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Contemplating the Necessity of Propriety

According to Lao Tzu, propriety is what comes when the Tao, its attributes, benevolence, and righteousness has been lost. Since it is the what comes after the Tao, benevolence, and righteousness, Lao Tzu also suggests it lacks leal-heartedness. To start my essay, I will explain the idea of propriety as societal incompetence. Afterwards, I will explain Lao Tzu's idea that propriety lacks leal-heartedness. I will then explain The Analects idea that propriety is to advance the upright and set aside the wicked. In response, I will give the Tao's potential rebuttal that The Analects are inconsistent. After presenting such evidence, I will give my argument on how propriety can be considered societal incompetence. To finish my essay, I will consider the argument that propriety is needed for a practical society, then counter it with the fact that what we see as practical may not be the best option for a competent society. I will be arguing for the interpretation of propriety as societal incompetence.

Propriety can be interpreted as societal incompetence. For this essay, propriety is how a member of society should act within that society. In other words, propriety is the normal way to act or be in society. Propriety is not an individual's idea of moral behavior. This can be said because a society is not necessarily the views of everyone. Society is a grouping of people that are typically similar but not identical. According to Confucius, propriety must be taught to people. The necessity to teach propriety relative to a person's society entails that propriety is not objective. If some people understand and use propriety as a means of rulemaking while others understand and do not use it, then there must be other ways to rule. If something is objectively

good, it would be used by anyone who understands the concept, assuming rulers want what is best for their citizens. Lao Tzu's interpretation is that propriety is the consequence from loss of the Tao, its attributes, benevolence, and righteousness. If propriety is not the Tao, we must decide which is better for rulemaking. The Tao is not meant for rule making, directly. It is meant to understand reality. However, understanding reality can lead to rulemaking, indirectly. If objectivity involves existing as is without the need to teach it into existence, reality is objective. I mean reality with no particular characteristics other than it is what already exists outside of human manipulation. Basing our lives, which can be manipulated, off the unmanipulated reality seems like the best route to take for societal excellence. If basing our lives off reality is the best and if the Tao is reality, the Tao is the better means of rulemaking. Societal incompetence entails flawed behavior within society. For example, a society that throws out reality and uses an interpretation that may or may not be affective is exhibiting flawed behavior. Lao Tzu's interpretation that propriety is not perfect entails that a society ran from propriety is not running without flaws. Therefore, it is societal incompetence.

To further the explanation of propriety as societal incompetence, I offer Lao Tzu's idea that propriety lacks leal-heartedness. Leal-heartedness is the act of being loyal because there is a desire to be loyal. It is not the act of being loyal out of necessity. It is also not the act of being loyal because there is a desire for the benefits of being loyal. Propriety, or social norms, give guidelines to determine appropriate actions. If propriety is the normal way of acting or being within society, then it must provide guidelines to determine if people are indeed acting or being normal. This raises the question whether people are loyal toward propriety because they genuinely want to be normal or because they feel the need to be normal. Though being normal may be a genuine desire, it clearly comes with benefits as well. When it is those benefits that are

being sought after, authenticity will likely diminish slowly as more and more normality is demanded. In other words, if it is rewards, we want, it is the actions that acquire those rewards that will be done. If it is the actions we want, whether rewarded or not, we will not stray from those desired actions. According to Lao Tzu in this translation of The Tao, “propriety is the attenuated form of leal-heartedness.” In other words, Lao Tzu seems to suggest that people may be acting with small amounts of authenticity. However, for the most part, Lao Tzu believes that people are acting loyal out of necessity or to gain the benefits.

Confucius proposes many characteristics of the superior man. For this essay, I focus on the mastery of propriety, the idea that the superior man would best rule his citizens by putting rules of propriety first. Rules of propriety are the guidelines that the superior man follows to reach superiority. If propriety is the normal way of acting or being, rules of propriety are rules created by propriety’s idea of normality. If mastery of propriety is a characteristic of the superior man, mastery of normality is a characteristic of the superior man. To progress this perfect normality, Confucius suggests a method of submission. He suggests advancing the upright and setting aside the crooked. This does not mean punishing the crooked. Rather, the superior man would not react to the disobedience with either rewards or punishments. According to Confucius, the superior man would rule in accordance with propriety by acting positively toward good behavior and inattentive toward bad behavior. Encouraging a specific behavior while discouraging the opposing behavior is a form of submission.

In response to Confucius's idea of propriety Lao Tzu may suggest that The Analects are inconsistent with the Tao. According to Lao Tzu’s text about The Tao, sages are to act without action. Sages can be compared to the superior man in that Lao Tzu considers sages to be at the highest level of humans. Acting without acting, in the context of governing, means correcting

negative behavior without actively confronting or expensing resources to do so. It does not mean correcting a negative behavior by confronting the perpetrator. It also does not mean expensing resources to achieve the opposing, good behavior. The Analects showcases a form of acting without action when setting aside the crooked. However, it also showcases acting with action when advancing upright. By confronting those who are deemed upright, the superior man is excreting resources to achieve the opposition of being crooked. He may look like he is setting aside, but by considering the advancements for the upright it can be said that the superior man contradicts the sage. If The Tao represents reality, the sage is acting in accordance with reality while the superior man is acting in accordance with an unauthentic interpretation of reality.

I am arguing that propriety is social incompetence. In other words, propriety is a flawed behavioral concept within society. Societal incompetence is when a society cannot effectively provide a safe and authentic environment for its citizens. It is when people are forced to act in a certain way out of fear of social consequences like isolation. In contrast, societal competence would be a society that can effectively allow people to be authentic in a safe manner. It is when people can be themselves with the aid of social acceptance. Rules of propriety, such as advancing the upright and setting aside the crooked, indicate a lack of loyalty to a society's citizens. According to The Analects, this rule is carried out with the purpose of having the people submit to their master. In other words, the master's goal with this rule is to have people's obedience. To submit is to act as told by the superior man, not necessarily by one's own desire to be loyal. When people violate the master's orders they are seen as crooked. When the crooked are set aside, it teaches them that being disobedient is unfruitful. This does deter them from continued disobedience. This deterrence is amplified when the superior man rewards obedient behavior. When one behavior gets them rewarded and the other behavior gets them nowhere, people are

likely to submit to the master. It is the logical option. This does create loyalty, but it is not authentic loyalty. People are loyal for selfish reasons, not because they respect or believe in the competence of their master.

It may be said that propriety is necessary to navigate a social world. If propriety is what is normal and appropriate, adhering to the rules of propriety is the only way to ensure normal and appropriate behavior by citizens within society. According to Confusions, propriety is the way to get citizens to behave. It provides people with the sense of shame and thus the idea of acting without shame. In other words, if propriety is what is followed when behaving, a person will not act in a way that is shameful for society. Rules of propriety provide people with guidelines needed to know their roles within society. It provides consistency, which is necessary for sustaining a proper society.

In response, I reiterate that my argument is for the interpretation of propriety as societal incompetence. In reality, it is likely impossible to have everyone act according to one set of rules. For propriety to work, people must want to be normal. As mentioned before, people are likely acting in accordance with propriety out of necessity or for the benefits. If people are not acting out of desire to be normal, then society's perspective of normal is likely not the majority's opinion. If society is being run for the purpose of helping people navigate the social world by using rules that are only superficially agreed on, then society is not running from authenticity. It is not being run with the purpose of allowing people to be realistic. A society that encourages an unrealistic reality is flawed. If society is using propriety to encourage an unrealistic reality, then propriety is the cause of these flaws. Therefore, propriety is flawed. If propriety is flawed, it is incompetent. If society is using an incompetent concept to make rules, then societal rules are incompetent. If rules, and not authenticity, are what make society, then society is incompetent. If

propriety is what makes society's rules, and thus society, then propriety is social incompetence. Though rules of propriety may provide roles and consistency, it cannot effectively justify the competence of the roles and consistency.