The Rectification of Names: Reality, Shared Meaning, and Social Harmony

A Theory of Relational Functional Constitutivism

Oliver Cole Whetstone

Abstract. Confucius's injunction that rulers, ministers, fathers, and sons fulfill their respective roles is often read as a demand for appropriate conduct. This essay argues that its connection to the rectification of names supports a more comprehensive reconstruction. Social categories enable harmonious coordination only when they satisfy two conditions: they must adequately fit the relationships and functional constraints of social reality, and participants must possess sufficiently compatible understandings of their meanings and responsibilities. Because certain human dependencies and coordination requirements are ineliminable, genuine role responsibilities provide defeasible reasons for excellent performance. Aristotelian accounts of function and activity illuminate this practical demand, while dynamic proportionality explains why excellent performance changes with circumstances and global proportionality explains how competing roles must be coordinated. Culture and education transmit shared categories; communal philosophical inquiry tests and corrects them. Rectification is therefore a continuing process of aligning reality, classification, public understanding, and conduct. The argument is a constructive interpretation, not a claim that Confucius explicitly endorsed its contemporary metaphysical vocabulary.

Keywords: Confucius; rectification of names; role ethics; social ontology; conceptual coordination; constitutivism; harmony; Aristotle

1. From Apparent Tautology to Social Order

In response to Duke Jing's question about government, Confucius replies: "Let the ruler be a ruler, the minister a minister, the father a father, and the son a son" (*Analects* 12.11).[1] The formulation appears tautological. Yet Duke Jing's response—suggesting that the breakdown of these roles would make even material plenty insecure—shows that the point is practical rather than merely verbal. One may possess the title of ruler without governing well, or be a father without performing the characteristic responsibilities of fatherhood. The repetition distinguishes nominal occupancy from adequate realization.

The problem becomes more ambitious when placed beside the rectification of names (*zhengming*) in *Analects* 13.3. There Confucius links the failure of names to accord with their referents to failures of speech, affairs, ritual, punishment, and action.[2] Whatever the exact exegesis of this disputed passage, it suggests a chain connecting linguistic and conceptual order to social coordination. The central question is not only whether individuals perform roles well, but how a community comes to identify, understand, and coordinate those roles at all.

I defend a reconstructive thesis: harmonious social coordination depends upon the alignment of four elements—actual relational structures, social categories, shared understanding of those categories, and the conduct of their occupants. The first alignment is between categories and the world; the second is among people concerning the categories' meanings. Neither alignment is sufficient alone. Accurate concepts that no one else understands coordinate poorly; unanimous agreement on misconceived roles can coordinate

efficiently toward destructive ends.

2. Social Categories and the Two Conditions of Coherence

Social roles are relational: a father is father of a child, a teacher teacher of a learner, and a ruler ruler of a community. The relevant classifications concern relationships and their associated responsibilities, not merely intrinsic properties of isolated individuals. This resonates with Roger Ames's and Henry Rosemont's work on Confucian role ethics, while leaving open whether every relationship is constitutive of personal identity in the strong sense they explore.[3]

For categories to facilitate appropriate coordination, they must first be *world-adequate*. They should distinguish genuine relationships and track the capacities, dependencies, and functional requirements relevant to them. A category of parenthood that disregards a child's dependency, for example, misdescribes a central feature of the relationship. This requirement is not simple correspondence between words and a world entirely independent of human practices. Some categories—judge, minister, citizen—are partly constituted by collective rules and recognition. Their adequacy requires both responsiveness to independently existing human constraints and institutional arrangements that are intelligible, coherent, and workable.[4]

Second, categories must be *intersubjectively intelligible*. Participants need sufficiently compatible expectations about what a teacher, student, parent, or officeholder may and must do. This does not require unanimity about every borderline case. It requires enough overlap in meaning and application to enable reliable expectations, mutual criticism, and coordinated action. A community may disagree productively about how much independence a student should have while still sharing the category of teaching and its basic purpose. Total semantic uniformity would be neither possible nor desirable.

These conditions are logically separable. A community may share a highly coherent but false ideology; alternatively, individuals may independently grasp a relationship's requirements but lack the common language needed to coordinate. Accordingly, the rectification of names should not be reduced either to discovering natural essences or to securing social consensus. It is the ongoing reconciliation of accurate classification and shared public understanding. The conception is fallibilist: both our descriptions of the world and our conventions about roles are revisable.

3. Necessity, Function, and the Ground of Role Responsibilities

Why should some categories have objective constraints at all? Human life includes ineliminable conditions. Children are born dependent; human beings require learning; communities face coordination and conflict; vulnerable persons need assistance. These generate recurring functions—care, education, adjudication, and governance—even though the institutional forms that perform them differ. A society need not have a monarch, but it cannot eliminate every coordination problem merely by abolishing that office.

Three senses of necessity should be distinguished. *Ontological necessity* concerns relations that cannot be retroactively undone, such as descent. *Functional necessity* concerns activities needed to meet characteristic human requirements. *Practical necessity* concerns responsibilities that a particular person

genuinely cannot set aside. The first two do not entail the third: that someone must care for a child does not entail that any arbitrarily chosen individual must do so. A theory of responsibility must explain assignment, legitimate assumption, capacity, and competing claims.

Foot's account of natural goodness and Thompson's analysis of life-form judgments provide philosophical models for grounding evaluation in characteristic forms of life.[5] The extension to institutional roles must be qualified: unlike biological dependencies, many offices are constituted by conventions and can be redesigned or abolished. The thesis is therefore that some *functional demands* are ineliminable, not that every historically familiar title or hierarchy is naturally necessary.

4. Why Perform an Unavoidable Function Well?

Where an individual genuinely bears a nonoptional responsibility, why deliberately frustrate its fulfillment? A parent charged with protecting a child has reason to protect competently; a teacher entrusted with instruction has reason to teach in ways conducive to learning. The role's function supplies standards of success. If the responsibility cannot responsibly be evaded, choosing avoidably defective performance is, other things equal, practically irrational. This is the proposed core of *relational functional constitutivism*.

The argument has four steps: (1) some human requirements are nonoptional; (2) some relationships genuinely assign responsibility for meeting them; (3) those responsibilities have standards of better and worse realization; and (4) a person who bears such a responsibility has presumptive reason to meet its standards. The word "presumptive" is indispensable. Standards internal to a function do not necessarily possess overriding moral authority.

This is the strongest objection raised by contemporary constitutivism debates. Korsgaard seeks to derive normativity from the constitution of agency, while Enoch's "shmagency" objection challenges the inference from constitutive standards to binding reasons.[6] Inescapability helps: parenthood is not an optional game. Yet an unavoidable position in an unjust institution may still carry functions that one should resist. A propagandist may be effective *qua* propagandist without being justified in producing propaganda. Even if a regime cannot function without propaganda, that necessity is relative to a contingent institutional end, not an ineliminable condition of human flourishing.

Thus two judgments must remain distinct: whether an action realizes a role's function successfully, and whether the role's end and the agent's responsibility for it are justified all things considered. The theory establishes a conditional, defeasible norm of functional excellence. It does not infer moral goodness from efficiency alone. A fully developed ethics must provide additional principles for adjudicating corrupt functions and conflicting obligations.

5. Activity and Dynamic Proportionality

Aristotle's account of *ergon* and *energeia* illuminates the difference between possessing a role and realizing it through activity. In *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, excellence concerns the characteristic activity of a being; in II.6, virtue involves a mean relative to us, determined by practical reason.[7] This is a comparative reconstruction, not a claim that Confucius formulated Aristotle's metaphysics. It suggests that role realization must be evaluated not by mere repetition of prescribed behavior but by success under the circumstances.

Parenthood provides a clear example. A toddler needs protection and direction; an adult child ordinarily needs far greater independence. The parent's characteristic concern for the child can remain stable while the appropriate exercise of authority changes. Likewise, the excellent teacher offers different guidance to the novice and to the advanced student. Excessive direction can be as damaging as neglect. What counts as enough, too little, or too much is relative to capacities and context, not a universal numerical midpoint.

In *Analects* 11.22, Confucius gives different advice to students who ask the same question, explaining that one needs encouragement and the other restraint.[8] The passage offers unusually strong evidence for context-sensitive instruction. The apparent inconsistency is intelligible as a difference in what the students require. Excellent teaching involves a stable purpose realized through variable conduct. This is *dynamic proportionality*: fidelity to a role's function may require continual adjustment of its expression.

6. From Role Failure to Social Pathology

Once a role has characteristic functions, failure can take several forms. Deficiency occurs when the appropriate activity is insufficient; excess when it is disproportionate; abdication when responsibility is improperly surrendered; usurpation when one office appropriates another's legitimate function. A parent may neglect or overcontrol; a ruler may refuse necessary decisions or centralize authority destructively; a minister may fail to advise or exceed the office's remit. *Analects* 3.19, 12.17, and 13.6 connect political order with reciprocal obligations, rectitude, and exemplary conduct.[9]

These pathologies are not merely departures from convention. They can undermine the relationships and functional outcomes that explain why the roles matter. But individual failures are not the only danger. An institution can itself be badly designed. A highly efficient official within an unjust system is not thereby contributing to genuine harmony. Social categories must therefore remain open to philosophical criticism, including criticism of their very existence and allocation of authority.

7. Global Proportionality and Conflicting Roles

Individuals occupy several roles simultaneously: parent, child, friend, citizen, teacher, professional, or officeholder. Each may impose real obligations, and these obligations can conflict. Excellent parenting does not by itself determine what a judge should do when a relative appears before the court. Local proportionality must therefore be complemented by *global proportionality*, the contextually justified ordering of obligations across relationships.

Relevant considerations include urgency, seriousness of harm, the agent's special responsibility, available substitutes, and the possibility of satisfying multiple duties. There need not be a fixed lexical hierarchy for every situation. Yet neither can competing duties be resolved by unprincipled preference. *Analects* 13.18, concerning a son and his father's theft of a sheep, illustrates the tension between familial loyalty and civic justice.[10] Whether or not one accepts Confucius's apparent resolution, the case shows why a universal role ethics needs a theory of priority among roles.

The concept of global proportionality identifies a necessary problem but does not alone solve it. A full account must justify its ordering criteria, especially when role loyalty conflicts with justice or the protection of vulnerable persons. This is a substantive remaining task, not something that follows analytically from the word "role."

8. Culture, Education, and Communal Philosophical Inquiry

The preceding argument reveals a missing mechanism. Even if roles possess objective functional constraints, people must learn what their categories mean and how to apply them. Culture transmits classifications, norms, and practices across generations. Education teaches their use and the reasons for them. Shared conventions make expectations mutually legible: participants can anticipate what teachers, students, parents, and officials are supposed to do, without renegotiating every encounter.

Yet transmission alone can perpetuate error. A community may agree on a defective account of parental authority, political legitimacy, or social hierarchy. Communal philosophical inquiry is therefore necessary as a corrective practice. Participants compare inherited classifications with actual relationships, test their implications, identify deficiency and excess, and revise expectations in light of reasons and experience. Inquiry is simultaneously epistemic, semantic, and formative: it seeks truth about roles, public agreement on their meanings, and improved judgment in their performance.

The Confucian emphasis on learning and friendship supports this emphasis. *Analects* 1.1 joins learning and practice with the pleasure of friends arriving from afar; 12.24 associates friendship with the cultivation of humaneness; and 16.4 distinguishes beneficial forms of friendship.[11] The biblical image "Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17, KJV) supplies a suggestive cross-traditional analogue. Neither tradition warrants the claim that conversation automatically produces truth. Inquiry requires criticism, openness to correction, and responsiveness to evidence.

Rectification is consequently a continuing communal activity. Shared meanings must be sufficiently stable for coordination yet sufficiently revisable to remain adequate to the world. This is the productive tension at the heart of the account: the community needs agreement, but it also needs institutions of disagreement and correction so that agreement does not harden into collective error.

9. Harmony Without Sameness

Social harmony is neither uniformity nor the mere absence of visible conflict. In *Analects* 13.23, Confucius distinguishes harmony (*he*) from sameness (*tong*); in 1.12, harmony is linked to ritual propriety, while harmony pursued without proper regulation is treated as insufficient.[12] These passages fit a view in which differentiated roles coordinate through shared, appropriate expectations rather than identical conduct.

We can now specify four conditions for the ideal: (i) categories adequately track relational realities and legitimate functional requirements; (ii) participants share sufficiently compatible understandings of those categories; (iii) individuals realize their responsibilities with dynamic proportionality; and (iv) competing responsibilities are coordinated through global proportionality. The conditions interact. A correction in our understanding of childhood development may require revision of parental expectations, which in turn requires changes in education, law, and daily practice.

The result is not guaranteed harmony. Accurate classification and common understanding are enabling conditions, not sufficient causes; scarcity, coercion, conflicting interests, and institutional injustice can still disrupt cooperation. Moreover, some disagreement is an ingredient of healthy correction. The defensible claim is that social coordination becomes more reliable and normatively appropriate when these alignments are sustained through public inquiry and practical judgment.

10. Rectification as a Continuing Achievement

The rectification of names can now be interpreted as an ongoing alignment of reality, categories, shared understanding, and conduct. The universal extension of "ruler, ruler; minister, minister; father, father; son, son" does not entail the preservation of every inherited social role. Rather, every category by which a community organizes its relationships should be tested for its coherence, its public intelligibility, and the appropriateness of the activities it guides. Some categories will be refined; others will be replaced.

This account connects ontology, semantics, education, practical rationality, and social ethics. Its originality is not the bare idea that roles are relational or that rectification is dynamic: Sarah Mattice has already advanced an important relational and process-oriented reading of *zhengming*.[13] Its proposed contribution is to join that insight to the necessity of certain social functions, a defeasible constitutivist account of role excellence, and a two-level theory of proportional coordination. It also explains why culture and philosophical education matter causally: they create and correct the shared conceptual framework within which role performance becomes mutually intelligible.

The ultimate thesis is therefore conditional but substantial. Where social categories are adequate to reality, publicly intelligible, and subject to continuing critical inquiry, they can guide the dynamically proportionate realization of necessary relational functions. Where these activities are coordinated across persons and institutions, they enable a form of social harmony that preserves differentiation without sacrificing mutual understanding. The rectification of names is not simply a linguistic reform or an exhortation to obedience. It is the collective work of making our social understanding and conduct answerable to the relationships through which human life is sustained.

Notes

1. *Analects* 12.11. Translations vary. Compare Edward Slingerland, trans., *Confucius: Analects, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003).

2. *Analects* 13.3. The interpretation offered here is constructive; scholarly debates concern whether rectification principally addresses naming, social roles, political order, or their interaction.

3. Roger T. Ames, *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011); Henry Rosemont Jr., *Against Individualism: A Confucian Rethinking of the Foundations of Morality, Politics, Family, and Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015).

4. For the distinction between institutional facts and brute facts, compare John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995). The present essay does not adopt Searle’s full theory of collective intentionality.

5. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001); Michael Thompson, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

6. Christine M. Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Enoch, “Agency, Shmagency: Why Normativity Won’t Come from What Is Constitutive of Action,” *Philosophical Review* 115, no. 2 (2006): 169–198.

7. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I.7, 1097b22–1098a20; II.6, 1106a26–1106b28. Compare Korsgaard, “Aristotle’s Function Argument,” in *The Constitution of Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 129–150.

8. *Analects* 11.22. Confucius’s different responses to Zilu and Ran You are particularly relevant to context-sensitive practical judgment.

9. *Analects* 3.19, 12.17, 13.6.

10. *Analects* 13.18. The passage is used to demonstrate conflict between obligations, not to endorse concealment of wrongdoing.

11. *Analects* 1.1, 12.24, 16.4; Proverbs 27:17 (King James Version).

12. *Analects* 13.23 and 1.12. See Xinzhong Yao, “The Way of Harmony in the Four Books,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 40, no. 2 (2013): 252–268.

13. Sarah Mattice, “On ‘Rectifying’ Rectification: Reconsidering Zhengming in Light of Confucian Role Ethics,” *Asian Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (2010): 247–260.

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