**humanism/仁(Rén)**

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| Chinese Perspective | ZHAO Tingyang | 02 Apr 2022 |

The concept of Ren makes up the foundation of Confucianism and is a core value of Chinese civilization. It is, however, less interesting to the Western mind, partly due to the Hegelian misunderstanding of it. Confucian theory has often been introduced as life lessons from grandmother with little philosophical importance. Ren is usually translated as benevolence, virtue, goodness or humaneness. Such translations of Ren are somewhat related, but fail to illustrate its deeper philosophical meaning.

Matteo Ricci, an early Christian missionary in China, was surprised to notice that Confucianism shared some similarities with Christian morality, despite Confucianism is not a religion. He successfully converted many Chinese scholars by arguing that the perfect morality of Christianity is better than any imperfect secularized morality. His beautiful translation of Ren is love, which gets to something of Ren, still a love that is so close to God’s love that it fails to reveal an alternative Confucian non-religious pursuit.

The translation of Ren is a problem, but it helps if we examine the structure of the pictograph. It depicts an image of the unity or agreement of two persons and structurally implies that which is *between and of* any two persons, literally meaning “of-any-two-persons” and logically implying everyone. What could possibly be the moral link between and of any two persons? We would expect it to be the optimal interrelationship of any two persons, which suggests reciprocity, communion, empathy and respect for one another, as well as harmony, justice and love. The problem of Ren is its comprehensiveness, similar to the concepts of goodness, freedom or equality. Many philosophical concepts tend to include too many propositions, making them all the more difficult to clearly define. Roughly speaking, Ren has a range of values in its meanings from mutual respect as the minimum to reciprocal love as the maximum.

We might try to recognize the key meaning of Ren by a list of its usages as Wittgenstein recommends. The theory of Ren is always attributed to Confucius, but the word “Ren” predates Confucianism, albeit with less prevalence. The following is a list of some earlier usages of Ren before the time of Confucius:

1. “Respecting everyone as a guest you may meet, taking each responsibility seriously as divine service, this is the way of Ren”[[1]](#footnote-1).
2. “Being considerate towards all people, moderating excessive justice, rectifying the distortion of justice; the accomplishment of all three things together could almost reach Ren”[[2]](#footnote-2).
3. ”Dealing with all matters impartially, this is the virtue of Ren”[[3]](#footnote-3).
4. “Love of kinship means Ren, and devotion to your state also means Ren”[[4]](#footnote-4).

This list displays the various roots of Ren. It is believed that family or kinship is the main source of Ren which then extends to more virtues, some of them less relevant than others. Justice or devotion to a state relates more to politics rather than morality. There are many stories detailing Confucius’ students frequently asking him what Ren exactly is which indicate the lack of a normative definition of Ren in Confucius’ time. Nonetheless, Confucius developed innovative answers.

Since the time of Confucius (551BCE-479BCE), thousands of interpretations of Ren have been given by Confucian scholars over the course of 2,000 years. The following is a list of ten interpretations, selected for their popularity, sensibility, and theoretical significance or philosophical capacity. Some are given by Confucius himself, others by famous Confucian scholars.

1. The best general definition of Ren by Confucius himself, recognized as a *Confucian Principle*, is that “Ren means that, to be established and to let others be established, to be successful and to let others be successful”.[[5]](#footnote-5)
2. The second definition, also frequently quoted, includes a proposition similar to the Golden Rule in the Bible: “*Do not do to others what you do not wish done to yourself.* You should conduct yourself so that you are free from any guilt of having done wrong thing to your State or shame for your family”[[6]](#footnote-6).
3. Confucius explains the source of Ren as “filial respect for one’s parents and brotherhood is the root of Ren”[[7]](#footnote-7).
4. Confucius once gave a most simple interpretation of Ren as “loving others”[[8]](#footnote-8).
5. However, Confucius is not implying that one should love everyone: “Only a person of the virtue of Ren knows how he should love decent persons and hate those who are evil”[[9]](#footnote-9).
6. Confucius explains Ren as the foundation of civilization: “If human beings lose the virtue of Ren, do norms and rites mean anything? If human beings lose the virtue of Ren, does music means anything?”[[10]](#footnote-10).
7. Zi-si (483BCE-402BCE), a grandson of Confucius, further develops the concept of Ren as “Ren is the recognition of humanity, fundamentally the love for family, while Yi means the appropriateness of social order based upon humanity, fundamentally the good positions for the persons of merits”[[11]](#footnote-11). He is the first to define Ren and Yi as two sides of morality.
8. Mencius (372BCE-289BCE), the second most-famous Confucian, later connected the definitions of Ren and Yi: “Ren is the home of humanity, and correspondingly Yi is the right way out of humanity” [[12]](#footnote-12). In other words, “Ren is what a human should be, and Yi is what a human should do”[[13]](#footnote-13).
9. Dong Zhongshu (179BCE-104BCE), the founder of Chinese hermeneutics or classical studies, offered several new interpretations: “The point of Ren is that Ren lives in the love for others rather than in self-love; the point of Yi is that Yi consists of one’s own obligations rather than the obligations of others”[[14]](#footnote-14).
10. A beautiful saying, also by Dong Zhongshu: “Ren makes up the human in humanity, and Yi makes up the self in self-discipline”[[15]](#footnote-15).

To summarize these definitions, Ren defines the best interrelationship of any two persons, that is, the interrelationship that can be universally applied to everyone. Ren has universal consensus and lacks dissent. It is equal to or even better than the moral Golden Rule if according to the Confucian Principle “be established and let others be established, be successful and let others be successful”, implying social justice and perpetual peace. The best example is love.

The concept of Ren holds *relationism* as the groundwork to Chinese thought and civilization, especially with regards to the ethical definition of “human”. Confucianism has often been regarded as the Chinese version of humanism by Western scholars or modern Chinese scholars. It might be better understood as relationism since Confucius never claims natural rights or individual rights based upon the equality of every individual. Confucius would find more common ground with Plato than with Kant.

Ren defines the concept of “human” with morality. This means that the natural or biological life of a person is not sufficient proof of humanness. A person is recognized as a human being only when he has become a person of morality, rising above his nature. Otherwise he remains an undifferentiated being in nature. Therefore, the concept of human is not a finished concept of *being as such*, but rather an open concept of becoming-to-be. The concept of “human” is a question to be answered by deeds in a lifetime, rather than a transcendental answer to the questions of life. In brief, a human *does* rather than *is*. Or it could be said, if I may, to be a human is to be a value of variables in the range of Ren, which consists of the relations of reciprocal goodness.

Relationism argues that no one *exists* independently of others. Therefore, it is not true that one *is.* Everyone *exists* in relation to something rather than *is* in concept. We are defined by our relations to others, and thus, a person proves himself to be a human of humanity as a result of his relations with others. If the human interrelationship is found to be full of evil and conflicts, civilizations and even human beings would perish. Therefore, the only reasonable choice left for the survival of civilization or humanity is to develop and maintain good human interrelationships with each other, overall benefitting everyone. That seems to be the most promising expectation for universal consent.

Confucius bets on a moral-based civilization, wherein morality underlies political order. As Confucius argues, if hearts lose Ren, we can no longer trust them, and consequently everything, including law, words and government, will become unreliable. Interestingly, a political philosopher of Legalism, Han-Fei (280BCE-233BCE) had a famous or notorious theory---depending on your take of it----contrary to the Confucian conception of the world. Han-Fei denies the priority of morality over politics and argues that only two things, punishment and reward, actually work in any society because everyone pursues self-interests above morality. It is a modern take, although Han-Fei also had a beautiful take on morality. He tells a story of “stupid” Confucianism: a warrior of the Lu state, where Confucius lived, had been found to have abandoned battle three times. Confucius asked him why he was such a coward, and he explained with Confucian theory that he would not fight to death because his elderly father depended on him. Confucius then recommended him for a higher position based on his filial merits. A disastrous consequence came about when many others began following suit[[16]](#footnote-16). The Lu state was soon thereafter conquered. Han-Fei’s theory is somewhat reminiscent of Chinese Hobbesian.

Whose theory is better? It depends on the situation. Han-Fei explains the game of competition (war) while Confucius focuses on the game of cooperation (peace). The death of a kingdom is one thing, and the death of civilization is another.

1. 《左传·僖公33年》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 《左传·襄公7年》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 《左传·昭公20年》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 《国语·晋语》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 《论语·雍也》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 《论语·颜渊》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. 《论语·学而》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 《论语·颜渊》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 《论语·里人》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 《论语·八佾》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. 子思：《中庸》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 《孟子·离娄上》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 《孟子·告子上》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. 董仲舒：《春秋繁露·仁义法》 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. 同上。 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 《韩非子·五蠹》。 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)