

The confucian concept of ren philosophy essay



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Confucianism is also called the philosophy of Ren. The concept of Ren occupies a central place in the Confucian philosophy. In the Analects, Confucius mentioned Ren over one hundred times, but he never formally defined it. In the English world, scholars have translated Ren by many terms - benevolence, love, altruism, kindness, charity, compassion, magnanimity, humaneness, humanity, perfect virtue, goodness, and so forth. These translations reflect the two senses in which Confucius used the word "Ren," that is, "Ren of affection," and "Ren of virtue." In the sense of "Ren of affection," Ren stands for the tender aspect of human feelings and an altruistic concern for others. Confucius said, "Ren is to love others" (Analects, 12. 22). One can readily experience the sense of Ren if willing to do so. Confucius said, "Is Ren indeed so far away? If we really want Ren, we should find that it is at our very side" (Analects, 7. 29). In Mencius, Ren is treated almost exclusively in the sense of affection. Mencius made Ren as affection the foundation of his ethics. He said, "No one is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others.... The heart of compassion is the beginning of Ren." (Mencius 2A. 6), and "for every person there are things one cannot bear. To extend this to what one can bear is Ren" (Mencius, 7B. 31). Sympathy naturally arises in one's heart when one sees other people suffer. One would not want to bear seeing sufferings. To extend this feeling to other things in the world and thus make it a general disposition is called Ren. In this sense, Ren is benevolence, love, altruism, tenderness, charity, compassion, humaneness, and so on.

In the other sense, the sense of "Ren of virtue," Ren is a general virtue that has to be realized among other virtues. For example, Confucius said, "You

achieve Ren if everywhere under Heaven you can practice the five: courtesy, breadth, good faith, diligence and clemency" (Analects, 17. 6). In this sense, a person of Ren is a morally perfect person, and Ren may be translated as "perfect virtue," "goodness," and "human excellence."

Although the relation between "Ren of affection" and "Ren of virtue" is subject to different interpretations, one aspect of this concept is certain: a person cannot have the latter without the former. A person who has Ren as a general virtue cannot lack Ren as affection. In order to understand Confucian ethics we must first of all understand the concept of Ren as affection.

The word "Ren" in Chinese consists of a simple ideogram of a human figure and two horizontal strokes. It can be seen as a person reaching out to others. The two horizontal strokes suggest human relations. What is the nature of human relations? What is the core of the concept of Ren as affection? If benevolence, love, altruism, kindness, charity, compassion, and humaneness all define the concept of Ren, what do all these terms have in common? I would suggest that, taken as a virtue of human relations, "caring" is the essence of every one of these terms. If a person does not care for others, he or she cannot be described in any of these terms. For example, benevolence is the kindly disposition to do good and promote the welfare of others. If one does not care for others, he or she cannot be benevolent.

In Mencius, Ren as "caring" is more evident. If a child were to fall into a well, why should one care? Mencius believed that a person cares because he or she has compassion. A person has a natural disposition to be Ren, to care, and therefore to act to save the child. One does not have to love the child to

save him or her. In situations like this, a person who holds a “who cares?” attitude is one without a human heart. Although the heart of Ren is natural, Mencius also said that a moral person needs to develop one’s heart of Ren, along with the heart of shame, of courtesy and modesty, and of right and wrong.

Moral cultivation and development will make the natural instinctual heart of Ren a mature moral virtue. Like Confucius, Mencius’s ideal form of government is one of Ren. He saw that princes of some states took people away from their work during the busy farming seasons, making it impossible for them to till the land and minister to the needs of their parents (Lester, 44). Thus parents suffered cold and hunger while brothers, wives, and children were separated and scattered. These princes did not care for their people. Mencius believed that in order to become a true king, one must care and practice the government of Ren toward the people (Mencius, 1A. 5).

In other words, caring, or Ren, is the way to become a good ruler. Both Confucius and Mencius believed that if a government is really one of Ren, one which takes good care of its people, there would be no crime or poverty. If the ruler cares for his people, he will make sure that people do not miss their farming seasons, and thus they will have good harvests in good years and be prepared for bad years. (Lester, 46) When people have enough food, they behave themselves well and do not steal or rob (Chang, 124). It is not that we do not have enough punishment; nor is it that we do not have enough taxation. It is that we do not have enough care, and this sometimes makes life unbearable. What we need is care.

Whether Confucius or Mencius are right in their opinions is open to discussion. What we can conclude from their teachings is that, in Confucian philosophy, to be a person of Ren one must care for others. So, we can say that “caring” occupies a central place in this concept.

One way to understand ren, as Confucius himself does, is to say that ren is to “love your fellow men” (Chang, 42). Ren is primarily expressed through human relationships, although later I found that Confucians suggested that ren can be expressed also through a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature. For Confucians, the most natural and important site for the expression of ren is the family. Mencius says that young children naturally know to love their parents, and when they grow they will naturally respect their elders (Lester, 111). Ren manifested in the parent-child relationship is filial piety, and in the sibling relationship, brotherhood (Lecture). The Analects says that these two virtues are the root of ren.

The familial virtues are not only the root of ren but also the basis of a stable social and political order. It is rare for a person who has the virtues of filial piety and brotherhood to have the inclination to be rebellious against his or her superiors (Lester, 112). The practice of ren begins from the individual self but can be enlarged through a series of concentric circles to include the family, the state, and ultimately (within reason) all of one’s surroundings. Although the ideal virtues of human relationships should first be cultivated in one’s home, they can be practiced elsewhere and are applicable to everyone irrespective of his or her place of residence or ethnicity (Lester, 112-118).

Often Confucianism leaves the impression that filial piety to one's parents is absolute. This is not so. In Confucianism, a person has many duties. Besides filial piety to parents, one also has the duty of loyalty to the ruler. The two duties may come into conflict. Unfortunately, Confucianism offers no general rules to solve this problem. It depends on individual circumstances and, as long as one cares, he can be Ren even if he fails to perform his duty.

Confucius and Mencius believed that a person practicing Ren should start from one's parents and siblings and then extend to other people. Confucius believed that "the greatest application of Ren is in the affectionate towards relatives," and "filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of Ren" (Analects, 1. 2). A person of Ren must love first his father and elder brothers and then, by extension, other people. Mencius said, "Treat with respect the elders in my family, and then by extension, also the elders in other families. Treat with tenderness the young in my own family, and then by extension, also the young of other families" (Mencius, 1A. 7). He believed that a person of Ren should be Ren to all people but attached affectionately only to his parents (Mencius, 7A. 45). This means that one's parents exert a greater pull on him or her. Thus, when both one's father and a stranger are in need, the doctrine of love with gradations justifies one's helping one's father before helping the stranger.

Accordingly, although we should care for everyone in the world if possible, we do need to start with those closest to us. This is not to say that we should care only for the people close to us. It means that starting with those close to us is the only reasonable way to practice Ren and care. It would be perfect if a mother could care, in addition to her own baby and her neighbor's, for

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every little baby in the world who needs care. Unfortunately that is not possible. So she should be content with giving care to her own baby and, perhaps, her neighbor's. This is as far as she can normally go, and this our way of life as people of Ren and care. Giving priority to people near us is not merely justified by the fact that the closer the needy are to us physically the more efficient our aid is. Even if it were equally efficient, we would still feel more obliged to help those nearby.