

Article

Persuasion without Words: Confucian Persuasion and the Supernatural

Se-Hyoung Yi

Department of Social and Cultural Sciences, University of Houston-Clear Lake, Houston, TX 77058, USA; yi@uhcl.edu

Received: 11 January 2019; Accepted: 29 November 2019; Published: 4 December 2019



Abstract: This article revisits the nonverbal rhetorical tradition in Confucianism and examines how Confucianism actualized the tradition through its careful consideration of supernatural forces. In Confucianism, genuine persuasion produces actual change and transformation of one's course of action, not merely verbal conviction. Speech only is not enough to genuinely persuade others. A speaker must transform others by his exemplary acts in the rites and holy ceremonies where supernatural forces and the notion of the afterlife hold a significant place. While Confucius was not interested in discussing the existence of demons and ghosts or their actual function in society, he recognized that their supposed and assumed existence in holy rites would provide society with an opportunity for genuine persuasion, which leads people to actual changes and reforms in their political and moral life. Discussing the nonverbal mode of persuasion in Confucianism may enhance contemporary democracy in two aspects. First, nonverbal persuasion recognizes those who may have difficulty in actively participating in verbal communication, such as the disabled, immigrants, foreigners, and politically and socially marginalized people, in political discourses. Second, the positive role of civic religion in contemporary societies may be discovered.

Keywords: Confucius; rhetoric; persuasion; deliberative democracy; the supernatural; afterlife

1. Introduction: Nonverbal Rhetoric and the Supernatural

Recently, scholars started paying attention to the “deliberative” or “verbal” tradition in Confucianism. The Confucian concept of *yi* (議) or *lunyi* (論議), often translated to “deliberating in politics” (Tan 2014, p. 85), affirms the deliberative and linguistic nature of Confucian politics. In the Confucian political tradition, collective political decision in royal courts and official forums must be made through “a deliberative kind of verbal exchange” or “an active verbal dialogue” in which reason or thinking is employed (Tan 2014, p. 85; Kim 2014, p. 91). For example, *Chunqiu bifa* (春秋筆法), the rhetorical form Confucius adopted to compile and edit *Chunqiu* (春秋), emphasizes the importance of elaborating profound meanings of each word through subtle historical narratives and ideological contexts (Wu 2018, p. 301). This style of writing proves Confucius's inventive use of linguistic tools in guiding political deliberations. The concept of Confucian deliberation resonates with the idea of deliberative democracy: a collective decision must be made and justified through reasoned deliberation and mutual critique among citizens (Cohen 1997, p. 67; Habermas and Rehg 2001, pp. 772–74; Gutmann and Thompson 2004, pp. 2–3). Both Confucianism and deliberative democratic theory share the importance of reasonable speech and reciprocal communication, emphasizing that people must be mutually persuaded by reasonable and rational arguments to justify their collective decision. This discovery—or rediscovery—of the linguistic and deliberative tradition in Confucianism proves that Confucianism may not only be compatible with contemporary democracy, but can enhance it.

While Confucianism may have been reconciled with contemporary democracy through this realization of the linguistic and deliberative common ground, putting too much emphasis on

this linguistic tradition has obscured another rich rhetorical tradition in Confucianism: nonverbal persuasion, or persuasion without words. The nonverbal rhetorical tradition in Confucianism has not drawn much attention. A few scholars started discussing the Confucian nonverbal mode of persuasion, but they have failed to consider the inevitable link between nonverbal persuasion and the supernatural realm and the supernatural beings that took their legitimate place in Confucianism (You 2006; Ziliotti 2018). In other words, Confucianism is understood and interpreted exclusively in the context of the linguistic and logocentric tradition. There may be a couple of reasons for this trend. First, nonverbal persuasion does not fit well in today's democratic ideals that focus on speech, verbal communication, reasonable argument, and freedom of expression. Second, discussing the nonverbal rhetorical tradition in Confucianism necessarily requires analyzing the Confucian perception of the supernatural realm and supernatural beings. While the supernatural is indeed a meaningful and significant topic to understand the cultural and philosophical root of the nonverbal rhetorical tradition in Confucianism and ways of justifying that tradition, discussions about ghosts, spirits, demons, and the afterlife would be considered not quite appropriate in contemporary political society.

Revisiting the idea of nonverbal persuasion and understanding how nonverbal persuasion is actualized in Confucianism through its careful consideration of supernatural forces can enhance our realization of genuine persuasion that produces not merely verbal conviction but actual change and transformation of one's action. Discussing nonverbal persuasion through Confucianism may also allow us to revisit and elaborate on the Western tradition of nonverbal and nonlinguistic persuasion, which has not been emphasized in contemporary political rhetoric. In this context, Confucianism helps contemporary democracy become more inclusive for two reasons. First, nonverbal persuasion recognizes those who may experience difficulty in actively participating in verbal communication, such as the disabled, the uneducated, foreigners and immigrants, and politically and socially marginalized people in political discourses. Second, the positive role of civic religion in contemporary societies may be discovered.

2. Confucius's Ambiguity: Do Spirits Exist?

Confucius has been known for his pragmatic and humanist approaches toward fundamental political questions about state, government, power, law, and justice during the Spring and Autumn period of Chinese history. Considering many influential Chinese thinkers in the same time period who advocated the mysterious retributive power of spirits (*shen*, 神) and demons (*gui*, 鬼), Confucius's hesitation in discussing supernatural forces appears to be surprisingly secular. For example, Mozi teaches that spirits and demons would deliver "an automatic reward for acts that had positive social utility and punishment for those that did not", emphasizing how speedy and severe the rewards and punishments from demons and spirits are (Csikszentmihalyi 2006, p.118).¹ Lao Tzu warns those who govern a country always to remain vigilant of the power of demons, as demons will have evil power on them if they do not follow the Way.² On the contrary, throughout his *Confucius Analects* (*Analects*), Confucius repeated his unwillingness to discuss supernatural forces and judgment in the afterlife. Confucianism is indeed "at most, disinterested in the supernatural . . . if not atheistic" (Knapp 2014, p. 640). Confucius took a major step toward "the explicit rejection of superstition or heavy reliance on supernatural forces" (Fingarette 1966, p. 54), focusing almost exclusively on ethical and political solutions in real-world politics. Confucius remained skeptical about the existence of supernatural forces and the afterlife, and he doubted their active roles in human life if they ever existed.

¹ Mozi wrote in *Mozi* that "This is to say, in distribution of rewards by demons and spirits no man is too insignificant to be rewarded for his virtue. And in the meting out of punishment by ghosts and spirits no man is too great to be punished." (Mozi 1929, p. 173).

² In *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu wrote that "Let the kingdom be governed according to the Tao, and the manes of the departed will not manifest their spiritual energy. It is not that those manes have not that spiritual energy, but it will not be employed to hurt men." (Lao Tzu 1891, p. 104).

For some political philosophers, this secular and humanist perspective distinguishes Confucianism from other ancient Western political philosophies that somehow relied on divine and supernatural forces and their realm for their philosophical and moral teachings. The judgment of souls in the afterlife, which can be found in both Platonic and Christian traditions, is a good example. In Confucian political philosophy, there is no systematic discussion about divine judgment that will determine eternal life after one's death. For Confucius, suffering and sacrificing for a virtuous and morally cultivated life are important, even if there will be no reward or punishment in the afterlife. Living a virtuous and moral life in this world, whether it brings about a tangible reward in this life or only hardship, is an end in itself (*Analects* 15.2).³ This secular, humanist, and pragmatic nature of Confucianism has been continuously called upon and utilized by both Asian and Western political thinkers to explain the rise of Asian economies, including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore.

However, it should be noted that Confucianism was not the only Asian political philosophy that doubted the existence and role of supernatural forces in society. The Spring and Autumn period and the ensuing Warring States period were the times of *realpolitik*. Strong states always preyed upon weak states, and people were ready to do whatever it took to survive. War, deceit, betrayal, and assassination were common. It would be naïve to assume that people living in that kind of political turmoil and chaos simply believed in the works of supernatural forces and divine punishment of the wicked. This is why the Legalist school was likewise popular at that time, teaching that a prince should impose uniform legal codes, strict standards, and impersonal regulations to increase his power and be ready to punish any violators mercilessly.

In that sense, one might ask why Confucius and his followers did not conveniently reject the notion of Heaven or the works of ancestral spirits and demons, but rather took a more complicated path. Indeed, we find a different Confucius in a few passages in *Analects*. When commenting on supernatural forces and humans' attitudes toward them, Confucius did not entirely deny their existence. Confucius even emphasized that humans need to respect ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance (*Analects* 6.22). Confucius advised his disciples to act as if the spirits were presented when sacrificing to them (*Analects* 3.12). In doing so, Confucius's silence and skepticism toward supernatural forces and the afterlife did not translate into his complete rejection of them. Confucius seemed to recognize their existence, and even their function—while limited—in maintaining social harmony.

Scholars have attempted to reconcile Confucius's seemingly contradictory attitudes toward the supernatural by interpreting Confucius as a humanist and as a traditionalist. Confucius's discussion of supernatural forces or the divine realm would be purely a rhetorical or symbolic device to legitimize his ideas of political order and a harmonious society (You 2006, p. 444; El Amine 2015, p. 192) and to effectively teach Confucian virtues to common people who otherwise would not have been able to understand his moral philosophy (Ding 2007, p. 150; Knapp 2014, p. 641). This is where scholars like Herbert Fingarette compare Confucius with Plato, situating Confucius's rhetorical utilization of the supernatural "as a parallel to Platonist-rationalist doctrines" (Fingarette 1972, p. 1). As Plato's extensive discussions of judgment in the afterlife and the works of gods might be a sort of noble lie or grand lie to convince and educate his audience or readers, Confucius also utilized spirits and demons, whose existence he doubted, to justify his moral teachings to the people of his times.

This essay suggests a different perspective to understand Confucius's ambiguity on the supernatural realm and mysterious forces. Confucius's ambiguity was intended to be neither a rhetorical device for intellectual inferiors nor a theoretical device to systemize his moral philosophy, but a practical device to produce the true and genuine form of persuasion. For Confucius, genuine conviction and persuasion must result in actual changes in the audience's action. Verbal agreement or emotional empathy from the audience does not always mean that the audience will act in accordance

³ Throughout this article, I have used translations of Confucius (2013) *Analects* by Edward Slingerland (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing). Quotations from *Confucius Analects* are referenced by book and section.

with what they said they were convinced of. Genuine persuasion is achieved through the sincere visualization of the message, not by crafty and eloquent words. To actualize this unique mode of persuasion without words, Confucius, without any effort to examine, prove, or verify, simply supposed and assumed the existence of supernatural beings and the afterlife.

3. Utilizing the Supernatural: A Comparative Perspective

Confucius's disinterest in supernatural beings and the afterlife is well summarized by a passage in *Analects*: "You are not yet able to serve people—how could you be able to serve ghosts and spirits? ... You do not yet understand life—how could you possibly understand death?" (*Analects* 11.12). For Confucius, while they *may* exist, supernatural beings and the afterlife were not the most urgent and critical topics he wanted to discuss. In another passage, Confucius said that "Having in the morning heard that the Way was being put into practice, I could die that morning without regret" (*Analects* 4.8). Confucius would die happy if he heard that the Way was realized and actualized in this world. There is no discussion of eternal truth in opposition to worldly realities. The Way is not something to be found in the afterlife or in spiritual life, but to be realized in this world. No eternal reward or punishment may be given after one's death. Therefore, Confucius hesitated to discuss the afterlife and any other topic related to spirituality and the supernatural, which may have distracted him from cultivating the virtuous way of life in this world. No version of "last judgment" or "punishment after death" exists in Confucius's teachings. Every teaching of Confucius is about how to live a virtuous and morally cultivated life and how to live together with all people in such a way by governing a state well: "The Master did not discuss prodigies, feats of strength, disorderly conducts, or the supernatural" (*Analects* 7.21).

However, if Confucius was skeptical about the supernatural and the afterlife, it is unclear why Confucius did not denounce the supernatural and life after death as myths and superstitions. Instead, Confucius complicated his stance. He suggested that people should respect the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance and that they should also worship the spirits (of their ancestors) as if the spirits are present. Even Confucius himself attended an exorcism performed in his village (*Analects* 10. 4).

Confucius's ambivalent attitude toward the supernatural and afterlife—neither explicitly confirming nor denying their existence—has been attributed to his unavoidable choice to teach the ordinary people who still believed in folk religions, superstitions, and cults. In some ways, Confucius "could not but tolerate such noncanonical rites", not necessarily because he genuinely believed in ghosts and spirits, but because he acknowledged the social and religious realities of his times (Wilson 2002, p. 254). Instead of getting involved in endless debates against the established social and religious traditions and customs of his times, Confucius might have decided to use them as a better rhetorical device to teach people. Therefore, Confucius is called not only a humanist but also a traditionalist, who understood the importance of cultural traditions and customs, and was willing to render "a kind of pragmatic homage" to the spirits, if—but only if—it was necessary (Fingarette 2008, p. 6).

Confucius's alleged utilitarian attitude toward supernatural forces and the afterlife—doubting their existence and their spiritual functions in human society while still acknowledging them for educational and rhetorical purposes—is often compared to Plato's extensive use of myths about gods, ghosts, and the afterlife in his writings. For example, in *Apology*, Socrates argued that he believed in gods and in fact he was called by a god (*daimon*) to be a gadfly in Athens: "Just so, in fact, the god seems to me to have set me upon the city as someone of this sort" (*Apology* 30e).⁴ In *Gorgias*, Socrates

⁴ To translate Plato's works in this article, I have used translations of Plato's (1971) *Gorgias* by Walter Hamilton (New York: Penguin), Plato's (1967) *Republic* by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books), and Plato's (1997) *Apology* by David Gallop (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Quotations are referenced by the name of the dialogue and the page number in the Stephanus edition, followed by the letter of the section.

illustrated a version of the last judgment and the afterlife in a very detailed fashion, which he “[has] heard and believe[s] to be true” (*Gorgias* 524a). Some of Plato’s writings, such as *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*, are entirely devoted to the systematic study of death and the afterlife, teaching the immortality of the soul and truth. For Plato, philosophy was concerned with the study about death and the afterlife. In *Republic* Book 10, Plato taught the immortality of the soul and the beautiful and true life after death. Leo Strauss understood that Plato’s turn to myths about the gods and the rewards and the punishments of the afterlife at the end of *Republic* was the last resort to persuade his interlocutors, which eventually showed that Plato himself subtly acknowledged the failure of Socrates’ argument in favor of justice and philosophy (Drury 2005, pp. 78, 84). This analysis seems to be supported by Socrates himself in *Gorgias*: “We must draw some such moral as this” (*Gorgias* 524a).

While Socrates’s philosophical and logical discussion of the afterlife and the supernatural, depicted by Plato, was a “noble lie” to “persuade, in the best case, even the rulers, but if not them, the rest of the city” (*Republic* 389c), it does not mean that the noble lie was successful. In fact, there is no evidence that Socrates’s interlocutors and other audiences took those myths and stories about death, the soul, ghosts, and the afterlife seriously. As Alessandra Fussi noted, those myths and stories already were, even in Plato’s times, “mere conventions, and therefore not authoritative at all” (Fussi 2001, p. 532). In *Apology*, Meletus categorically denied the existence of gods when cross-examined by Socrates. Even Socrates himself doubted if his interlocutors would believe the myth. “Possibly, however, you [Callicles] regard this as an old wife’s tale, and despise it” (*Gorgias* 527b). If Socrates intended to convince others, his discussion of ancient myths, gods, ghosts, and the afterlife was ineffective, and Socrates already knew it. Therefore, it would be more reasonable to consider Plato’s philosophical discussion of the afterlife and the supernatural as a theoretical device to systemize and justify his moral philosophy, not as a rhetorical device to persuade his audience. Plato’s dependence on language, logic, and reason as the mode of teaching delivery confirms his philosophical and logocentric understanding of the afterlife and the supernatural.

4. Confucian Persuasion: Persuasion without Words

While Confucius and Plato shared their ambivalent stances on the existence and the role of supernatural forces and the afterlife in human society, Confucius’s take on the supernatural and the afterlife was unique: In contrast to Plato, Confucius’s consideration of the afterlife and supernatural forces lacked any systematic and logical discussion. When discussing supernatural beings, Confucius did not always rely on narratives or the linguistic mode of communication. Instead, he presented his teachings through nonverbal ways. In other words, Confucius’s teaching on the afterlife and the supernatural was a practical device for Confucius to actualize the nonlinguistic mode of Confucian persuasion.

By “practicality” in the Confucian context, I do not mean Fingarette’s utilitarian interpretation, a sort of technical practicality in rhetoric to manufacture conviction or persuasion. It rather suggests that Confucius simply supposed and assumed the existence of the supernatural and the afterlife, intentionally refusing to prove or verify their existence, to actualize what he thought to be true and genuine persuasion. The fact that a person logically acknowledged, verbally agreed, or emotionally resonated with the speaker’s argument does not necessarily mean that what he agreed to will be actualized and practiced through action. A person can claim that he is genuinely persuaded by an eloquent speaker. However, there is no guarantee that the same person will necessarily change his course of action in accordance with what he said he was convinced of. If verbal consent or conviction does not result in the actual changes in his thought, mind, words, and eventually action, Confucius would not conclude that he was truly persuaded. It is a mere agreement that a petty person (*xiaoren*) would wish for: “The gentleman (*junzi*), harmonizes, and does not merely agree. The petty person agrees, but does not harmonize.” (*Analects* 13.23). True and genuine conviction must ultimately lead to the audience’s virtuous and cultivated way of life.

Confucius does not think that humans will be genuinely persuaded by speech only, or by any linguistic mode of communication only. For humans to be genuinely persuaded, they need more than just speech. Humans will be truthfully persuaded when the message of the speech, or the true intent of the speaker, is visualized by the speaker himself. An eloquent speaker may be able to verbally explain what virtue is and what a cultivated life is. Nonetheless, unless a virtuous and cultivated life is visualized and displayed by the speaker's own life, the spoken words, however logical and persuasive they may be, will not be able to change the audience's hearts and minds and will fail to change their course of action. Speech cannot produce truthful conviction unless it is combined with the visualization of its content, action. In fact, manipulative and strategic speeches will only hinder the possibility of true persuasion. This is why Confucius taught his disciples not only with his speech but also through his action. *Analects* lists numerous examples of Confucius's teaching with action. For example, Confucius taught *li* by making his look, posture, voice, and attire in accord with the Confucian way, even when he was sick: "When he was sick, and his lord came to visit him, he would lay with his head to the east, draped in his court robes, with his ceremonial sash fastened about him" (*Analects* 10.19). Confucius did not just teach about filial piety and respect for elders by speech only, but exemplified his teaching by "[leaving] only after the elderly people had left" when attending village drinking ceremonies (*Analects* 10.13). Confucius taught how to harmonize with the circumstances and act in concert with the Mean even during his leisure time: "In his leisure moments, the Master was composed and yet fully at ease" (*Analects* 7.4). Without directly engaging in verbal teaching, Confucius was able to visualize his moral teachings.

Some scholars even argue that Confucius intended "the subordination of rhetoric to action", reflecting his skepticism about language (Bloch and Chi 1995, p. 259). While Confucius never disregarded the importance of linguistic communication and verbal persuasion, Confucius sometimes did look skeptical about "speech without action": "He [the gentleman] is simply scrupulous in behavior and careful in speech, drawing near to those who possess the Way in order to be set straight by them. Surely this and nothing else is what it means to love learning" (*Analects* 1.14). When he was asked about the gentleman, Confucius answered that "He first expresses his views, and then acts in accordance with them" (*Analects* 2.13). A gentleman only speaks when he can and will carry out what he said in action. Accordingly, he hesitates to speak when he knows he cannot take it into action (*Analects* 12.3). A gentleman despises crafty words and ingratiating expression: "A clever tongue and fine appearance are rarely signs of Goodness" (*Analects* 1.3). When not associated with action, speech alone cannot produce genuine persuasion.

Confucius's emphasis on action as a means of persuasion indicates that persuasion may take place even without words if the content is sincerely and properly displayed and visualized by the speaker. Confucius's concern about speech without action may sound strange to today's democratic understanding of persuasion, which is based upon verbal communication and reasoned arguments. Indeed, democracy is often characterized with the legacy of free speech: *parrhesia*, the right to say everything, and *isegoria*, the equality of freedom of speech (Saxonhouse 2008, pp. 9, 94). This dependence on verbal persuasion has become more prevalent among contemporary democratic theorists. As Stacy Clifford pointed out, liberal deliberative democracy values reasonable speech and reciprocal communication, but this is why many democratic theorists have "excluded nonverbal speech acts in order to ensure the transparency and coherence of communication and deliberation": Nonverbal modes of communication make effective persuasion impossible. (Clifford 2012, p. 213) In contrast, LuMing Mao discussed how the Confucian nonlinguistic mode of persuasion, or persuasion without words, acknowledges a more reciprocal, participatory, and dynamic relationship between a speaker and his audience: "Confucius's participatory discourse is not informed by a casual, logical account, and it does not try to demonstrate a teleological progression ... it does not pretend to provide an orderly account of things" (Mao 2001, pp. 519–20).

5. Politics of “as if”: The Supernatural and Confucian Persuasion

So, the speaker does not have to speak eloquently to be persuasive. No particular verbal techniques or a set of rhetorical skills are needed in Confucian persuasion. Persuasion without words but with action, however, does not always mean that the speaker must “perform” an act in front of the audience, and certainly not mean that the speaker should “show off” his moral actions. This is what a petty person does when boasting of his minor and petty cleverness (*Analects* 15.34). Nor does it mean that a gentleman must become a mere “trustworthy person” who insists on rigidly keeping his petty words and promises (*Analects* 13:20).

Instead, the speaker visualizes moral virtues by “ritually-correct behavior, ethical courage, and noble sentiment” (Confucius 2013, Slingerland trans., p. 238). Participating in well-arranged, organized, and pious rituals and ceremonies is the best way to visualize what heavenly goodness would look like, what a morally cultivated life would look like, and what harmony in society would look like. All the procedural details, songs, and dances in the rituals must be therefore carefully arranged, composed, and practiced. Participants’ dress, posture, meals, and even walking should be designed appropriately and meticulously. Throughout the ceremony, the gentlemen’s moral charisma and natural attraction are infused into the audience’s hearts and minds in dramatic and profound ways (Ivanhoe 2000, p. xii). In that sense, rhetoric and rituals are presented as one in the Confucian tradition (Haboush 1984, p. 42).

According to Confucius, the virtue of a gentleman is like the wind. He persuades the people just as the wind moves over the grass. Persuasion occurs naturally, irresistibly, effortlessly, and almost magically, when the gentleman’s message, without any eloquent speech or dramatic rhetoric, permeates through the holy rituals and ceremonies. Confucius thus said that “If those above love ritual, then the common people will be easy to manage” (*Analects* 14.41). Fingarette described this Confucian mode of persuasion as “magical powers.” By magic, Fingarette meant “the power of a specific person to accomplish his will directly and effortlessly through ritual gesture and incantation” (Fingarette 1966, p. 55). This intangible, invisible, and marvelous power is quietly but irresistibly exerted with proper ritual conduct. In other words, “What Confucius brings out in connection with the workings of the ceremony is not only its distinctively human character . . . but also its moral and religious character” (Fingarette 1972, pp. 14–15).

Confucius’s utmost emphasis on rituals and ceremonies in the context of genuine and effective political persuasion explains why Confucius wanted the gentleman to behave “as if” spirits and demons exist. In ancient East Asian societies, the rituals and holy ceremonies were a tribute to Heaven and the spirits of one’s ancestors. However, Confucius did not seem to care if the spirits are indeed present during the ritual and receive offerings. Confucius said, “When sacrificing to the spirits, you should comport yourself as if the spirits were present” (*Analects* 3.12). Hahm argued that this passage shows Confucius’s plan to transform the idea of *li* (禮) from “sacrificial offerings to the gods” and “devotion to supernatural deities” to “social ethics, scholarly learning, and moral cultivation” (Hahm 2009, pp. 144–45). In other words, while Confucius still did not deny the supernatural aspect in the ritual ceremonies, its significance became less prominent. Confucius was more concerned about “the requirement of a reverential attitude in the correct performance of socially meaningful acts” (Hahm 2009, p. 145). As Fingarette noted, “as if” is a pedagogical suggestion. The actual existence or presence of the spirits is not important. What is at issue is the “psychological and inner presence” of the spirits (Fingarette 1972, p. 22). No one in the ritual and ceremony needs to be assured that the ghosts and spirits indeed exist and that they are present. They may or may not exist; that is not the point of a proper ritual. Supernatural forces are assumed and supposed to exist because their existence is the necessary condition for holy rituals and ceremonies. Their existence must not be bluntly denied because then rituals and ceremonies cannot be truthfully served. It does not matter whether ancestral spirits really exist. Nor is it important for the participants in rituals to genuinely believe in the existence of spiritual beings. It is more important that the participants accept it as a kind of social grammar. If you conduct yourself in accordance with proper procedures throughout the ritual and internalize those ritual forms “as if” the ghosts and spirits are present, virtuous, civil, and moral, life will be visualized accordingly

and the magical power of persuasion will be exerted throughout all participants. For Confucius, a wise man harmonizes with the common people by displaying his reverence to the assumed or supposed ghosts and spirits: “Working to ensure social harmony among the common people, respecting the ghosts and spirits while keeping them at a distance—this might be called wisdom” (*Analects*, 6.22).

Confucius held up Yu the Great, the legendary ruler in prehistoric times, as an example of an ideal Confucian ruler. Yu the Great, the founder of the Xia dynasty, is best known for the project of flood control in the Yellow River. People suffered from torrential floods of the river at that time, which prevented the social and economic developments in that region. Even Emperor Shun, one of the Five Great Emperors, failed to tame the river. It is said that Yu the Great did thorough research on the condition of the soil and the regularity of the floods, and persuaded people to build an irrigation system at points along the river to redirect the current out to sea. Then, he helped people rebuild their shelters and develop agriculture by fully utilizing water and soil. In other words, Yu the Great accomplished remarkable success in politics, economy, agriculture, and engineering in prehistoric China. Yu the Great’s teachings are even included as a chapter in the Book of Documents (*Shang Shu*), one of the Five Classics of ancient Chinese literature, which all ancient Confucian scholars, including Confucius himself, frequently referred to.

Confucius praised Yu the Great: “How majestic! Shun and Yu [Yu the Great] possessed the entire world and yet had no need to actively manage it” (*Analects* 8:18). Fighting natural disaster, establishing a new dynasty, and developing agriculture and economy are all tangible and practical achievements, which must have cost Yu a great deal of manpower and resources. Without a doubt, Yu the Great had to organize many officials and ordinary people, and plan all the technical and administrative details. However, Confucius argued that Yu the Great accomplished all the projects through his perfect ritual practices, not through some political, rhetorical, or governing skills. Confucius did not account for Yu’s success in terms of his profound knowledge in agriculture or civil engineering and construction. According to Confucius’s interpretation, Yu the Great did not even have to “actively manage” all the details required for his governing. Then, how did Confucius explain the great ruler’s astonishing achievements? The answer is simple: “He [Yu the Great] subsisted on meager rations, and yet was lavishly filial in his offerings to the ancestral spirits. His everyday clothes were shabby, but his ceremonial headdress and cap were exceedingly fine . . . I can find no fault with Yu” (*Analects* 8.21). Confucius was not interested in Yu’s verbal teachings or political skills. Confucius praised Yu’s reverence for rituals.

This is not a conventional interpretation of Yu’s works, even in Confucius’s time. Yu was indeed famed for his knowledge and skills. Even his teachings recorded in the Book of Documents almost exclusively focused on the details of what Yu the Great did: the foundation of the new Xia dynasty, the regional planning of the land, the organization of tribes from across the region, the agricultural and cultural developments of the land under his rule, and the engineering feats reputedly performed by him (Knechtges and Chang 2014, p. 817). The Book of Documents does not explicitly mention Yu’s reverence for the spirits and ghosts. Confucius’s reinterpretation of the deeds by Yu the Great is crucial to understand the active interaction among nonverbal persuasion, reverence for the supernatural, and ritual and ceremonial practices. By genuinely and adequately demonstrating his respect for the ghosts and spirits through his conduct in rituals and ceremonies, Yu the Great showed his yearning for the Confucian Way and Virtue. Yu the Great genuinely persuaded his people to join him and accomplish a lot of things together, even without any need to manage them actively or verbally, according to Confucius.

A Confucian gentleman does not persuade people with eloquent rhetorical skills and logical arguments only. He must transform others by his exemplary acts in the rites and ceremonies. This is why supernatural forces, such as spirits and demons, and the notion of the afterlife, hold an important place in Confucius’s moral philosophy. While Confucius remained skeptical about the existence of demons and ghosts or their actual function in society, he recognized that their supposed and assumed

existence in holy rites would provide society with an opportunity for genuine persuasion, which leads people to actual changes and reforms in their political and moral life.

6. Conclusions: Confucianism, Nonverbal Persuasion, and Civil Religion

Revisiting the tradition of nonverbal persuasion in Confucianism in regards to Confucius's ambivalent attitude to supernatural forces enriches contemporary discussion of democratic persuasion and the positive role of civic religion in politics. First, as discussed in the previous sections, it sheds new light on the tradition of nonverbal persuasion, not only in Confucianism, but also in the Western rhetorical tradition. Indeed, while it may not draw much attention from contemporary democratic theorists, some Western philosophers, such as Pascal, continuously emphasized the importance of the nonverbal and nonlinguistic mode of persuasion (Norman 1977, p. 31). Including nonverbal persuasion as an important and legitimate mode of persuasion helps democracy tolerate and welcome those who are not able to verbally communicate or those who may experience difficulty in making reasonable and competent arguments in public: the disabled, the less educated, foreigners and immigrants who may lack good command of the language of their new land, and politically and socially marginalized people (Clifford 2012, p. 214; Young 2003, p. 118). Elina Ziliotti in her recent work explained why Western theories of deliberative democracy are severely limited in terms of their ability to understand the disparate views of diverse cultural traditions regarding public interactions, and therefore emphasizes that including the Confucian nonverbal mode of communication in public deliberation will provide a platform where different cultural groups can concur on peaceful agreements (Ziliotti 2018, pp. 360–61). In this context, Confucian persuasion complements the logocentric notion of language embraced by most modern deliberative democrats, notably Jürgen Habermas, that language provides a way of understanding binding actions through speech, mutual argumentation, and rationally motivated agreement (Habermas 1984, pp. 273–337; Dungey 2001, p. 460; Rehg 2013, pp. 477–78).

Second, discussing the importance of rituals and ceremonies associated with the supernatural realm in politics offers us a better understanding of the role of civic religion in contemporary societies. Confucius's practical perspective on supernatural forces and the afterlife and their functions in human society may be related to the role of civil religion in modern society, which was emphasized by Jean Jacques Rousseau, Alexis de Tocqueville, and Robert Bellah more recently. Confucianism indeed has functioned as a sort of civil religion in East Asian societies, offering a moral and spiritual foundation for a society; a kind of social cement that helps to hold the state and society together; and shared common values and cultural norms among citizens (Paramore 2015, p. 270; Ming 2012–2013, p. 77; Bellah 2005, p. 53). As a result, civil religion, without rigorous religious structure or rigid doctrine, focuses more on the sacredness, not the deity, which would enable the people to “rationally accept certain political values and legitimacy norms” (Ming 2012–2013, p. 78). Confucius's ambiguous stance on spirits and demons, which neither confirms nor denies their existence while acknowledging their place in rituals, does look like what Sanford Kessler called “religious functionalism” or a “quasi-religion” (Kessler 1994, pp. 185–88). In other words, it could be said that Confucianism has been a version of a civil religion that does not really care about divine existence, but rather pays more attention to the social usefulness of spirituality and religious piousness, just as all modern civil religions utilize them to enhance democratic citizenship and social integration.

While there certainly exist some components of civil religion in Confucianism, especially following its metaphysical turn after Zhu Xi's neo-Confucianism, which “borrowed” its religious interpretations of the traditional Confucian concepts, such as Way, and Heaven from Taoism and Buddhism, a few questions remain to be answered before Confucianism is interpreted within the framework of civil religion (Fung 1942, pp. 124–25). For example, religion may still be a too strong word for Confucianism. Although civil religion in modern times would be a quasi-religion and does not have any strict or rigid structure or doctrine, it does have traditional roots. Rousseau, Tocqueville, and Bellah suggested diluting the traditional Christian belief system and mixing it with new democratic values. In other words, modern civil religion does have its doctrines, which may be political but originated from

Christianity. It is unclear if Confucius's take on the supernatural and the afterlife would be that strong. The spirits and demons in ancient Chinese societies did not have a religious structure or systematic doctrines. They themselves did not teach anything. It is also questionable if Confucius had an ambition to replace ancient religion with a more systematic value system. In that sense, it may be safer to conclude that Confucius's intent was to offer a more humanist way to understand the place of supernatural forces in human society, neither confirming nor denying their existence.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- Bellah, Robert. 2005. Civil Religion in America. *Daedalus* 134: 40–55. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Bloch, Joel, and Lan Chi. 1995. A Comparison of the Use of Citations in Chinese and English Academic Discourse. In *Academic Writing in a Second Language*. Edited by Diane Belcher and George Braine. Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation, pp. 231–76.
- Clifford, Stacy. 2012. Making Disability Public in Deliberative Democracy. *Contemporary Political Theory* 11: 211–28. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Cohen, Joshua. 1997. Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy. In *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*. Edited by James Bohman and William Rehg. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 67–92.
- Confucius. 2013. *Confucius Analects*. Translated by Edward Slingerland. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mark. 2006. *Readings in Han Chinese Thought*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Ding, Huiling. 2007. Confucius's Virtue-Centered Rhetoric: A Case Study for Mixed Research Methods in Comparative Rhetoric. *Rhetoric Review* 26: 142–59. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Drury, Shadia. 2005. *The Political Ideas of Leo Strauss*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dungey, Nicholas. 2001. (Re)Turning Derrida to Heidegger: Being-with-Others as Primordial Politics. *Polity* 33: 455–77. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- El Amine, Loubna. 2015. *Classical Confucian Political Thought: A New Interpretation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Fingarette, Herbert. 1966. Human Community as Holy Rite: An Interpretation of Confucius' Analects. *The Harvard Theological Review* 59: 53–67. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Fingarette, Herbert. 1972. *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Fingarette, Herbert. 2008. Discovering the Analects. In *Confucius Now: Contemporary Encounters with the Analects*. Edited by David Jones. Chicago: Open Court, pp. 1–12.
- Fung, Yu-Lan. 1942. The Rise of Neo-Confucianism and Its Borrowings from Buddhism and Taoism. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 7: 89–125.
- Fussi, Alessandra. 2001. The Myth of the Last Judgment in the "Gorgias". *The Review of Metaphysics* 54: 529–52.
- Gutmann, Amy, and Dennis Thompson. 2004. *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1984. *The Theory of Communicative Action Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen, and William Rehg. 2001. Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles? *Political Theory* 29: 766–81. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Haboush, Jahyun Kim. 1984. Confucian Rhetoric and Ritual as Techniques of Political Dominance: Yǒngjo's Use of the Royal Lecture. *The Journal of Korean Studies* 5: 39–62. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Hahm, Chaihark. 2009. Ritual and Constitutionalism: Disputing the Ruler's Legitimacy in a Confucian Polity. *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 57: 135–203. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2000. *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.
- Kessler, Sanford. 1994. *Tocqueville's Civil Religion: American Christianity and the Prospects for Freedom*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Kim, Sungmoon. 2014. *Confucian Democracy in East Asia: Theory and Practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Knapp, Keith. 2014. Confucian Views of the Supernatural. In *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook*. Edited by Wendy Swarts, Robert Ford Campany, Yang Lu and Jesse J. C. Choo. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 640–51.

- Knechtges, David R., and Taiping Chang. 2014. *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature: A Reference Guide Part Two*. Boston: Brill.
- Lao Tzu. 1891. *The Sacred Books of China: The Text of Taoism*. Translated by James Legge. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Mao, LuMing. 2001. What's in a Name? That Which Is Called 'Rhetoric' Would in the Analects Mean 'Participatory Discourse'. In *De Consolatioine Philologiae*. Edited by Anna A. Grotans, Heinrich Beck and Anton Schwob. Goeppinger: Verlag, pp. 506–22.
- Ming, Chen. 2012–2013. On Confucianism as a Civil Religion and Its Significance for Contemporary China. *Contemporary Chinese Thought* 44: 76–83. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Mozi. 1929. *Ethical and Political Works of Motse*. Translated by Yi-pao Mei. London: Probsthein.
- Norman, Buford. 1977. Logic and Anti-Rhetoric in Pascal's Penses. *French Forum* 2: 22–33.
- Paramore, Kiri. 2015. "Civil Religion" and Confucianism: Japan's Past, China's Present, and the Current Boom in Scholarship on Confucianism. *The Journal of Asian Studies* 74: 269–82. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Plato. 1967. *Republic*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.
- Plato. 1971. *Gorgias*. Translated by Walter Hamilton. New York: Penguin.
- Plato. 1997. *Apology*. Translated by David Gallop. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rehg, William. 2013. Rhetoric, Cogency, and the Radically Social Character of Persuasion: Habermas's Argumentation Theory Revisited. *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 46: 465–92.
- Saxonhouse, Arlene. 2008. *Free Speech and Democracy in Ancient Athens*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Tan, Sor-hoon. 2014. Early Confucian Concept of Yi (议) and Deliberative Democracy. *Political Theory* 42: 82–105. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wilson, Thomas. 2002. Sacrifice and the Imperial Cult of Confucius. *History of Religions* 41: 251–87. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wu, Huaiqi. 2018. *An Historical Sketch of Chinese Historiography*. Translated by Chi Zhen. Berlin: Springer.
- You, Xiaoye. 2006. The Way, Multimodality of Ritual Symbols, and Social Change: Reading Confucius's "Analects" as a Rhetoric. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 36: 425–48. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Young, Iris Marion. 2003. Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy. In *Debating Deliberative Democracy*. Edited by James S. Fishkin and Peter Laslett. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 102–21.
- Ziliotti, Elena. 2018. Public Deliberation in a Globalized World? The case of Confucian Customs and Traditions. In *Yearbook Practical Philosophy in a Global Perspective*. Edited by Michael Reder, Alexander Filipovic, Dominik Finkelde and Johannes Wallacher. Freiburg: Verlag Karl Alber, pp. 339–61.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).