

# The importance of ren in maintaining social order essay sample



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When Confucius taught his disciples, he apparently did not intend to start an intellectual “ school” or movement, and although it is still a subject of debate whether to classify Confucianism as a religion or not, his followers regard him as a god. Aside from his other titles, he was named the “ Co-Assessor with the deities of Heaven and Earth” and in 1907, the emperor Kuang-Hsu ranked him next to God and has given him the title “ Shiang-ti”—meaning that he should be another Son of Heaven (Brown 19). Throughout his career as an educator, Confucius taught about the concept of *Ren*, or “ humanity,” “ humaneness” or “ benevolence,” which includes individual duties to society and all virtues which help maintain social harmony and peace. He taught that *ren* is a quality that every human should strive to achieve but since it is so exalted that he also taught a good life is an endless aspiration for ethical perfection (“ Confucianism”). His teachings were a great influence in Chinese government, education and attitudes toward correct personal behavior that his precepts and principles were incorporated into the Chinese Law in 210 B. C. The concept of *ren* , like any other ethical and moral teaching, through the self-perfection of virtues, is a valuable guide to maintaining social order and prosperity.

*Ren* is viewed as a combination of reverence, tolerance, trustworthiness, keenness and kindness, or of reverence in private life, respect when entrusted with a task, and benevolence when dealing with others. It is an ensemble of virtuous behavior which encompasses, among other things, justice, solidarity, impartiality, and harmony. It is said that if one achieves *ren* , one at the same time masters other virtues, including, but not limited to, courage, prudence, cautiousness in speaking, and propriety (Roetz 120).

Confucius believed that every normal human being aspires to become a superior man which might not only include being superior to his fellows, but surely includes being superior to one's own past and present self (Dawson 1). It could be said, then, that one's goal in life should be to achieve self-perfection, which, as it has already been stipulated, is an endless process of discovery and evolution. It requires one to cultivate higher and more useful traits and qualities and would offer a substantial reward not only for one's self, but also for the society in which the person belongs. The aim to excel, approved and accepted by common consent, would, of course, appeal to every member of the society. Thus, enforced by universal recognition of its validity, would become a part of everyday individual and social life. A society where people, altogether, strive for the perfection of its goals would ultimately progress itself into perfection as well. Confucius incorporated individual virtues with the individual's role to family, society and government (Huang 7). If every individual is cultivated in the virtues, family relations will surely become harmonious; if every family is harmonious, then the society will be orderly; and if every society is orderly, then the state will surely be at peace (The Great Learning 5). When the state is at peace and all its members are living harmoniously, it should only be natural that progress and prosperity should follow. The validity of this argument is so widely accepted and reasonable enough that similar concepts have been repeated by philosophers centuries later after Confucius.

Confucius had given his standards of a superior man. He said that " the superior man seeks to perfect the admirable qualities of men, and does not seek to perfect their bad qualities" (Analects xii). He further state that " the

way of the superior man is threefold...Virtuous, he is free from anxieties; wise, he is free from perplexities; bold, he is free from fear" (Analects xiv). From here, we could see that Confucius required three aspects in a superior man: that of virtue, wisdom and courage. He said that " the superior man has neither anxiety nor fear... When internal examination discovers nothing wrong, what is there to be anxious about, what is there to fear?" (Analects xii). It should be noted that the superior man aspires to achieve *ren* . It would be beneficial to study what constitutes a superior man to understand better what *ren* is.

Confucius had specified characteristics of what constitutes a superior man. First is that a superior man is driven by a purpose, and that is that " the superior man learns, in order to reach to the utmost of his principles" (Analects xix). The superior man is a lover of truth, which does not only mean that he seeks out what is truth but is, in himself, truthful as well—" the object of the superior man is the truth... The superior man is anxious lest he should not get the truth" (Analects xv); " what the superior man requires is just that in his words there may be nothing incorrect" (Analects xiii). The superior man purity of thought and action—he " must be watchful over himself when alone" (The Great Learning) and " in regard to what he does not know, shows a cautious reserve" (Analects xiii).

He is " correctly firm, and not firm merely" (Analects xv). The superior man, despite of his stature, acts in humility—he " has dignified ease without pride" (Analects xiii); he " is dignified, but does not wrangle" (Analects xv). He is broadminded and openminded—he " honors the talented and virtuous, and bears with all. He praises the good, and pities the incompetent" (Analects <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-ren-in-maintaining-social-order-essay-sample/>

xix) and he “ does not promote a man simply on account of his words, nor does he put aside good words because of the man” (Analects xv). Most of all, the superior man is a man of virtue—that virtue is what is most important to him. Confucius said: “ the determined scholar and the man of virtue will not seek to live at the expense of injuring their virtue. They will even sacrifice their lives to preserve their virtue complete” (Analects xv) and that “ perfect virtue is the burden which he considers it is his to sustain” (Analects viii).

Miles Dawson explains that “ Confucius sets before every man, as what he should strive for, his own improvement, the development of himself—a task without surcease, until he shall ‘ abide in the highest excellence’” (7). He further explains that Confucius urged that despite in the absolute this goal is unattainable, each person should be determined above all things to attain it, that is one must abide in the highest excellence at which he is at the moment capable (7). Confucius has taught that “ the superior man in everything considers righteousness to be essential. He performs it according to the rules of propriety. He brings it forth in humility. He completes it with sincerity. This is indeed a superior man” (Analects xv).

When it comes to governance, Confucius said: “ employ the upright and put aside all the crooked; in this way the crooked could be made to be upright” (Analects xii). At first glance, this statement could not be easily understood that even the person (Fan Ch’ih) to whom Confucius has said these words had not realized what it meant. But after a close examination, we will come to understand that when we choose only those that have desirable qualities —those who are virtuous—in, but not confined to, government offices, and reject those who are not, those who do not possess desirable qualities, in <https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-ren-in-maintaining-social-order-essay-sample/>

ving for position, will strive to develop desirable ones, which would ultimately eliminate undesirable qualities altogether.

In order to implement humane government, Confucius strongly advocates “rule by virtue” instead of “rule by decrees,” which means that, above all else, the ruler should be well cultivated in virtue himself so that he may set an example for the people to follow. Confucius taught: “now the man of perfect virtue, wishing to establish himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others. To be able to judge of others by what is nigh in ourselves; this may be called the art of virtue” (Analects vi)—that is, a person should apply *ren* in his own action or in guiding others. Furthermore, he stresses that a man of virtue will most definitely influence others to do the same: “if a superior man love[s] propriety, the people will not dare not to be reverent. If he love[s] righteousness, the people will not dare not to submit to his example. If he love[s] good faith, the people will not dare not to be sincere” (Analects xiii) and “when a prince’s personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders, but they will not be followed” (Analects xiii).

Confucius did not assign a normative value to persons aside from their social relationships. He believed that all duties are duties of one’s station towards other socially described persons, such as a person’s duties towards his parents, siblings, children, neighbor, mentor, etc. He taught that these roles are natural and that family roles are the core examples. Thus, Confucius argues that adhering to duties to the family must be basic requisite for a man of complete virtue, thus: “they are few who, being filial and fraternal,  
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are fond of offending against their superiors. There have been none, who, not liking to offend against their superiors, have been fond of stirring up confusion. The superior man bends his attention to what is radical. That being established, all practical courses naturally grow up. Filial piety and fraternal submission—are they not the roots of all benevolent actions?” (Analects i).

Although Confucius advocacy of love of others is accorded with proximity of relationship, it would still be prudent to say that his teachings were for the good of the individual only, or that of the family or clan. True enough that he has given emphasis on prioritizing the family, but he never taught *ren* to become a “ particularistic attitude, setting limits and excluding strangers” (Roetz 128). Instead, he set the family as “ of special importance as the first exercise of virtue, but it is not ruled out to gradually expand the range of the ethical commitment” (Roetz 129). It is a place of primary responsibility, from which the affection shall become the model for treating others in general. It is only natural to have a higher degree of love to those who are closer to us in relation than those who are in no way related to us. Could anyone seriously believe that one loves his own child just like the child of his own neighbor? Unless, of course, that one’s child has undesirable qualities in virtue, which could only be blamed on the failure of the father to pass on his own virtues. Mengzi (Mencius) advocates the transition from family to the general public, which he conceives as the extension of affection. He said:

Treat with the reverence due to age the elders in your own family, so that the elders in the families of others shall be similarly treated; treat with the kindness due to youth the young in your own family, so that the young in the

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families of others shall be similarly treated:- do this, and the kingdom may be made to go round in your palm. It is said in the Book of Poetry, ' His example affected his wife. It reached to his brothers, and his family of the State was governed by it.'- The language shows how king Wan simply took his kindly heart, and exercised it towards those parties. Therefore the carrying out his kindness of heart by a prince will suffice for the love and protection of all within the four seas, and if he do not carry it out, he will not be able to protect his wife and children. The way in which the ancients came greatly to surpass other men, was no other but this:- simply that they knew well how to carry out, so as to affect others, what they themselves did" (I-1, 7: 12).

Confucius taught that " a youth, when at home, should be filial, and, abroad, respectful to his elders. He should be earnest and truthful. He should overflow with love to all, and cultivate the friendship of the good" (Analects i). In the first place, it was Confucius who first gave the Golden Rule: " what you do not want done to yourself, do not do to others" (Analects xv), which, after more than five centuries later, Christians had a similar teaching: " so in everything, do unto others what you would have them to do to you" (Mt. 7: 12). Notice that with Confucius, the Golden Rule was stated in the negative which implies not to do harm to others as none would like harm to be done to themselves; in contrast with the Christian version which might just imply that one must do good only because one desires also to be done good (setting aside all other teachings).

The Golden Rule is what Confucius called " like-hearted considerateness"

could be summed up to. Like-hearted considerateness, or *shu* , is one-half  
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part of a doctrine to the Way of humanity, the other half being “wholehearted sincerity,” or *zhong* (Huang 23). *Shu* is so sufficient a moral value that some defines it directly as *ren*, implying that if one can think and treat others as one would himself, one has undoubtedly attained “humanity” (Huang 23). Furthermore, when asked about what is benevolence, Confucius replied: “it is to love all men”; and when asked what knowledge is, he replied: “it is to know all men” (Analects xii). According to Heiner Roetz: “love... denotes a gentle attitude of care, a well-tempered benevolence for others, and the endeavor not to do harm to them” (127).

Along with virtue, wisdom and courage are the other aspects of a superior man. It must be noted, however, that during the time of Confucius, wisdom and knowledge are used interchangeably. Thus, for Confucius, knowledge is essential to achieving *ren*. He taught about knowledge that it is “when you know a thing, to hold that you know it; and when you do not know a thing, to allow that you do not know it. This is knowledge” (Analects ii). He further explained that:

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts. Wishing to rectify their hearts, they first sought to be sincere in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts, they first extended to the utmost their knowledge. Such extension of knowledge lay in the investigation of things.

Things being investigated, knowledge became complete. Their knowledge being complete, their thoughts were sincere. Their thoughts being sincere, their hearts were then rectified. Their hearts being rectified, their persons were cultivated. Their persons being cultivated, their families were regulated. Their families being regulated, their states were rightly governed. Their states being rightly governed, the whole kingdom was made tranquil and happy” (The Great Learning 4-5).

Immediately, we could see the intermingling relationships between knowledge and virtue and how it could affect the family and the state, ultimately achieving social order. Mengzi, in his desire to let others understand *ren*, said: “ when a man’s finger is not like those of other people, he knows to feel dissatisfied, but if his mind be not like that of other people, he does not know to feel dissatisfaction. This is called ‘ Ignorance of the relative importance of things’” (Mencius VI-1, 12: 2). Knowledge is such an important aspect in achieving *ren* that the Analects was opened with a quote to it: “ is it not pleasant to learn with a constant perseverance and application?” (Analects i). Roetz said that “ as a corrective, knowledge is obviously to protect moral action against indiscriminate” (128). However, we must stress that acquiring knowledge does not specifically make one a superior man, it merely is a means to become one.

Confucius taught: “ when a man’s knowledge is sufficient to attain, and his virtue is not sufficient to enable him to hold, whatever he may have gained, he will lose again. When his knowledge is sufficient to attain, and he has virtue enough to hold fast, if he cannot govern with dignity, the people will not respect him. When his knowledge is sufficient to attain, and he has virtue  
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enough to hold fast; when he governs also with dignity, yet if he try to move the people contrary to the rules of propriety: full excellence is not reached" (Analects xv). Furthermore, " though a man may be able to recite the three hundred odes, yet if, when intrusted with a governmental charge, he knows not how to act, or if, when sent to any quarter on a mission, he cannot give his replies unassisted, notwithstanding the extent of his learning, of what practical use is it?" (Analects xiii). Confucius also did not limit learning to those of science, mathematics, logic, etc., but sought, first and foremost, learning in the way of virtue, saying " if a man withdraws his mind from the love of beauty, and applies it as sincerely to the love of the virtuous; if, in serving his parents, he can exert his utmost strength; if, in serving his prince, he can devote his life; if, in his intercourse with his friends, his words are sincere:-although men say that he has not learned, I will certainly say that he has" (Analects i).

One could immediately see that a person of virtue, the superior man, has a lot to contribute in maintaining social order. His ways, as it has been stressed out, are accepted by common consent, and he stands as an example for others to follow. When all has set themselves with the same principles as the superior man, misunderstandings between fellow men would be hard to come by. When, by the principles of a superior man, all aspire for others what they aspire in themselves, the fellowship of men will be all but for a common cause. When all work together for a common cause, social order is imminent.

With all the teachings of Confucius, it is hard to imagine that a superior man, in his quest to achieve *ren*, could contribute to put the society to which he

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belongs in chaos. He dedicates his life in virtue and in aspiration for knowledge, to seek out truth, that in gaining knowledge and truth he understands others; that when he comes to understand others, through his virtue may know how to interact with them properly; that knowing how to interact properly with others, all might live together with peace and order. Confucius said: “ if the will be set for virtue, there will be no practice of wickedness” (Analects iv). Furthermore, he said that “ virtue is not left to stand alone. He who practices it will have neighbors” (Analects iv). When everyone desires for perfection, and does not gain it at the expense of others, the society to which they belong would eventually benefit. Social order could be achieved when everyone respects and works with his fellowmen, and the teachings of *ren* guides us on this goal.

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