

Li (禮), or Ritual Propriety: A Preface to a Confucian Philosophy of Human Action

Diogenes

2015, Vol. 62(2) 71–80

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DOI: 10.1177/0392192117703052

journals.sagepub.com/home/dio

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose an interpretation of the Confucian concept of *li* or Ritual Propriety, and suggest a new philosophy of action and mind on the basis of the concept. To achieve this aim, I focus upon and analyze passages in *The Analects*, and try to establish major Confucian theses on human action. By comparing Confucian views on human action with Western ones, I shed light on the originality of the concept of *li*.

Major theses on *li* in *The Analects* are as follows: (1) As an essential characteristic of human behavior, *li* is ordinary and ubiquitous. (2) *Li* is a socialized form of our mind, is the outside of an inside, and as such presupposes the unity of the mind and body. (3) *Li* is a social medium through which we interact with others in order to achieve common values and to turn our society into a harmonious and aesthetic space. To argue for the above theses, I focus on the centrality of language in our life, and utilize Russian psychologist Vygotsky's theory of language learning as well as Wittgenstein's concept of language game, together with the Confucian theory of correct names.

I

The goal of this paper is to propose an interpretation of the Confucian concept of *li* (ritual propriety), and to suggest a new philosophy of action and mind on the basis of the Confucian concept of *li*. This new interpretation will enable us to take a new look at the nature of human being and ethics. The concept of *li* is one of the central concepts most frequently discussed in *The Analects*. *Li* is unique to Confucianism, and Western ethics does not have any counterpart to it. Although Western translators have suggested various translations, none of them delivers the original and deep insights contained in the concept of *li* about human actions and the relation between the mind and the body.

In order to explicate the full significances of the concept, all extensive documents, such as *The Analects*, *Mencius*, *Xunxi*, *Liji* (禮記, The Book of Rites), should be reviewed. Considering the limited space of this article, the tasks are confined to the following three: (1) Focus on the passages

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in *The Analects*, and try to establish a major Confucian thesis on human action; (2) Compare the characteristics of Confucian views on human action with Western ones; (3) Argue for Confucian views with the aid of linguistic theories of philosopher Wittgenstein and Russian psychologist Vygotsky. This article is an attempt to fuse Eastern and Western philosophies by supporting Eastern ethical insights with Western linguistic theories.

In the tradition of Western philosophy, the existence of the soul, its structure, and its immortality were the subject matter of intensive discussion as early as 5th century BC: Socrates preached the care of the soul; Plato discussed the nature and destiny of the soul in many of his dialogues (*Phaedo*, *Republic*, *Phaedrus*...). In contrast, Confucius rarely discussed the heart-mind (xin, 心). This fact indicates that the concept of the heart-mind (心) itself was not regarded as a major philosophical theme. While the word 'xin' (心) is mentioned only six times in *The Analects* (PKU Library, 1992: 110), it is remarkable that the concept of *li* (禮) is one of the most frequently discussed concepts in *the Analects*, together with that of *ren* (仁). *Li* is a set of norms for human actions or behavior rather than for the mind. This fact provides a major motive for this paper: why did Confucius believe that *li* or ritual propriety was a more important philosophical theme than the mind?

My working hypothesis is that the notion of *li* is closely linked to the Confucian view on the mind. Whereas Western philosophers have thought that the possession of the mind and reason is the differential of the human being, Confucians held the belief that humans differ from animals in their unique way of acting.

Bodily behavior rather than the mind is the social medium through which we interact and communicate with others and construct a life-world, a *Lebenswelt*. While Western thinkers have assumed that mind is primarily the cognitive agent to know reality, or to acquire truth, Confucians maintained that the mind is mainly an agent of actions. That is, it is the inner cause of language utterances and actions, and its major role is to coordinate our actions with that of others. The Confucian heart-mind (心) can have significance and objective status only when it is realized in actions and language. What the Confucian mind faces is not the world, but the minds of others in its community. In that regard, the mind is primarily social and action-oriented (Fingarette, 1972). In summary, *li* or other ritually proper actions are the realizations of the mind.

2 *Li* in the *Analects*

2.1 Ordinarity and ubiquity of *li*

Confucianism holds that *li* is the typical feature of human behavior in general. The underlying ideas of certain Western ethical theories, such as utilitarianism, hedonism, and social contract theories – i.e., that human beings in everyday life are selfish, and their principle of action is the satisfaction of egoistic desires – are foreign to Confucianism. For Confucian thinkers, human beings in everyday existence are basically moral, and they behave themselves as ethical beings: being human means being ethical. This view is a part of the connotations contained in the concept of *li*. It is not only on ceremonial occasions, such as marriage, funeral, or ancestor memorial, that observance of a ritual propriety is required; even in everyday life, *li* ought to be observed and it actually is. Thus, even when we eat or sit, which is believed to be simply a physical and physiological behavior, we humans should and in fact do observe the ritual proprieties.

君子無終食之間 違仁

Exemplary persons do not take leave of their authoritative conduct (*ren*, 仁) even for the space of a meal (*Analects*, 4.5).¹

席不正，不坐

He would not sit unless the mats were properly placed in accord with custom (*Analects*, 10.12).

Do we really observe ritual proprieties even when we are eating and sitting – and if so, why? Although eating and sitting are the kinds of behavior we share with animals, we humans do not eat nor do we sit in the same ways as animals do: we cook rice, take meals with spoons or with the right hand, and sit in a proper way. Table manners are the most basic etiquettes to keep. Confucian belief in the ubiquity of *li* is more explicitly declared in the following passage. *Li* behaviors are the basic constituents of the human life-world. The world of human beings is the space of *li*:

非禮勿視 非禮勿聽 非禮勿言 非禮勿動.

Do not look at anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not listen to anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not speak anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety; do not do anything that violates the observance of ritual propriety (*Analects*, 12.1).

The belief that we as a matter of fact follow normative rules is more generally and formally expressed in the theory of correct names (正名論): words in our natural language, when correctly used, have normative power; and insofar as we follow the guidance of these words, we do in fact observe the ethical norms. Since *li* constitutes the human life-world, it is ubiquitous in human life. Human life-space is not just a marketplace where different self-interests are coordinated through social contract guided by prudential reason. It is a value-laden space where certain ethical attitudes and values, which result from our own self-awareness as human beings, lead our life. *Ren* (仁), *jing* (敬), and *li* (禮) are these attitudes and values. If our neighbors did not observe the ritual proprieties in their behavior or speech, we would close our eyes and would not listen to their speech. Likewise, if we did not observe the ritual proprieties in our behavior or speech in our relationship with other members of our community, we would not draw their responses or attention. By *modus tollens*, since we do as a matter of fact communicate and exchange actions with others, we for the most part do observe ritual proprieties in daily life.

2.2 The unity of mind and body

In the above, we have noted that Confucius rarely discussed the concept of the heart-mind in *The Analects*. It is not because he was not interested in the mind. Rather, in his conception of the mind, the heart-mind is the agent of *li*. It coordinates human behavior in a society; it is something to be realized in *li*. In contrast to it, the primary role of the mind in Western understanding is to seek truth and to know reality. The Confucian mind is inseparably connected with the body. *Li* behavior is the manifestation of the mind: to borrow Saussure's term, the relation between Confucian mind and the body is similar to that between the signified and the signifier of a linguistic sign (Saussure, 1966: 67).

In the old days, Confucians were state-bureaucrats who supervised religious ceremonies (Cai, 1994: 21). They recognized that not only religious ceremonies but also everyday human life activities had ritualistic aspects. They generalized this insight into the concept of *li*, and established the concept as the central ethical principle. Ritual ceremonies presuppose that some invisible entity supervises certain aspects of our life. The concept of *li* is formed from the belief that our life as a whole is led by some invisible values or principles; moreover, human actions, even in ordinary life, are efforts to realize these values.

Underlying the concept of *li*, the Confucians' emphasis on the body and action over mind is present: Confucian moral training consists in the discipline of the body or the social self (修身) rather than the discipline of the mind (修心).

Why do they prioritize the body over the mind? The following considerations may provide an answer. For our minds to have any significance to others and draw their reactions, our mental activities must manifest themselves through language or bodily behavior. The latter is a social medium by virtue of which we interact with others: through behavior we deliver our thoughts, intentions, and feelings to others.

For Confucians, the major role of the mind is to coordinate our social behavior. The goal of human ethical efforts is not to reach or to realize some divine or transcendent values, but to construct a human and ethical realm in this world through ritually proper behaviors (*li*). Unlike a large part of Western philosophy that strives to reach philosophical superlatives (Wittgenstein, 1953, §192), Confucians do not believe in such superlatives. For them, reality and truth, or rather, the *dao* (道), lie in our everyday life-world of comparatives.

The belief in the unity of mind and body underlies the concept of *li*. Mind and body are inseparably connected in human behavior; the humane mind (*ren*, 仁) and ritually proper behavior (*li*, 禮) are necessary and sufficient conditions for each other: without the mind of *ren*, we cannot observe the ritual propriety; we can read others' minds only if we examine their behaviors:

人而不仁 如 禮何,

What has a person who is not authoritative (*ren*) got to do with observing ritual propriety (*li*)? (*Analects*, 3.3).

While the mind of *ren* is necessary for observance of a ritual propriety, the practice of *li* transforms people's mind into the *ren* mind and thus the observance of *li* results in the overcoming of the natural self:

克己復禮爲仁 一日克己復禮 天下歸仁焉。

Through self-discipline and observing ritual propriety, one becomes authoritative in one's conduct. If for the space of a day one were able to accomplish this, the whole empire would defer to this authoritative model (*Analects*, 12.1).

With regard to the relationship between the mind and the body, we should note in the above verse that the observance of a ritual propriety comes from the control of our natural self, and it influences the mind of the whole community. Self (己), in the above passage, is meant to be a natural, instinctive self. The self in a natural state is indeterminate and chaotic, so that selves of this kind cannot avoid conflicting with each other. By moulding and controlling the selves of this kind with the cultural patterns (*wen*, 文), we can transform our rough mind into the *ren* mind and turn our amorphous behavior into ritually proper conducts, which in turn educate other people's minds.

We are not born with the *ren* mind (仁心). It is a result of cultivation and learning. Subject matters of Confucian learning and knowing are not reality or truth, nor is the aim of learning the acquisition of the so-called objective knowledge. What we should learn and know are exemplary speeches and behaviors of sages, or values and norms of culture transmitted through tradition. The results of cultivation and learning are summarized in the system of *li*, which controls and guides our behaviors:

博學於文，約之以禮。

Learn broadly of culture, discipline this learning through observing ritual propriety... (*Analects*, 12.15).

Confucians share with Western thinkers the view that the possession of the mind is the differentia of human beings from other animals. But as mentioned before, the mind of the West is primarily cognitive ability, whereas the Confucian mind is the ability to perform ethical conducts. Humans live lives and behave themselves in ways that are quite different from animals because humans have the *ren* mind (仁心).

According to Confucius, words and actions of humans are signifiers of the mind. Due to this inseparable relation, we can read others' minds by examining their behavior:

察言而觀色。

They examine what is said, are keen observers of demeanor, ... (*Analects*, 12.20).

不知言 無而知人也。

A person who does not understand words has no way of knowing others (*Analects*, 20.3).

Expressions, such as 'examine what is said (察言)', 'keen observers of demeanor (觀色)', 'understand words (知言)', 'knowing others (知人)', suggest that we can read others' minds by closely observing their words and actions, and that one's words and actions are the expression of, or, to be more accurate, the realization of the mind itself.

2.3 Li and social harmony

Ren mind is formed and *li* behavior is performed when we are aware of the fact that we are humans (*Analects*, 12.1: 7.30). Furthermore, in order to live with other members of our community, we ought to extend such awareness to them. The latter step is the Confucian principle of analogical extension (*shu*, 恕). As Zhuzi comments, *shu* (恕) means "putting oneself in the other's place (推己及人)," or extending our attitude of self-respect to others. Our words and actions should come from the respect for others' personalities, and our actions should be performed in consideration of the context and situations, so that they can be harmonized with others' behaviors. This harmony enables us to achieve the common goods shared by our community:

禮之用 和爲貴... 有所不行 知和而和 不以禮節之 亦不可行也。

Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety [...]. But when things are not going well, to realize harmony for its own sake without regulating the situation through observing ritual propriety will not work (*Analects*, 1.12).

恭而無禮則勞 慎而無禮則蕙 勇而無禮則亂 直而無禮則絞。

Deference unmediated by observing ritual propriety is lethargy; caution unmediated by observing ritual propriety is timidity; boldness unmediated by observing ritual propriety is rowdiness; candor unmediated by observing ritual propriety is rudeness (*Analects*, 8.2).

Most people in most cases perform daily acts in a way fitting to *li*: they eat, sit, sleep, and wear clothes in a socially proper way. If our words are uttered and actions are in fact performed in a

ritually proper manner, it is because of the programs internalized in us in the course of a long process of socialization. However, we are continually confronted with new situations, which require reflective contemplation. Due respect for others and careful consideration of situations should be made, whether it is the moment for an audience with a duke in the palace or a time for encountering the blind. Confucius' cautious manner in *The Analects* 10.4 can be understood in this context:²

入公門 鞠躬如也 如不容。

On passing through the entrance way to the duke's court, he would bow forward from the waist, as though the gateway were not high enough (*Analects*, 10.4).

The way our social behaviors keep harmony with others' is similar to the way players lead a dynamic, harmonious, and fun-producing game by exchanging game actions. Similarly, observance of ritual proprieties not only makes the realm of human life ethical, but it also turns it into a more pleasant and harmonious space:

人而不仁 如樂何，

What has a person who is not authoritative got to do with the playing of music? (*Analects*, 3.3).

興於詩，立於禮，成於樂。

I find inspiration by intoning the songs, I learn where to stand from observing ritual propriety, and I find fulfilment in playing music (*Analects*, 8.8).

When our mind is inspired by poems in the Book of Songs, we establish ourselves in the society by observing ritual proprieties, which render the whole society filled with pleasant harmony. The above sentences express the relation between the inspired mind, ritual behaviors, and the harmonious community in a neat way.³ We may compare society to an orchestra, where different musicians come together and perform a harmonious symphony by playing their own parts. The reason as to why they can produce one and the same piece of music, despite the differences between their instruments, is that each musician respects the other players and follows the symphonic rules. To draw another analogy, we can liken our cultural activities in a life space to actions in a game: as Wittgenstein and Saussure pointed out, culture is a set of language games or a sort of chess game (Wittgenstein, 1953; Saussure, 1966: 22, 88).

We can summarize the major theses on *li* in *The Analects* discussed above as follows:

- (1) As an essential characteristic of human behavior, *li* is ordinary and ubiquitous.
- (2) *Li* is an expression and realization of humanity.
- (3) *Li* is a socialized and objectified form of the social mind; it is the outside of an inside.⁴
- (4) *Li* is a social medium through which we exchange our words and actions with others in a harmonious way, so that we can transform our society into a pleasant and aesthetic space.

3 Language-dependence and rituality of human action

3.1 An argument for the concept of *li*

Are our ordinary human conducts really ritualistic? The following argument would support the positive answer to the question:

- A. Human action is language-dependent.
- B. Linguistic activities are language games.
- C. Human actions are game actions of language games.
- D. Words are basic blocks for rituals in that they are norms or rules to express or realize human values.
- E. As a consequence, actions in language games are ritualistic.
- F. Therefore, human actions are ritualistic.

With regard to premise A, we can obtain support from Russian psychologist Vygotsky's view on the relation between language and action. Wittgenstein's theory of language game and Saussure's linguistic theory support premise B. From A and B, thesis C follows. Thesis D needs some discussion. Game actions are interactive activities between players of equal status, while ritual ceremonies are performances which express respect for an entity or value of a higher order. However, if we can accept the Confucian theory of correct name (正名論), we can think of linguistic activities as a sort of ritual. Language is value-laden: the natural language of a certain community is not just an instrument to communicate with other members of the community; it also embeds the most fundamental norms to be observed in order for humans to live and interact with others. Thus, speaking the natural language of a community is an act of ritual observance in the most fundamental sense (thesis E). From C and E, conclusion F follows.

3.2 Vygotsky's theory of language: Language learning and behavior control

Are human actions really language-dependent? Vygotsky's psychology will help us in answering the question as well as in supporting the unity of the mind and the body. The first experience children are confronted with in a society is socialization. The first and basic step of socialization is language learning. In fact, socialization is an ongoing process that is conducted during the whole course of life, just as our language learning and linguistic activities are lifetime activities.

According to Vygotsky's theory, language acquisition brings about qualitative change in children's behavior. He maintains that language is more than a means of communication between community members (interpersonal medium); it is also a medium through which a child's mind relates to his own consciousness and his own body (intrapersonal medium). Language is a major tool of the mind with which the mind forms consciousness and controls its own body (Vygotsky, 1978: 89–91).

By learning language from adults, children acquire a means of communication with adults. Sooner or later, they internalize the acquired language, and utilize this as a tool to form higher intellectual capacities, such as mediated perception, intentional attention, deliberate memory, and conceptual thinking. Internal language in its turn enables children to regulate their own bodies by providing a tool to determine the shape of their conduct (Vygotsky, 1963: 108 ff). This latter aspect of language learning is important to our discussion.

Language acquisition brings about the following changes for children's behavior. During the pre-linguistic stage, children are passive responders to the environment. With the tool of the mind, they become active agents; they objectify the world, including their own body and behavior, by conceptualizing the world and behavior with language. Now, they can deliberate over actions to be done, make plans, and choose among various options. With the aid of language, they have emancipated themselves from the slavery of the senses to become free agents.

Once their shapes are determined by language, actions turn into parts of a narrative and become situated in a social context. They form a network of meanings and a social narrative. Thus, our actions, once conceptualized by language, enter into relations with a myriad of other actions,

events, and objects, whose social shapes have already been given by language. Situated in social coordinates, our actions are constrained by the network of meanings: they become the subject matters of judgment as to their rationality, social propriety, context-sensitivity, or ethical justifiability.

When children come to realize that their actions are constrained by the meaning relations of a community they belong to, they accept that they should perform their actions under that constraint in order to be a member of the community. Their actions should and for the most part do have shapes and meanings that are understandable by their community. The fact that their actions are intelligible to their community implies that children behave themselves in ways that are acceptable to the community.

Words are powerful storage media: they store social memories accumulated throughout generations. One of the most important items among these memories is the set of rules which members of a community abide by and the values which they cherish. Thus, as children learn the language of a society, it is a matter of course that they are programmed to perform actions conformable to the social rules and values immanent in the language. In short, they observe the ritual proprieties (*li*) of the society whose language they acquire.

To sum up, Vygotsky's theory carries the following implications regarding the concept of *li*:

- (1) Human behaviors are language-dependent.
- (2) Our behaviors, once their shapes are determined by language, become parts of a network of social meanings; thus, our ways of behaving come under the constraints of those meanings, and our behaviors are transformed into ritually proper behaviors, i.e., into *li*.
- (3) Our mind utilizes the acquired language in order to control our body and action, integrating the domain of the body into that of the mind; thus the unity of the mind and the body is achieved.

3.3 Theory of correct names (正名論)

One of the central thesis of Confucianism is the theory of correct names. It is first expressed briefly by Confucius (*Analects*, 12.11 and 13.3), and is later more fully explicated by Xunzi (*Xunzi*, book 22). The core of the theory is that names or words are not mere labels of things, they are also norms which guide and constrain our actions by exerting normative force.

In order to better understand the normativity of words, let us take a couple of primitive and elementary vocabularies, such as "Mama," "Daddy," "Yummy," or "Yucky." A child who has acquired these words can catch his mother's attention with the aid of a couple of syllables and can also ask for something to eat quite easily. But sooner or later, the child comes to realize that he has entered into a realm of rules he is forced to follow if he is to use those words. These words are of course very convenient tools to call things in the world around the child. However, they also prescribe, and even force upon language users, definite ways of acting, thinking, and feeling: these prescriptive or regulatory rules enforced by words are essential parts of the meanings of the words.

The concept of *li* is closely related with the theory of correct names: Observance of ritual proprieties consists in behaving oneself as the everyday words prescribe and treating others in the way they are named: someone called "ruler" ought to behave himself as a ruler, a minister should conduct the job as the word "minister" prescribes:

君君 臣臣 父父 子子

The ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son (*Analects*, 12.11).

These sentences are not mere tautologies. They are to remind us that the words ‘ruler’ and ‘father’ are basic and elementary social norms which enforce certain ways of acting. This normative power of ordinary language is the result of a long history of language evolution, during which language users have imbued words with ways of acting, thinking, or feeling. These ways constitute the forms of life, which are shared by the language community, and which have survived long and arduous evolutionary tests over many generations.

3.4 Wittgenstein’s theory of language game

Western tradition has largely believed that humans are born with the cognitive mental ability to seek truth and to know reality. Language has been regarded merely as an instrument of our mind to express and deliver to others what it thinks and what it acquires as reality via epistemological efforts. Criticizing this traditional belief in the priority of the mind and truth, Wittgenstein (1953) suggests that language rules our life, that our culture is a series of language games, that our mind is a result of linguistic activity and thus it is social. If our life-activity, including our behaviors, is a set of language games, then our behaviors are rule-following actions, and thus are ritualistic.

To find out what kind of characteristics our behaviors have in case they are part of language games, let us analyze the structure of the language game. Games have the following features:

- (1) Most games have a medium with which players play with each other, such as a soccer ball in a soccer game. This medium sets up the most basic and comprehensive rule, which fundamentally regulates players’ activities: while playing a game, soccer players are not allowed to touch the soccer ball with their hands.
- (2) Game motions of players could be construed in an objective way. Otherwise, their motions would not incur other players’ responses. This means that for each game, there is a proper way of interpreting the players’ motions.
- (3) The nature of a game and its rules are formed in the long history of the game, and they exist in the form of internalized and shared memories among players.
- (4) Players’ intentions, to be meaningful in the game, ought to be externalized in the form of players’ bodily actions observable by others: players’ actions are manifestations of their intentions.
- (5) Players’ intentions and their bodily actions do not carry any significance by themselves. They are meaningful only insofar as they serve certain values agreed upon and shared by all players. This last feature of the game makes game actions ritualistic.

From these structural features of games thus analyzed, we can infer the following about players, game actions, and the field of the game:

- (1) All actions performed in a game are rule-observing ones.
- (2) Insofar as game players perform rule-following actions, and as these rules followed serve certain values shared by all players, the players are treated and respected as meaningful agents. Thus they should be differentiated from outsiders of the game.
- (3) The identities of game actions do not lie in their visible shapes. They are not what they appear to be, but they are expressions of players’ inner intentions or, to be accurate, their realizations. Their identities should be interpreted against the background of the game field and context. Bodily motions in games are language-dependent in that their identities are determined by the game language.

- (4) The ground of a game is not the visible space where bodily motions are exchanged between players. The genuine field of the game spread in the minds of the players. And this mental field, although invisible, turns into objective and social space, when players' intentions are exchanged with each other, embodied in visible forms of actions.
- (5) Players in a game pursue common aims or values by exchanging game actions.

*

The society in which we live in is not a visible spatio-temporal space, but a community of minds. Our actions, as realizations or embodiments of our intentions, are ritualistic; thus, they are *li* behaviors. We humans for the most part observe social proprieties, i.e., we perform *li* actions, and are morally good, as Mencius insisted. However, this moral goodness is not a feature of our inborn nature; it is the result of nurture, the result of socialization, the combination of inborn nature and cultural socialization (性偽之合), as Xunzi argued.

For a majority of Western thinkers, a state or a society is the result of a social contract, which compromises conflicting self-interests. In order to be ethical, they have argued, we humans ought to go beyond this phenomenal world, and to try to reach some philosophical or ethical superlatives, such as the Idea of the Good, intrinsic Goodness, Categorical Imperatives...

Confucians' conception of everyday life-world is completely different. It is already an ethical dimension; this world of comparatives is itself real and value-laden. Once socialized, our everyday conducts for the most part are transformed into ritual proprieties, which are also efforts to achieve common values of our community. Comparatively speaking, our everyday life-world as a whole is the realm of values or the space of *li* (禮).

Notes

1. In the following, the translations cited are those of Ames and Rosemont 1998. However, as for the translation of *ren* (仁), I think that the expression 'humane' or 'worthy of the name of man' is preferable to their translation 'authoritative'.
2. We may compare Confucius' cautious mind to the Balinese *Lek* (shame), see Geertz, 1973: 401–402.
3. Cf. Balinese's view on human behavior, Geertz, 1973: 400.
4. This expression is borrowed from Owen, 1992: 27.

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