless in the sense presupposed by some commentators on Chinese culture requires that an individual self first exist and then that it be sacrificed for some higher public interest".

However, as Hall and Ames (1997, 23–26) argue, this conception of the "Chinese" self implicitly brings in a "Western" sense of self and hence fails to appreciate the difference between individuality in the sense of autonomy and individuality in the sense of uniqueness. Firstly, we can see how the conception of the Chinese being "selfless" that has been propagated by some commentators like Munro presupposes a framework relatively similar to prominent forms of Western individualism, such as individualist contractualism. The key point is that individuals have their own independent conception of the good, which informs their preferences, which they then try to maximize. If we conceptualize society as collections of individuals with their own independent conceptions of the good and their own set of preferences based on this, it is easy to see that this creates the potential for conflict between these different sets of preferences. It is likely there are many contradictory preferences between all the different individuals in society, which creates the need for some individuals to give up their preferences in favour of those of others. Thus, a selfless self is one that is more willing to give

1 For example, Rošker (2023) documents how this misconception heavily influenced Western perceptions of the Sinic region's responses to COVID.

up its preferences in favour of others.² Applying this to the case of the classical Confucian conception of the self, this self could be said to be more willing to give up their preferences in the face of collective demands and hence meet Munro's labels of "selfless" or "self-abnegating" more readily than Westerners.

Rošker (2023) makes a similar point here in her recent work. Like Hall and Ames, she believes that it is incorrect to conceptualize the Confucian relational self by setting up the notion of a Western individual and contrasting this with society as something in opposition to it. Rather, Rošker believes that the false dichotomy established between "individual" and society reflects a foundational individualism in that it conceptualizes the individual and society as separate entities in opposition to each other. More precisely, under individualism: "the self is viewed as in contradiction with society, with its autonomy only possible if it can maintain its independence from society, whose actions are considered heteronomous with regard to the individual" (Rošker 2023, 145). Under this framework, collectivism is viewed as the antithesis of individualism (and associated with totalitarianism) because the interests of these individuals are perceived as being infringed upon to serve the heteronomous interests of society as a whole. So, what Rošker defines as foundational to individualism is not the idea of different individual persons, but rather the notion that society's actions are heteronomous to the individual.

To show this, Rošker sets up the notion of Confucian "relationism". By relationism, she is referring to the fact that Confucianism puts a lot of emphasis on specific relationships that allow for individuation through the development of a unique place within a community (something that is not recognized enough under simple collectivist interpretations, such as Munro's). Let me explain this in more detail. Rošker argues that relationism is defined by:

webs of relationships that connect individuals who perceive themselves not as isolated and independent entities but as so-called relational selves. This means that the life and social roles of people in such systems are mutually interconnected and that their identities are to a large extent defined by their social relations. (Rošker 2023, 43)

So, as Hall and Ames (1997, 25) also argue, this means that what an individual is to the classical Confucians lies in the achieved quality of one particular individual's many relationships. According to the classical Confucian conception of the self, one becomes recognized and distinguished by virtue of communal deference

2 A "selfless self" is not a contradiction because, according to this questionable view of the Confucian relational self, selflessness has the connotation of giving up your individuality and becoming a cog in the machine of the whole, it does not mean you have no relevant (and obvious) individual biological existence. An analogy would be ants: few would dispute the idea that they are selfless creatures, with no sense of individuality, but they still have a relevant individual biological existence.

to the quality of one's character. This is in opposition to individualism's conception of individuality, where the individual is defined by the particular qualities they have that are opposed to those generalized standards of society as a whole.

We can further explain the difference between Confucian relationism and Munro's collectivist interpretation by exploring the similarities between individualism and Confucian relationism. Rošker (2023, 144–45) argues that both individualism and relationism proceed from human personhood conceptualized as an individual self. What this means is not that both are individualistic—in the sense of viewing the relationship between selves and society as heteronomous—but rather that both conceptions of personhood allow the capacity for individual self-reflection and self-understanding. In Rošker's words:

Both systems include specific conceptualisations of what is called the human Self, which can be defined by its ability to turn inward and engage in self-reflection, by its ability to form interpersonal relations with other human selves, as well as by its executive function as an agent that makes choices, exerts control, and engages in self-regulation. The human self as such always refers to an individual person. (Ibid., 145)

Therefore, there is an important sense in which both individualism and relationism proceed from a belief in the existence of the individual self. This is the sense in which self-consciousness is not something reducible solely to a person “playing” their roles in society (in a manner akin to actors in a play who lack any inner mental depth beyond these roles). Instead, there is a mental area that is recognized as one's own within which one has the capacity for executive function based on self-reflection. For example, it is now recognized that you cannot necessarily tell what state someone's mental health is in. This is because there is a sphere of private subjectivity which is not always publicly available to others, within which someone's experience of their mental health resides. This is one of the reasons why many cases of mental health problems such as anxiety and depression can go undetected.³

We can make this clearer by looking at conceptions of the relational self that do not include this sphere of private subjectivity. For example, the leading anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1974, 31) is highly critical of the Western conception of the person as fully independent, labelling it “a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures” (ibid.). At first glance, Geertz seems to share a similar view to Rošker and Hall and Ames given that he states his belief that in most societies tightly structured relational networks, not internal attributes, have a central place in self-construal. However, Geertz's conceptualization of this

3 See, for example, Mojtabai and Olfson (2024) and CDC (2021) for evidence of this.

differs significantly, precisely because it does not allow for the self-reflection and self-understanding associated with individual personhood. Geertz gives the Balinese people as a paradigmatic example of a group that possesses a very (perhaps completely) interdependent self- construal. In Balinese society

physically men come and go—mere incidents in a happenstance history of no genuine importance, even to themselves. But the masks they wear, the stage they occupy, the parts they play, and, most important, the spectacle they mount remain and comprise not the facade but the substance of things, not least the self. (Geertz 1974, 35)

Indeed, such an emphasis is placed on interdependence that “in both their structure and their mode of operation, the terminological systems conduce to a view of the human person as an appropriate representative of a generic type, not a unique creature with a private fate” (ibid.). Therefore, Geertz’s interpretation of the relationality of the Balinese would suggest that he sees them as lacking in individual, private, personhood. In other words, there is no mental area that is recognized as one’s own within which one has the capacity for executive function or self-reflection. Rather, all the emphasis is placed on people’s roles within the relational network of society, with people being reduced to the position of actors on the stage, playing these roles. One might argue that Geertz ends up in a position that is similar to Munro’s interpretation of Confucianism—collectivism rather than relationism—a conception that is reliant on a foundational individualism that sees society’s interests as necessarily heterogeneous to the individuals.

I would argue that the Confucian relational conception of the self precludes autonomous individuality from being the basis of one’s perception of one’s relationship with others and the environment, but does this without ruling out the presence of something we can recognizably call “an individual”, because an individual is defined by *their* roles and *their* relationships. Properly speaking, an individual is best understood as a unique place *within a community*. An individual has self-consciousness—a capacity for executive function and self-reflection—but this self-consciousness itself is fundamentally contextual: it is a shared consciousness of roles and relationships.

Let me further explain the relationship between the terms “self-consciousness” and “shared consciousness”, because there is potential for much confusion here, especially regarding how these two terms, which in some cases may be regarded as opposites, can be used here without contradiction. One possible interpretation of what Hall and Ames (1997) say in more depth can be elucidated by a comparison with Charles Taylors’ explanation of why “one is a self only among other selves” (Taylor 1989, 35), with a self unable to be described without reference to those who surround it. Let me first outline Taylor’s view.

As Taylor puts it:

My self-definition is understood as an answer to the question of who I am. And this question finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers. I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also, crucially in the space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out. (Ibid.)

Language plays a crucial role here, as we are unavoidably in an ongoing conversation with those around us from the moment we are born. As Taylor then explains:

In talking about something you and I make it an object for us together, that is, not just an object for me which also happens to be one for you ... the object is for us in the strong sense. (Ibid.)

This strong sense means that

I can only learn what anger, love, anxiety, the aspiration to wholeness etc., are through my and others' experience of these being objects for us in a common space. (Ibid.)

What Taylor is saying here can easily be translated into the language of referential frameworks.⁴ What he is saying is that the referential framework of any human being is inextricably linked to the languages and the concepts of their cultural background.⁵ We can see this more clearly if we consider an extreme example that we might initially think avoids this sociality to at least some degree: that of a hermit who has isolated themselves from society. After all, we might worry that a hermit lacks an “achieved quality of multivariant relationships” (Hall and Ames 1997, 25), and thus ceases to be in ongoing conversation with those around them.

Of course, hermits have, in some sense, chosen to cease to be in conversation at some time in their lives. However, in these cases the hermit started out as part of a

4 Rošker (2021, 9–10) defines a referential framework as “a relational structure of concepts, categories, terms and ideas as well as values which are applied in the cognitive processing of the objects of comprehension”. Put concisely, a referential framework is the conceptual apparatus by which we comprehend the world and our relationship to it and others within it.

5 I refer to this term in the broadest sense, encompassing both familial, regional and national culture as well as wider historical epoch (arguably individualistic neoliberal capitalism in the contemporary West).

conversation as a child before they adopted their hermit's lifestyle and, crucially, they still possess a referential framework inherited from their conversations in childhood that still defines the conceptual world they inhabit. For example, if the hermit fails to gather enough food one week, they are likely to think something along the lines of "I feel anxious" in their head, thereby using a socially defined concept in a socially constructed language.

Taylor makes the general point that we may later deviate from the ways in which the society we are born into influences our referential frameworks, but that this innovation can only take place from within the base of a common language. As Taylor (1989, 35) puts it: "Even as the most independent adult, there are moments when I cannot clarify what I feel until I talk about it with a certain special partner(s), who know me, or have wisdom, or with whom I have an affinity". Let us consider an example to understand this better.

John, say, has trouble with feelings of anxiety and a tendency towards perfectionism. One thing that really helps him is talking to his therapist about these issues. One day he is dissatisfied with the amount and quality of work he is handing in, and worried that his boss may also be unhappy with it. John's therapist hears the details of this problem and then explains that he thinks this is an example of his anxiety and perfectionism (both of which form a part of his referential framework) clouding his view of the world, causing him to see his efforts in a very different light than his boss and colleagues. For John, his therapist pointing this out transform's anxiety from an unnamed emotion to a named state of mind, as he comes to understand it is not only something he experiences but an experience he has in common with many other people.

What would have happened if John's therapist had not said this to him? He would have been left in a state of confusion, not necessarily understanding why he felt the way he did. Because John's therapist has a high degree of affinity with John and a good degree of experience when it comes to understanding and addressing mental health issues, the therapist is able to clarify to John what he is feeling. By having this conversation with his therapist John consciously explores the pre-reflective depths of his referential framework, gaining a greater degree of self-understanding, while also (if the therapy is successful) going some way towards adjusting his referential framework so that anxiety, perfectionism, and associated states of confusion cloud his judgement less in the future. Therefore, the prior shaping of John's referential framework is revealed and there is an attempt to further shape how he thinks about these emotions. This, I believe, captures Taylor's meaning.

Taylor then continues by saying that the incapacity of adults to clarify their feelings sometimes "is a mere shadow of the one the child experiences. For him, everything would be confusion, there would be no language of discernment at all, without the conversations which fix this language for him" (Taylor 1989, 36). We

can extend the example above to explain what Taylor means here. Imagine John when he was a child or teenager, experiencing feelings of anxiety or stress for the first time. He may initially struggle to understand the feeling he is experiencing, as he has not yet attained the language necessary to conceptualize it. Then he has a conversation with his parents about the situation he is in and describes, using the shared language already available to him, why he feels that way. His parents, in return, explain to him the concept of anxiety for the first time, what it is, and the societal-specific connotations that come along with this. Indeed, this phenomenon is very much a psychological reality. As many studies show—see for example, De Los and Kazdin (2005)—a struggle to conceptualize their emotions is a real phenomenon for many children.

Returning to the case of the hermit, we see how inextricably interlinked to the society they come from they are. Their inner modes of conceptualizing and identifying thoughts and felt emotions are inherited from the referential framework of the social group they were once part of. At some point hermits likely fear that they have not collected (or will not collect) enough food to feed themselves adequately in solitude on any given week. This is fundamentally a sense of consciousness that is *shared*, because anxiety is an object *for the hermit and the members of the hermit's past society together*,⁶ *not the hermit alone*. This is how self-consciousness can also be shared consciousness. The hermit's consciousness is private to him in the sense that it might not necessarily be obvious to a walker passing by his place of solitude that this is how he is feeling, whereas it is clear to the hermit he has the feeling of anxiety. In this sense, the hermit's consciousness is self-consciousness, and he has the capacity for private self-reflection. However, in another sense, the hermit's consciousness is fundamentally marked and structured by a shared consciousness because of the fact their referential framework is socially informed in the way just discussed. To be clear, this view does not run contrary to the idea of having a sense of inner subjective experience.⁷ Rather, it is the case that the inner subjective experience that emerges in maturity is itself the product of complex social relations operating within and shaping a shared referential framework. This is also how I interpret Hall and Ames (1997, 25) when they say self-consciousness is also shared consciousness.

However, it is important to note that this shared self-consciousness itself is not something static; rather, it is a continual process of becoming. Indeed, in Ames'

6 Or, more accurately, a distorted version of their past society based on the hermit's memories (especially if they have been a hermit for a long period of time). In other words, the hermit's representation of the past, his conception of his former community.

7 By sense of inner subjective experience, I mean the ability of someone to identify certain thoughts as belonging to them rather than belonging to others and that these thoughts are contained within a place of private self-reflection inaccessible to others, as mentioned above.

(2021) view, the Confucian relational self can be defined as a dynamic shared consciousness in the process of becoming *Ren* (仁). This needs a lot more explanation, so let me now move my attention directly to the primary texts and to a variety of sources of important commentary on them to elucidate this further.

Ren (仁) and *ren* (人)—The Confucian Relational Self as a Process of Self Cultivation

Ren (仁)⁸ has a long history of being a stubbornly ambiguous character to explain and translate into European languages (Ames 2021, 65). As Kallio (2017, 47–51) notes, *Ren* (仁) has been translated into many different terms in English. In their historical translations, Legge and Waley translated *Ren* (仁) as “virtue” and “goodness”, respectively, while Wilhelm and Eno, the latter still active, translate it as “humanity”. Indeed, Gentz (2018, 122) goes as far as to claim that “we find no consistent meaning of the term *ren*, no common concept, idea, or even problem that would link these different propositions [in the *Analects*]”.⁹ Despite this ambiguity, it is one of the most important terms in Confucianism. As Lai (2013, 83) points out, *Ren* (仁) is mentioned in 60 of the 503 conversations in the *Analects*. Lai further notes that

Ren is referenced across a broad range of conversational topics and contexts that impact on its meaning: it is the *summum bonum* of an exemplary life (Book 1), an orientative stance (Books 4, 6, 8 and 12); it is manifest in official life (Books 4–8, 12, 13, 17); there are discussions about its scope and cultivation (Books 14, 15) and the benefits for humanity when it is recognized in exemplary government (Books 4 and 20). (Ibid.)

Given this, one might ask whether there is a consensus among commentators about any aspect of *Ren* (仁). One thing most commentators agree on is that whatever *Ren* (仁) is and involves, it is a fundamentally relational term, involving behaving in appropriate concert with others. Why is this a matter of broad agreement? When considering the relationality of *Ren* (仁), we should pay attention to the structure of the character. It is telling that the character signifying a virtuous person literally consists of the Chinese radical signifying person (亻) and the Chinese number two 二(er). As Ames puts it:

8 *Ren* (仁) and *ren* (人) have the same pronunciation and pinyin romanization. To clearly differentiate which I am talking about I will always include both character and pinyin and will capitalize the pinyin of *Ren* (仁).

9 This is not limited to English translations as, for example, Kallio (2017, 49) has had trouble translating the term into Finnish.

the present character *Ren* 仁 in being composed of “person” and the number “two” is semantically revealing in locating the process of becoming consummately human within the pattern of relations we have with others. (Ames 2021, 66)

Thus, just an initial etymological analysis of the fact the character is constructed in this way gives us strong *prima facie* reasons to believe that relationality is a key aspect of it, which is why this is something most commentators agree on.

For my present purposes, I need to characterize this relationality to make sense of the Confucian account of the self. To this end, I will explain the conception of relationality implicit in *Ren* (仁) as read by Ames and his various co-authors. In short, their argument is that “*Ren* (仁) is what Confucius means by ‘self’” (Hall and Ames 1997, 27). What is the primary evidence for this interpretation? Ames (2021, 71) points to *Zhongyong* (20) and the *Mencius* (7B16) as examples. *Zhongyong* (20) states that: “Authoritative conduct [*Ren* 仁] means conducting oneself like a human being [*ren* 人]”. The *Mencius* makes a similar point in stating that:

Aspiring to consummate conduct in your roles and relations [*Ren* 仁] is becoming a person [*ren* 人]; and when these two words—consummate conduct and your person—can be spoken together, you are walking the proper way. (*Mencius* 7B16)

What both these passages make clear is that the process of becoming a person involves consummate conduct in roles and relations. The *Mencius* (7B16), in particular, suggests this explicitly, postulating that following the way 道 (*Dao*) involves *ren* (人) and *Ren* (仁) being synonymous with each other.

To fully understand *Ren* (仁) it is useful to go further and look at it in reference to the other term for self in the classical Confucian texts, *ji* (己), noting that *ji* (己) and *ren* (人) refer to self and other in the conventional self/other 己/人 distinction. One key passage of the *Analects* in which these terms are used in conjunction is *Analects* (12.1). In this, Confucius tells Yan Hui:

self-disciplining [己] and returning to the rites will make one *Ren* [仁]
[...] conquering yourself and returning to *li* is *ren*. Becoming *Ren* (仁) is self-originating, how could it be otherwise?

On a surface level this seems to run contrary to the view Hall and Ames (1997) espouse that I have been articulating. After all, if virtue is self-originating does this not mean that it originates in the self and not in the community? However, this would be to fall into the trap mentioned earlier of seeing individuality and

relationism as opposed. Hall and Ames (1997) argue that *ji* (己) should not be mistaken as a term for an individual, in the sense that this individual can be considered apart from others. This is because *ji* (己) needs the socialization and cultivation that comes along with societal rites to become cultivated and most fully human (*Ren* (仁)). Therefore “the function then of disciplining *ji* through ritual practice is to take up the appropriate place for oneself in a relationship to others in the community” (Hall and Ames 1997, 27). Or, in the words of Ames, we

become humane by cultivating thick, intrinsic relations that constitute our initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of our life narrative... [to be] *Ren* (仁) is to cultivate our conduct assiduously as it is expressed through those family, community, and cosmic roles and relations that we live. (Ames 2018, 173)

This account is further elaborated by Ames in the edited volume *Encountering China* (2018) (as well as Rosemont and D’Ambrosio in their contributions). Firstly, Ames (2018, 172–73) states that the perennial question in all the classics of Confucianism is in what way (*Dao* 道) do persons become consummately human (*Ren* 仁). The answer is that “persons” (necessarily plural) become humane by cultivating thick, intrinsic, relations that constitute our initial conditions and that locate the trajectory of our life narrative (Ames 2018, 173). How does this relate to *Ren* (仁)? It relates to *Ren* (仁) because this process of becoming human itself is the Confucian relational self. In the words of Ames (ibid.): “becoming consummate as persons (*Ren*) ... is to cultivate our conduct assiduously as it is expressed through those family, community, and cosmic roles and relations that we live”. As such, *Ren* (仁) is precisely this process of self-cultivation. As Ames puts it:

in this Confucian tradition, the ‘I’ is irreducibly ‘we’ in the sense that we need each other to become persons. That is, if there is only one person, there are no persons. Becoming consummate in our conduct *Ren* (仁) is something that we do, and that we do together or not at all. (Ibid.)

Most commentators on Confucianism agree with Ames that *Ren* (仁) cannot be achieved by individuals on their own but rather requires sociality. In other words, to become consummately human one must interact with others in ways which reflect the fact others inevitably have a role in shaping our referential frameworks (and *vice versa*) and therefore that we can both learn from and teach others in ways which are conducive to becoming consummately human (*Ren* 仁) (Ames 2018, 177). Therefore, the Confucian conception of the self can be defined in processual terms as becoming a shared self-consciousness of roles and relations.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to provide further clarity on the Confucian concept of the self by distinguishing it from some common misrepresentations, particularly the notion of self-effacing collectivism. Engaging with key scholarship, notably Ames (2021) and Rošker (2023), I argued that such misrepresentations often stem from imposing Western frameworks that fail to account for the relational dynamics central to Confucian thought. My exploration began with a philosophical critique of the assumptions underpinning the collectivist misreading, demonstrating how frameworks like Munro's (1979) rely on inappropriate individualist premises that are alien to the Confucian context. Building on Hall and Ames' (1997) insights, I showed that the Confucian relational self is not a passive entity subsumed within collective demands, but rather an identity constituted by the unique place that emerges for someone through their specific roles and relationships. Rošker's (2023) notion of relationism further underscores this point, emphasizing the Confucian self's capacity for self-reflection and individuation. In the second half of the paper, I turned to primary Confucian texts to ground these theoretical reflections in textual evidence. I showed that *Ren* (仁) can be regarded as encapsulating the process of becoming human through the cultivation of virtuous relationships. By engaging with passages from the *Analects* and the *Mencius*, I demonstrated how the relational self is not static but continually realized through the enactment of *Ren* (仁). I concluded that the Confucian conception of the self is best defined in processual terms as becoming a shared self-consciousness of roles and relations.

Acknowledgements

I thank Dr Joshua Forstenzer for his feedback. This research was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UKRI) [Grant Number AH/R012733/1].

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