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Confucius's Virtue Politics: *Ren* as Leadership Virtue

Shirong Luo

This essay calls attention to an aspect of Confucius's notion of ren that has often been overlooked or even denied in much recent discussion of the topic. While the egalitarian aspect of ren, i.e., the idea that every human being has the potential to become a ren person, is frequently asserted, the leadership dimension of ren has for the most part been given short shrift. I argue that for Confucius, ren is the leadership virtue. This conclusion is mainly based on a careful and systematic analysis of what may be called 'the definitional ren passages' and some 'elucidative ren passages' in the Analects.

Introduction

It is uncontroversial that the idea of *ren* 仁 (often translated as 'the perfect virtue', 'Goodness', 'benevolence', etc.) is central to Confucius's teachings, and it is also generally agreed that there is what might be called an 'egalitarian aspect' to Confucius's idea of *ren*, that is, *everyone* has the potential to become a *ren* person and has the right to engage in the cultivation of *ren*. Wing-Tsit Chan maintains that *ren* is 'a quality applicable to all human beings' (Chan, 1955, p. 299). Chung-ying Cheng holds that 'it is not the ruler alone who is capable of practicing *ren* or should practice *ren*. All human beings are capable of practicing *ren* and should do so in order to be more human and more humanized' (Cheng, 1997, p. 522). This egalitarian aspect of *ren* is often attributed to Confucius (551–479 BCE) as one of his great contributions to the development of the concept (Chan, 1955). It seems, however, that another aspect of *ren*, i.e., *ren* as leadership virtue, has long received scanty attention. This aspect of *ren* is not, as one might assume, incompatible with the egalitarian dimension because although everyone has the ability and right to cultivate *ren*, not everyone will actually possess *ren* (to a substantial degree). That *ren* is the leadership virtue means that if one possesses *ren* to a substantial degree, one is worthy of being a ruler or a government official. For Confucius, *ren* is the moral qualification

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for a leadership position. Although it is often the case that one can be a *ren* person without, strictly speaking, being an actual leader or that one can be a leader without being a *ren* person, for Confucius the person in the first case deserves to be a leader and the person in the second case does not. In *Analects* 15.14, Confucius attributes the second person's actually being in a position of authority without practicing *ren* to 'political theft *qie wei* 竊位'. In the ideal Confucian society, only the sage (*sheng* 聖 or *sheng ren* 聖人) should be the ruler; only the *ren* person or *junzi* (the gentleperson) in the ethical sense is qualified to be an government official. It is in this sense that *ren* may be called the leadership virtue.

In his influential article 'The Evolution of the Confucian Concept of *Jen*', Wing-Tsit Chan asserts that Confucius made two important contributions to the evolution of the concept of *jen* (*ren* 仁): one is that he transformed *ren* from a particular virtue into a general virtue and the other is that he made *ren* a virtue attainable for *everyone*, not just aristocrats or social elite. Thanks to Confucius, '*jen* [*ren*] is no longer a special moral characteristic of rulers, but a quality applicable to all human beings' (Chan, 1955, pp. 298–299). Chan argues that 'although many of Confucius's conversations with his disciples concern government, yet in no instance did he use the word *jen* as a special quality of rulers' (p. 299). Chan is right in saying that Confucius has made *ren* a general virtue, but that does not mean that *ren* has for Confucius ceased to be a particular virtue. As a matter of fact, in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), Confucius on some occasions uses the term *ren* to refer to a particular virtue, while on other occasions he uses it to denote a general virtue. With respect to Chan's second point, we need to be clear about what it means. If it meant that one does not have to be a ruler, a government official or an aristocrat to be engaged in the cultivation of the virtue of *ren*, few of us would disagree. But just because *ren* is accessible to *everyone* does not necessarily mean that for Confucius *ren* has ceased to be a leadership virtue. A simple analogy may be helpful here. Just because every natural born US citizen can become the President does not mean that the Presidency is not a leadership position. Chan overstates his case when he claims that 'in no instance did he [Confucius] use the word *jen* [*ren*] as a special quality of rulers' (p. 299). In fact, many *ren*-passages in the *Analects* clearly indicate that *ren* is a leadership virtue. Taking the leadership dimension out of Confucius's notion of *ren* tends to make many of his remarks about *ren* incoherent. Doing so also distorts the teleology of his teaching activity. We must realize that Confucius's school was not primarily a school of good manners set up to produce well-behaved persons, but an institution of virtuous leadership. His main objective was to prepare his disciples for government positions. Without taking this aim into account, we would be at a loss to know why Confucius and his interlocutors spent so much time discussing politics and government. On the other hand, if we reintegrate the aspect of leadership into the notion of *ren*, most of Confucius's remarks will make much better sense. So to a great extent, the idea of leadership is the fulcrum of Confucius's *ren*.

The transformation that Confucius has brought about is not that *ren* has ceased to be a leadership virtue, but that *anyone* will be qualified for leadership or fit to rule if he possesses *ren* (to a substantial degree) or strives to attain *ren* in a steadfast fashion.

Leadership should be based on virtue *de* 德 or merit, rather than on the accident of birth. For Confucius, *ren* remains a leadership virtue and the evaluative criteria for both leaders and would-be leaders. I shall defend this thesis by presenting a careful and systematic analysis of relevant *ren* passages in the *Analects*. In the conceptual content of *ren* there is an element of ethical entitlement to leadership. Confucius remarks (*Analects*, 4.5), ‘Wealth and high station are what everyone desires, but unless I got them in the right way I would not abide in them’ (Lau, 1992, p. 29, modified). In passage 4.14, we are told, ‘Don’t worry about your lack of official position [*wei* 位]. Worry about what would earn you a position [*li* 立]’ (Lau, 1992, p. 33, modified). Almost all the translations of passage 4.14 that I have consulted render the term *li* 立 correctly as ‘having official position’. Clearly Confucius’s concern in both passages is what makes one deserve being a leader. Many of his remarks in the *Analects* make it clear that what would earn one an official appointment is *ren*; being *ren* is the ‘right way’ to attain leadership positions. Rulers and government officials deserve to rule if they are *ren* 仁. To that extent, *ren* is the leadership virtue.

Abundant textual evidence in the *Analects* indicates that Confucius’s teachings are not mainly about how to become a virtuous *person* or moral agent, but how to become a virtuous *leader*. Most commentators and translators agree or acknowledge that the primary objective of Confucius’s teachings is to make his disciples ‘fit to take part in government’ (Dawson, 1993, p. xiii). A central concept in his teachings is *junzi* 君子 (often translated as ‘the gentleman’), which appears 107 times in the *Analects* (Chan, 1963, p. 15). The word *junzi* originally meant ‘a ruler’s son’, but Confucius ‘denied that birth alone entitled one to rulership and reinterpreted the term *junzi* to mean someone whose moral standards and superior understanding entitled him, if not to actual rulership, at least to high official position under a hereditary ruler’ (Watson, 2007, p. 9). While Confucius is willing to accept *anyone* who wants to learn from him (*Analects*, 15.39), the overarching purpose of his school is not to train moral *persons*, but virtuous *leaders*. As Fung Yu-lan points out, although Confucius offered instruction in many subjects, ‘his primary emphasis was on government activity’ (Fung, 1952, p. 53). Given this emphasis, it is not difficult to understand why Confucius is incensed when his disciple Fan Chi asks about how to grow crops and vegetables (*Analects*, 13.4). He calls Fan Chi ‘*xiao ren*’ 小人, a word he often uses in contrast to *junzi*. A *junzi* has no need of growing crops and vegetables because if he is fond of ritual *li* 禮, propriety *yi* 義, and trustworthiness *xin* 信, the common people will gravitate toward him (and therefore grow food for him) (*Analects*, 13.4). Ritual, propriety, and trustworthiness are among the most important subjects that Confucius teaches his disciples. And they are all part of *ren* 仁.

Ren is ‘the most important moral quality a man can possess’; it is ‘the moral quality a gentleman [*junzi*] must possess’ (Lau, 1992, pp. xiv–xv). While there is no denying that *every human being* is capable of cultivating the constituent virtues subsumed under *ren*, a *ren* ruler or government official can have much greater influences on society than a virtuous commoner. For one thing, such a leader can serve as an

exemplar or role model for the people, thereby transforming the entire society for the better. For another, when the ruler does not behave correctly, he undermines his authority and legitimacy; his people are unwilling to obey him (*Analects*, 13.6). When this happens, social chaos may ensue. So it seems to make a great deal of sense to place the emphasis on *ren*, as Confucius does, as what entitles one to rule. Paul Goldin makes a good point when he writes, '[a] scrupulous gentleman might be able to affect his family and perhaps a few of his neighbors; a sage ruler, by contrast, could conceivably lead all human beings to that ideal Confucian kingdom of universal moral excellence' (Goldin, 2011, p. 24). Furthermore, being a good person may be necessary for virtuous leadership, but it is not sufficient. 'Confucius makes abundantly clear . . . that there are essential skills involved in being a good ruler or a good official. Merely being a thoroughly decent, well-meaning person is hardly enough' (Kupperman, 2001, p. 72).

Since the present article focuses on the leadership aspect of *ren*, it is important to gain some clarity on the term 'leader' from the outset. In the *Analects*, there are at least eight terms that Confucius uses to refer to rulers and government officials: ruler *jun* 君, minister *chen* 臣, those in leadership positions *shang* 上, high official *daifu* 大夫, the lowest rank of officials *shi* 士, gentleman *junzi* 君子, officials *ren* 人, and great persons *daren* 大人. Of these eight terms, *junzi* 君子 and *ren* 人 tend to be problematic for the contemporary reader due to the fact that they have multiple meanings. The word *junzi* has at least three senses: literally it means 'a ruler's son', but it can also mean a government official (Lau, 1992, p. xii). Employed in an ethical sense, it refers to a morally ideal leader, to which Confucius often appeals when he makes evaluative judgments about certain government officials (*Analects*, 5.16). However, sometimes he also compares himself with *junzi*, the ideal official and concludes in his characteristic humility that he does not measure up to the standard (*Analects*, 14.28). To be sure, for an extended period of his life, Confucius does not hold an official position, but we must realize that for Confucius, the question is not whether one holds a position of authority or not, but whether one deserves holding such a position (*Analects*, 4.14). One can hold office but lack qualifications or have qualifications without holding office. In his conversations with his disciples, Confucius frequently employs the ideal of *junzi* as the goal of their studies. Again, although many of his disciples are not actual officials, Confucius's point is that they should strive to be worthy of leadership positions. In light of the foregoing discussion, I will expand the concept of leader to include not only the actual leaders but also would-be or aspiring leaders. Confucius himself and most of his disciples may be placed in the category of aspiring leaders.

Yang Bojun points out that the term *ren* 人 in its ancient usage has two senses: in its broad sense, it means all human beings, whereas in its narrow sense, it means all officials including *shi* 士, *daifu* 大夫, etc. (Yang, 2006, p. 5). But in my view, the term *ren* 人 has more than two senses: in its broadest sense, it means people in general, everyone or every human being (as in *Analects*, 4.5), but when used in contrast to oneself, it often means 'others' (as in 6.30). Even when it means others, however, it sometimes has a restricted referent. This restricted referent can be found through a

careful analysis of the context in which the term *ren* appears. The referent sometimes turns out to be a virtuous subordinate official or would-be official (6.30), but oftentimes it is a superior (13.19).

When Confucius defines *ren* 仁 as *ai ren* 愛人 (often translated as ‘love others’ (*Analects*, 12.22)), he does not simply mean loving others as opposed to loving oneself, but loving one’s worthy subordinates or those worthy of being entrusted with official responsibilities. It would seem that such love is more of a leadership responsibility than a personal feeling, as it should manifest itself in promoting the virtuous *ju zhi* 舉直 (*Analects*, 2.19, 12.22) or helping them gain official positions *li ren* 立人 (6.30, 15.14) and doing so is a hallmark of virtuous leadership. When *ren* 人 is used in contrast to the people *min* 民, the masses *zhong* 眾 or the hundred families *bai xing* 百姓, it also seems to mean (virtuous subordinate) officials or would-be officials, as in *Analects* 1.5 and 14.42. However, in some passages such as 13.19, *ren* 人 seems to refer to one’s superiors in the leadership hierarchy. So it is important to pay close attention to the context in which *ren* appears to determine its precise meaning. This applies to the term *junzi* 君子 (usually translated as ‘the gentleman’) as well. It appears that the term *junzi* applies not only to government officials (as in 14.6, 17.23, and 19.10), but also to would-be officials. Would-be officials may be divided into two categories: one includes sons, brothers, and certain other male relatives of high-ranking officials, as they can become officials on consanguineous grounds (*shi guan* 世官) (*Analects*, 11.1). The other category consists of people from the lower strata of society (*ye ren* 野人) who may become government officials on meritorious grounds, i.e., through recommendation (*jian ju* 薦舉) and school training (*xiao pei* 校培) (Wang and Yang, 1996, p. 481). Many of Confucius’s disciples are in this category. One can even say that Confucius himself belongs to this category as well, for although he holds office for a short time, during an extended period in his life, he cannot find an enlightened ruler who is willing to appoint him to a leadership position where he is able to realize his vision of virtuous government. This frustrating and disappointing experience may account for his complaint that he has yet to meet a (ruler) who is truly fond of the leadership virtue (*hao ren zhe* 好仁者) (*Analects*, 4.6). In addition, the term *junzi* is also used to refer to virtuous officials (*Analects*, 5.16, 12.4, 14.28, 20.2, and 20.3) and in such cases it is interchangeable with the term *ren* 仁 or *ren zhe* 仁者. Thus, the passages in which *junzi* is a synonym of *ren* 仁 may also be used in our effort to ascertain the nature of *ren*.

Since leaders and would-be leaders are subject to similar evaluative criteria, I shall use the term ‘leader’ in a broad sense, i.e., to refer to a government official as well as a would-be official. A would-be leader is someone aspiring to assume and in preparation for a leadership position. As mentioned earlier, many of Confucius’s disciples are in this category. It also seems appropriate to classify the members of aristocracy as leaders, as they hold hereditary titles or offices. So the extension of the term ‘leader’ in the present article is broadly inclusive of all officials, aristocrats, and would-be officials. Leaders have (or are in preparation for assuming) the responsibilities to guide *dao* 導, rectify *zheng* 正 or *zhi* 治, and employ *shi* 使 the

common people. The way in which these duties are carried out distinguishes virtuous leaders from those who are not. Virtuous leaders guide the common people by virtue *de* 德 and ritual *li* 禮 rather than punitive measures (*Analects*, 2.3, 4.13); the order and harmony of a state depends on the leadership virtue, rather than coercive force. In order to create a harmonious society, leaders *themselves* must behave in accordance with the Way *dao* 道 (*Analects*, 12.17, 13.6, and 13.13). It seems that Confucius's doctrine of self-cultivation *xiu ji* 修己 is primarily geared to government officials, rather than the public. If *ren* refers to the virtuous leader or leadership virtue, then it will make a great deal of sense to classify Confucius's teachings as 'leadership virtue ethics' or 'virtue politics'. It is important to keep in mind that Confucius's main preoccupation is not so much about how an abstract, nondescript 'moral agent' or 'person' should act as about how a political leader should behave, for Confucius firmly believes that when leaders behaved virtuously (i.e., in accordance with the Way), the whole society would be in order and harmony. 'Politics... was Confucius's first and foremost concern... early Chinese thought essentially revolved around two questions: the harmony of the universe and the harmony of society—in other words, cosmology and politics' (Leys, 1997, pp. xxiv–xxv).

It is often claimed that Confucius's *ren* is an unattainable ethical ideal, for he rarely, if ever, grants the epithet *ren* to anyone. According to this view, while *ren* is cultivatable, its attainment is beyond anyone's reach. It can be shown that this view is in error, as Confucius does call several individuals *ren*. The fact that all those individuals are leaders lends strong support to the thesis that I am defending.

Methodology

Before I proceed to the analyses of the pertinent passages in the *Analects*, I would like to explain the methodology through the use of which I have reached the conclusions that constitute the central thesis of the present article. Because of the systematic nature of this methodology, the conclusions that have been reached seem to stand on solid ground. This method has two salient features: first, in my attempt to understand Confucius's idea of *ren*, I have tried to stay within the textual boundaries of the *Analects*. I have not, for example, appealed to *Mencius*, *Xunzi*, or later Confucian texts for illumination or clarification. Why is this important? One reason is that there is a possibility that Mencius or later Confucians may have misunderstood some of Confucius's teachings or held views different from those of Confucius. If so, the attempt at illumination may lead to misinterpretation. And this concern is not at all far-fetched as evidence clearly indicates that Confucius and Mencius are not in agreement on the meaning of *ren*, commonly believed to be a central, if not the central, concept of Confucianism or 'Confucian ethics'. While Mencius primarily defines *ren* in terms of compassion or sympathy, the role of compassion in Confucius's understanding of *ren* is much less pronounced. A great exegetic advantage of staying within the confines of the *Analects* is that it forces us to delve deep into the intricacy and richness of the text, thereby gaining a more accurate understanding of Confucius's teachings.

The second feature of my methodology is classification. I have classified the passages in which the term *ren* 仁 appears (hereafter the *ren* passages) into different categories on the basis of their illuminating effects on the meaning of *ren*. There are twenty chapters (also known as ‘books’) in the *Analects*. Each chapter contains a varying number of passages of different lengths. Altogether the book contains 499 passages in fifty-eight of which the term ‘*ren*’ appears 105 times (Chan, 1955, p. 296). The *ren* passages may be divided into two categories: the definitional passages and non-definitional passages. The definitional passages are those in which Confucius defines the term ‘*ren*’ in response to a question posed by a disciple. Such passages almost invariably start with the stock sentence: ‘So-and-so asks about *ren*.’ Passage 12.1, for example, is a definitional passage. The non-definitional passages are those in which Confucius mentions *ren* but does not seem to be defining it in response to a disciple’s question. Passage 7.30, for instance, is a non-definitional passage. There are eight definitional passages: 6.22, 12.1, 12.2, 12.3, 12.22, 13.19, 15.10, and 17.6, and fifty non-definitional passages. Three things about the definitional passages are noteworthy. First, of all Confucius’s interlocutors, it is his disciples who ask all the *ren*-questions. Second, four of the eight definitional passages (12.1, 12.2, 12.3, and 12.22) are found in Chapter 12. Third, the disciple who poses the most *ren*-questions is Fan Chi (6.22, 12.22, and 13.19). According to their elucidative effects on the meaning of *ren*, the non-definitional passages may be further classified into two categories: elucidative passages and non-elucidative passages. Most of the elucidative passages are those in which Confucius is asked whether a particular individual can be called *ren*. The individual in question is either real or hypothetical, and in the cases involving a real person, the individual concerned is often a historical figure. The following eight passages are elucidative: 5.8, 5.19, 6.30, 7.15, 14.16, 14.17, 17.21, and 18.1. They can be classified further into two subcategories: *ren*-affirming passages and *ren*-denying passages. In the *ren*-affirming passages Confucius affirms that the individual in question is *ren*. There are four *ren*-affirming passages: 7.15, 14.16, 14.17, and 18.1. In the *ren*-denying passages Confucius denies either implicitly or explicitly that the individual in question is *ren*. There are four of them altogether: 5.8, 5.19, 6.30, and 17.21.

That Confucius uses *ren* to refer to virtuous authority is clearly shown in five of the eight definitional passages: 12.1, 12.2, 13.19, 15.10, and 17.6. As for the rest of the definitional passages (6.22, 12.3, and 12.22), the connection between *ren* and virtuous authority can be brought to light by what may be called ‘anchor passages’, which will be explained in my analyses of some of the passages. To see the connection between the concept of *ren* and that of virtuous leadership, let us consider the definitional passages first, and then move on to some elucidative ones.

Definitional Passages

12.1

In this famous definitional passage, Confucius defined *ren* in terms two aspects: overcoming oneself *keji* 克己 and restoring ritual *fuli* 復禮. Let us consider the

second aspect first. The era in which Confucius lived saw the disintegration of social order whose two pillars were ritual *li* 禮 and music *yue* 樂. Traditionally the situation was described as ‘ritual crumbling and music going bad’ *li beng yue huai* 禮崩樂壞. Given Confucius’s idea that ritual played a crucial role in governance (*Analects*, 11.26), it is not hard to understand why Confucius gave priority to restoring ritual. Needless to say, not *everyone* could restore ritual *li* 禮, just as not everyone could restore law and order; only people in a position of authority had the capacity to do so. Hence, *restoring ritual presupposes leadership*. So this aspect of *ren* was not applicable to *everyone* (for example, a peasant *qua* peasant could not restore ritual), but only to a person with authority. We should keep in mind the fact that in this passage Confucius was answering a question about *ren* 仁 posed by his best disciple Yan Hui 顏回 whom he thought would someday attain a prominent government position. The leadership aspect of *ren* was further shown by what Confucius said next: ‘If someday you managed to restrain yourself and restore the ritual, in this way you could lead the entire world back to *ren*’ [*tian xia gui ren* 天下歸仁] (Slingerland, 2003, p. 125, modified). *Ren* 仁 in this particular context seems to have meant something like ‘a golden age of Chinese civilization’, for Confucius ‘believed in a past golden age, when sage kings ruled the world and all people lived in a peaceful and flourishing society’ (Ivanhoe, 2000, p. 1). But who ‘could lead the entire world back’ to the bygone golden age or, as Goldin puts it, ‘the ideal Confucian kingdom of universal moral excellence’, if not a virtuous leader? This brings us back to the first aspect of *ren*: *keji* overcoming oneself. Although only a person with authority could restore ritual, not every leader would do so. For example, the Ji families who were ministers to a feudal lord did just the opposite: they usurped the ritual of the supreme ruler (Watson, 2007, p. 26). Only those leaders persistently engaging in moral self-cultivation would restore ritual.

Confucius used several synonymous terms to articulated the idea of moral self-cultivation: *ke ji* 克己 overcoming the self, *xiu ji* 修己 cultivating the self, *zheng ji* 正己 rectifying the self, and *zheng shen* 正身 correcting the self. According to Confucius, the purpose of moral self-cultivation was threefold (*Analects*, 14.42): [*junzi*] ‘cultivates himself and thereby achieves reverence . . . he cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to his peers . . . he cultivates himself and thereby brings peace and security to the people’ (Lau, 1992, p. 147, modified). Notice that in this context *junzi* must have been meant to refer to a virtuous leader or would-be leader, as revealed by the telltale sentence that he ‘brings peace and security to the people’. An average person *qua* average person could not have such a major impact on society, especially when peace and security were at stake. Thus, for Confucius, the two aspects of *ren*—moral self-cultivation and the restoration of ritual—were mutually dependent and reinforcing, both of which had their references to and converged on virtuous leadership. A leader would not restore ritual unless he steadfastly engaged in moral self-cultivation; it would be pointless to engage in moral self-cultivation without being teleologically oriented towards the restoration of ritual. It would seem therefore that if the dimension of leadership were removed from Confucius’s definition of *ren* in 12.1, it would be hard to make sense of it.

Putting the leadership element back where it belonged, the definition of *ren* would seem to be far more intelligible. It is important to keep in mind that Confucius was not trying to teach his disciple Yan Hui how to become a good *person* or a *person* of good moral character, for as far as we can tell based on the descriptions of him in the *Analects*, Yan Hui *was a good person*. Instead, Confucius was preparing his best disciple for a prominent leadership position to *restore ritual*.

Although in a sense all of Confucius's teachings were about moral self-cultivation, some of his remarks were more explicit than others in emphasizing the connection between moral self-cultivation and virtuous authority. Those remarks can be found in the following passages: 12.17, 12.19, 13.2, 13.4, 13.6, and 13.13. Due to space constraints, let us consider only one of them: 13.6. To understand this passage correctly, it is important to be clear about the identity of the subject Confucius talked about. I choose this passage because in many of the translations I have consulted, a nonspecific noun or pronoun such as 'a man', 'the person' or 'one' is employed to stand in for the subject that was absent in the Chinese text, thereby making Confucius's remarks appear to be applicable to *anyone* and *everyone*. I suspect that it is this tendency on the part of many translators to use universal nouns or pronouns in their translations of the *Analects* that has led to an excessive attention to and emphasis on the egalitarian aspect of *ren* and a disregard for or neglect of its leadership dimension. In this regard, James Legge's (2009) translation is a rare exception because he correctly identifies the subject in passage 13.6 as a leader. Confucius remarked, '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' (Legge, 2009, p. 266, my emphasis). If a ruler's orders were not obeyed by his people, he would have to resort to brute force; should they resist violence with violence, there would be chaos. To prevent social chaos, government must rest upon virtue *de* 德. This is Confucius's answer to the question as to why the ruler must rectify himself. To some extent, that is also his answer to the question why we should obey authority: our willingness to obey authority depends on whether our leaders are virtuous.

12.2

That *ren* is the way a leader or would-be leader should behave can also be seen in passage 12.2. When Confucius answered questions about *ren* posed by his disciples, the kind of leadership positions that he envisioned at least some of them might be holding were those with both superiors above and subordinates below in the leadership hierarchy. As a matter of fact, the disciple Zhonggong (仲弓) who asked the question about *ren* in passage 12.2 served as steward to the head of Ji 季 family whose rank was high official (*daifu* 大夫). It is unclear, though, whether Zhonggong held the position at the time of the conversation. Anyway, it is not hard to see why Confucius defined *ren* the way he did. He said to Zhonggong, 'When you go out the door, behave as though you were going to meet an important guest. When you employ the common people, do so as though you were conducting an important

sacrifice' (Watson, 2007, p. 80). The second sentence of this definition of *ren* makes it clear that Confucius was referring to the way a virtuous *official* should behave, for only a government official would be in a position to 'employ the common people'. If the listener were not interested in becoming a public servant, he would find this part of *ren* irrelevant and inapplicable to him. So the egalitarian claim that Confucius's *ren* is applicable to every human being would be true only in a conditional sense, that is, if one aspired to hold public office. On the surface the first sentence 'When you go out the door, behave as though you were going to meet an important guest' seems to be less revealing. So the key here is to find an anchor passage that contextualizes the phrase '*chu men* 出門' (literally to go out the door). Fortunately, a sentence in passage 9.16, which also contains the word '*chu*', seems to be illuminating enough to fit the bill: '*chu ze shi gong qing* 出則事公卿'. Watson (2007) translates it as '*In public life serving lords and high ministers*'; Dawson (1993) renders it as '*serving the ruler and high ministers outside the family*'; Lau's (1992) translation is '*to serve high officials when abroad*'. All these translators seem to agree that '*chu*' signaled the milieu in which a low-rank official would serve his superior. In light of this, we are now able to see that the first sentence of Confucius's *ren* was about the manner in which a low-rank official (*shi* 士) should serve his superior, that is, respectfulness. The fact that Confucius would often advise his disciples to serve respectfully (*jing shi* 敬事) lends further support to this reading (*Analects*, 1.5, 5.16, 13.19, and 15.38). The above analysis seems to show that in 12.2 Confucius was defining *ren* as *leadership* virtue, rather than as a virtue universally applicable to *any* moral agent.

What is interesting is that in his definition of *ren* in 12.2 Confucius incorporated his famous principle to which he referred in passage 15. 24 as *shu* (恕): 'What you do not want others to do to you, do not do to others (*ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren* 己所不欲, 勿施於人).' How to interpret this normative adage has been a matter of disagreement among commentators. I would like to suggest that it should be understood as part of the leadership virtue. *Shu* cannot be properly understood without constraints. An important constraint on *shu* is that self *ji* 己 should be the self of a virtuous *leader* or *would-be leader*, rather than an abstract concept universally applicable to anyone. This constraint may not be obvious to the contemporary reader, but it is understandable if we keep in mind that the conversation in which this principle was articulated took place between Confucius whose main objective was to prepare his disciples for government positions and a disciple who was or aspired to be an official. Having this constraint clearly in view might have forestalled many misguided counterexamples to *shu* as a 'universal moral principle'. There were certain things that a leader or would-be leader would not want others to do to him. But what were they? We need to find an anchor passage that contextualizes or adds content to *buyu* 不欲 or *e* 惡 (dislike or aversion) rather than attempt to come up with a list of things we contemporary readers are averse to and to determine whether it makes sense to use our own aversions as an ethical guide. If we confine our search to the text of the *Analects*, we are very likely to succeed in locating such an anchor. In passage 17.24, Zigong 子貢, the *same* disciple who asked Confucius for a guide

to conduct throughout one's life and was told by the Master that *shu* 恕 would be such a guide (*Analects*, 15.24), posed what appears to be a follow-up question:

'Does even the gentleman (*junzi* 君子) have his dislikes?' Confucius replies, 'Yes. The gentleman has his dislikes. He dislikes those who proclaim the evil in others. He dislikes those who, being in inferior positions, slander their superiors. He dislikes those who, while possessing courage, lack the spirit of ritual. He dislikes those whose resoluteness is not tempered by understanding.' (Lau, 1992, p. 181, with modifications)

What Confucius said in 17.24 contextualizes *shu* and explicitly anchors it to the virtuous *leadership*. The most revealing sentence is 'He [the gentleman] dislikes those who, being in inferior positions, slander their superiors.' It implied a hierarchical system of officialdom in which the Confucian gentleman would or should be prepared to find himself. To be sure, we contemporary readers can ignore that context and read something more broadly applicable into the text. However, that would not be true to Confucius's original message. While everyone dislikes being maligned or slandered, a virtuous *leader* would be especially vulnerable to defamation, for his authority depended on his good reputation, rather than coercive force. A virtuous (middle-rank) official should not malign his superiors, for he would not want his subordinates to do the same to himself. Towards his subordinates and the common people, he should be tolerant (*kuan* 寬) (3.26) and not nitpicking (*she xiao guo* 赦小過) (13.2), so that he could win them over (17.6). Virtuous leaders should examine and criticize their own shortcomings, rather than others' (12.21). Thus, *shu* is in essence a principle of self-cultivation and, as mentioned earlier, self-cultivation is the basis of virtuous authority (13.6, 13.13).

13.19

In response to his disciple Fan Chi's question, Confucius defined *ren* as '居處恭,執事敬,與人忠 *ju chu gong, zhi shi jing, yu ren zhong* While at home hold yourself in a respectful attitude; when serving in an official capacity be reverent; when dealing with others be loyal' (Lau, 1992, p. 127, modified). The sentence 'when serving in an official capacity be reverent' is a telltale sign that Confucius was defining *ren* with a specific audience in mind, i.e., people aspiring to hold public office. Otherwise, it would not make much sense to mention 'serving in an official capacity'. Apparently the disciple Fan Chi understood the leadership dimension of *ren*, for he was not surprised, nor did he complain that Confucius' teaching was irrelevant to his life plan. While the sentence 'when serving in an official capacity be reverent' clearly reveals that Confucius was explaining to his disciple Fan Chi how a virtuous leader should conduct his official duties, the translation of *yu ren zhong* 與人忠 is problematic because of the translator's (Lau's) use of the generic pronoun 'others'. For Confucius, loyalty was an attitude a subordinate should have toward a superior (*Analects*, 3.19). If no constraint is placed on the extension of the concept of *ren* 人, we may misconstrue what Confucius said by assuming that one should be loyal to just *anyone* including one's inferiors. To avoid this implication, it would seem better

to render *yu ren zhong* 與人忠 as ‘when dealing with a superior official be loyal’. Overall, Confucius’ definition of *ren* in this passage may be understood as the three ways a *virtuous leader* should behave. But Lau’s and many other translations of the same passage render the identity of the subject nonspecific. To be sure, suggestions, injunctions or commands are standardly expressed with the omission of the subject, yet we should not lose sight of the fact that Confucius was speaking to a specific person who belonged to a specific group of people, that is, aspiring leaders (*junzi*), not just *anyone*. Having said that, we should not forget that *ren*’s leadership aspect is not incompatible with its egalitarian dimension, for *anyone* could join the group of aspiring leaders (*Analects*, 15.39).

15.10

Virtuous leadership is not meant to be exercised in isolation. It requires cooperation and support from colleagues and superiors. The leadership virtue is not limited to loyalty to superiors and respect for and kindness to the common people. A virtuous leader must be able to forge alliances with like-minded colleagues through friendship and win support from virtuous superiors by means of loyal services. That is why in passage 15.10 Confucius emphasizes this aspect of the virtuous leadership by likening it to a craftsman sharpening his tools.

17.6

What Confucius taught in this definitional passage may be called ‘the five ways’ a virtuous leader (*ren* 仁) should behave.

Tzu-Chang asked Confucius about *ren*. Confucius said, ‘There are five things and whoever is capable of putting them into practice in the Empire is certainly *ren*’.

‘May I ask what they are?’ ‘They are respectfulness, tolerance, trustworthiness in word, quickness and generosity. If a man is respectful he will not be treated with insolence. If he is tolerant he will win over the multitude. If he is trustworthy in word his fellow men will entrust him with responsibility. If he is quick he will achieve results. If he is generous he is competent to command others’. (Lau, p. 173, modified)

We would be hard pressed to make sense of this definition of *ren* if we assumed *ren* to be a multidimensional virtue universally applicable to *any* human being. Some of the details Confucius gave with respect to the five constituent virtues of *ren* made it abundantly clear that he was talking about a multifaceted virtue that as a whole was pertinent only to a leader or to someone aspiring to be one. Of the five constituent virtues, the second (tolerance) and the fifth (generosity) bear the telltale signs of the leadership dimension of *ren*. Although Confucius consistently held that a leader should be tolerant (*Analects*, 3.26), it was here in this passage that he spelled out why a leader should so behave: to win over the multitude. Let’s assume that to be tolerant is applicable to *everyone*, and let’s also assume that a UPS driver is reading this passage. If he thought that Confucius’s *ren* were applicable to him, he would probably be puzzled as to why he should ‘win over the multitude’. By contrast,

a person running for public office would find Confucius's idea pertinent and inspiring. The same can be said of generosity. Unless the UPS driver were planning to run for office, he would find it less relevant to his situation than to his supervisors' because it is they who are in a position to command others. Consider the third virtue, 'trustworthiness'. Lau's translation is 'If he is trustworthy in word his fellow men will entrust him with responsibility.' The key question here is how we should understand '*ren ren yan* 人任焉'. As Yang Bojun points out, one of the meanings of *ren* 人 in its ancient usage is 'official'. *Ren* 任, on the other hand, when used as a verb, means to 'appoint' or 'assign'. So it makes good sense to translate '*ren ren yan*' as 'those in leadership positions will appoint one to an official post'. If one is not interested in a political career, one will fail to grasp the rationale for being trustworthy. The leadership aspect of *ren* must have been perfectly clear to Confucius and his disciples, but to the contemporary reader, far removed from the milieu in which Confucius and his interlocutors found themselves, it becomes difficult to recognize, and the pervasive use of generic nouns and pronouns such as 'person', 'man', 'men', 'one', 'someone', and 'others' on the part of many translators have not ameliorated the situation.

The following three definitional passages (6.22, 12.3, and 12.22) have this in common: Confucius's definitions of *ren* appear to have little bearing on virtuous leadership. To remove this difficulty, we need relevant anchor passages in the *Analects*, which contextualize the definitions in question, thereby revealing *ren*'s leadership dimension. In what follows, I will demonstrate how the implicit leadership aspect in the above-mentioned definitions of *ren* can be thrown into high relief by their respective anchor passages.

6.22

This is a puzzling passage. What makes it puzzling is that Confucius' definition of *ren* in it has no discernable bearing on the virtuous leadership. According to Confucius, a *ren* person (仁者) tends to difficulties first and leaves benefits for later (*xian nan hou huo* 先難後獲) (Lau, 2007, p. 45). On the surface, he seems to be explaining a good work ethic applicable to *everyone*. Reading this laconic definition is like looking at a small piece of archeological artifact as it is difficult to determine precisely what it is until we find an anchor passage that contextualizes it. Fortunately, similar remarks can be found in other chapters. In 12.21, we are told that in response to a disciple's question about how to uphold virtue, Confucius says that the way to uphold virtue is to serve first and reap the gains afterwards (*xian shi hou de* 先事後得). It is important to remember that all the *ren*-questions are posed by his disciples, whom he teaches in hopes that they will someday become virtuous leaders. But again, his remark in itself sheds little light on the connection that we are seeking. It is passage 15.38 that anchors both 6.22 and 12.21 to virtuous leadership. Confucius says, 'In serving the ruler, attend respectfully to your duties and look on pay as a secondary matter' (*shi jun jing qi shi er hou qi shi* 事君敬其事而後其食) (Confucius, 2007, p. 110). In essence, what is emphasized in 6.22 and 12.21 is respect, but without 15.38, it would

be difficult to see the connection of what seems to be a good work ethic to virtuous authority.

12.3

What Confucius says in this passage is not only perplexing to us, but apparently also to his disciple who asks the question about *ren*. According to Confucius, a defining characteristic of a *ren* person (*ren zhe* 仁者) is that he is discreet in speaking. Baffled by this definition, the disciple Sima Niu asks for clarification. Confucius explains, ‘If doing something is difficult, why should saying it be less so?’ According to Yang Bojun, Confucius often tailors his teaching to the needs of his disciples, and in the case of Sima Niu, he defines *ren* in such a way as to remedy the disciple’s reputed tendency to loquacity (Yang, 2006, p. 140). But the fact that Confucius also makes many similar remarks elsewhere suggests that defining *ren* as being cautious in speaking is not simply a matter of an ad hoc pedagogical strategy, but an integral part of his political philosophy as well. Confucius’s caveats about garrulity and glibness seem to be centered on trustworthiness (*xin* 信), which is part of the leadership virtue. The construction of the word 信 in ancient Chinese consists of the graphs for a human being and the mouth. The semantic transition from human speech to trustworthiness is not hard to fathom as the etymology of the word suggests an intimate relationship between trust and speech. For Confucius, trust is built on the correspondence between one’s speech and action: if what one says matches what one does, then one is trustworthy. He even goes so far as to suggest that the virtuous leader *junzi* (君子) should first put into action what he intends to say and then say it (*Analects*, 2.13). ‘People in old times were sparing in their words. They were ashamed to think that their actions might not measure up [to what they said]’ (Watson, 2007, p. 34). Although trustworthiness is a virtue that everyone should possess, it will make or break a political leader, for without the trust of the common people, a ruler will lose the foundation upon which his authority rests (*Analects*, 12.7). A potential leader will stand or fall by this virtue: if he is trustworthy, he is likely to be entrusted with official responsibilities, thereby becoming an actual leader (17.6). These insights are still valid today as they were in Confucius’s time. One of the most famous examples in recent memory is George H. W. Bush’s campaign pledge, ‘read my lips: no new taxes.’ Once elected, although he tried to adhere to his promise, he eventually raised taxes. His reneging on his campaign promise was seized upon by his rivals as a major leadership flaw and used repeatedly in their speeches and ads. As a result, Bush lost his reelection bid to Bill Clinton.

12.22

It is not at all clear that in 12.22, the answer that Confucius gives to the disciple Fan Chi’s question about *ren* has any direct bearing on virtuous leadership, for this terse definition contains only two words: 愛人 (*ai ren*). Even if we add a subject, thereby forming a complete sentence ‘The *ren* person loves others’, it will shed little light on

the identity of the subject, which is probably perfectly clear to Confucius and his interlocutor. Without taking that context into consideration, we can be easily obfuscated by the generality of the expression. It appears that what we have here is another ‘archeological fragment’. We may gain no clarity on the subject until we find a passage that contextualizes the definition here. Of all the passages that contain ‘*ai ren*’ (愛人) (1.5, 12.22, and 17.4), 1.5 is the one that explicitly anchors *ai ren* to virtuous leadership. Confucius says,

In guiding a state of a thousand chariots, approach your duties with reverence and be trustworthy in what you say; avoid excesses in expenditure and love your fellow men [*ai ren*]; employ the labor of the common people only in the right seasons. (Lau, 1992, p. 3, modified)

The anchor passage indicates clearly that the subject that should do all the things enumerated by Confucius, including ‘*ai ren*’, is a leader. If so, then Confucius’ definition of *ren* in 12.22 should read ‘A virtuous leader loves *ren* 人.’ What’s unclear is what Confucius meant by the word *ren* 人. As mentioned earlier, the term *ren* 人 in its ancient usage has (at least) two senses: in its broad sense, it refers to people regardless of their social status while in its narrow sense, it means government officials. In the context of 1.5, since ‘love *ren* 人’ (*ai ren*) is used in contrast to ‘employ the common people’ (*shi min* 使民), Yang Bojun thinks that it is used in the narrow sense (Yang, 2006, p. 5). If so, then perhaps ‘*ai ren*’ should be translated as ‘love other officials’. But other officials include those of higher rank, equal rank, and lower rank. Since the correct attitude toward an official of higher rank is respect *jing* 敬 (*Analects*, 5.16), and toward the official of equal rank it is friendliness *you* 友 (*Analects*, 5.16, 15.10), we may conclude that *ai ren* 愛人 means loving subordinate officials. But, should a virtuous leader love all subordinate officials? Confucius’s answer seems to be in the negative, for if *junzi* should serve only virtuous superiors and befriend only virtuous colleagues (*Analects*, 15.10), it makes good sense to conclude that a virtuous leader should love only virtuous subordinates. But what does this love entail? The answer to this question can be found in the same passage in which Confucius defined *ren* 仁 as loving virtuous subordinates (*Analects*, 12.22). Loving virtuous subordinates entails *ju zhi* 舉直 (promoting the upright) or *li ren* 立人 (helping the worthy or virtuous attain official positions) (*Analects*, 6.30). As I have mentioned in section 1, would-be leaders constitute a special category of leaders. Clearly all would-be leaders (e.g., most of Confucius’s disciples) are subordinates because they are below the officials of the lowest rank. It is also clear that not all would-be leaders are worthy of being promoted or being entrusted with official responsibilities. Thus, virtuous subordinates should include virtuous would-be officials. If so, then *ai ren* (loving virtuous subordinates) entails not only promoting virtuous subordinates but also entrusting qualified would-be officials with official responsibilities. That said, we should also keep in mind that that loving virtuous subordinates has other dimensions as well, such as bringing ease to them (*an ren* 安人), i.e., providing them with adequate material comfort (*Analects*, 14.42), and urging them to work diligently (*Analects*, 14.7).

Elucidative Passages

Having shown that *ren* is the leadership virtue by analyzing the definitional passages in the *Analects*, I now turn to some elucidative passages. We may recall that the elucidative passages are those in which Confucius is asked whether a specific person can be called *ren*. As mentioned earlier, the following eight passages are elucidative: 5.8, 5.19, 6.30, 7.15, 14.16, 14.17, 17.21, and 18.1. They can be classified into two categories: the *ren*-affirming passages and the *ren*-denying ones. The former are those in which Confucius affirms that the individual in question is *ren*. There are four *ren*-affirming passages: 7.15, 14.16, 14.17, and 18.1. The latter are those in which Confucius denies either implicitly or explicitly that the individual in question is *ren*. Due to space constraints, I will only discuss the *ren*-denying passages: 5.8, 5.19, 6.30, and 17.21.

5.8

In this passage, Confucius was asked whether Zilu (子路) and two other disciples could be considered *ren*. In my analysis of this passage, the focus is on Zilu. Confucius's immediate response was that he did not know (*bu zhi ye* 不知也). When pressed further, he replied that Zilu was capable of certain leadership responsibilities, and he then reiterated that he did not know whether Zilu could be called *ren*. Yang Bojun thinks that Confucius's reply should not be taken at face value; it was most likely just a tactful way of saying that Zilu had not yet reached the level of *ren* (Yang, 2006, p. 48). Yang, however, does not give us a reason as to why he thinks so. I would like to suggest an explanation supported by two anchor passages concerning Zilu: 11.22 and 11.26.

Let us consider 11. 26 first. In this passage, we are told that Confucius asked his disciples how they would proceed if they became government officials. It was Zilu who spoke up before anyone else,

give me a state of a thousand chariots to govern, set me in among powerful neighbors, harass me with foreign armies, and add to that widespread famine, and at the end of three years, I will have imbued the people with courage, and moreover, provided them with a sure direction. (Ames & Rosemont, 1998, p. 149)

While Zilu was speaking, Confucius smiled at him. Afterwards, an observant disciple asked Confucius why he had smiled at Zilu. Confucius replied, 'I smiled at him because in governing a state you need to observe ritual propriety, and yet in what he said there was no deference (*rang* 讓) at all' (p. 150). Confucius's answer provides a clue as to why he was reluctant to call Zilu *ren*: this disciple was deficient in respect, a core constituent of the leadership virtue. A state should be governed by ritual (*wei guo yi li* 爲國以禮), and the essence of ritual is deference or respect. A would-be leader who lacks deference is unlikely to become a virtuous leader. I have shown that in most definitional passages Confucius defined *ren* in terms of ritual propriety (*Analects*, 12.1, 12.2) and respect, loyalty, and trustworthiness (13.19, 15.10, and 17.6). The fact that Confucius sometimes used the term 'ritual' in

conjunction with respect (4.13, 12.5, and 13.4) and sometimes used it in contrast to a lack of respect (3.26, 11.26) seems to suggest that the essence of ritual is respect or deference.

In passage 11.22, Zilu asked Confucius if he should put what he had just heard into action immediately, to which Confucius replied, 'While your father and elder brothers are alive, how can you hear something and immediately put it into action?' (Watson, 2007, p. 75). Confucius made it clear that Zilu should defer to his father and elder brothers by consulting them on the action at hand. A final point about Zilu is that his lack of respect not only manifested itself in the way he spoke but also in his declared governing agenda: his priority was to teach the people *courage yong* 勇, rather than ritual *li* 禮, respect *gong* 恭 (and its synonyms *jing* 敬 and *rang* 讓), propriety *yi* 義, and/or trustworthiness *xin* 信. Confucius warned his disciples repeatedly against the danger of courage not tempered with other qualities such as love of ritual *hao li* 好禮, love of propriety *hao yi* 好義, or love of learning *hao xue* 好學 (Analects, 8.2, 8.10, 17.8, and 17.23). Clearly Zilu did not take his teacher's advice to heart. So the two passages just discussed clearly show that the disciple Zilu was deficient in respect. Such deficiency manifested itself in two ways closely related to leadership: in his lack of deference to his father and elder brother signaling the kind of attitude he would most likely have towards his superiors, and in his hypothetical governing agenda. It could have been a main reason for Confucius's reluctance to call him *ren*.

5.19

In this *ren*-denying passage, Confucius was asked whether the two officials under discussion could be considered *ren*. One was a long-serving prime minister of the state of Chu 楚; he was appointed three times as prime minister without showing any sign of delight, and three times dismissed from office without exhibiting any sign of resentment. He invariably reported to the new prime minister on affairs of state after the latter took office. The other was a high official in the state of Qi 齊. He left the state after another high official committed regicide. He went to two other states in succession without staying, for he thought the officials in those states were just like his colleague who had assassinated the ruler. Apparently he wanted to stay away from vicious politicians. Confucius called the former 'loyal' (*zhong* 忠) and the latter 'pure' (*qing* 清). When pressed for an answer as to whether they could be considered *ren*, Confucius said that he did not know. Perhaps Confucius's reluctance to call these two officials *ren* was due to the insufficient information presented to him. Also possible is it that since *ren* is a multifaceted concept, loyalty or purity alone is only *part* of leadership virtue. Whatever the reason may be, one thing is clear: both of these men were government officials. This fact made the question and the subsequent evaluation appropriate rather than strange or out of place to both the questioner and Confucius. It also attests to the validity of the thesis that virtuous leadership is an important dimension of Confucius's *ren*.

6.30

This passage is different from all other elucidative passages in that the individual in question is hypothetical. The disciple Zigong (子貢) asks, 'If there were a man who gave extensively to the common people (民) and brought help to the multitude (眾), what would you think of him? Could he be called *ren*?' (Lau, 1992, p. 55, modified). In the Chinese text, there is no subject, but the context clue makes it clear that the subject is a hypothetical ruler. In the English translations I have consulted, the subject is 'someone', 'a man', 'one' or 'person'. The generality of the noun or pronoun tends to obscure the identity of the subject. The tendency on the part of many translators to fill in the blank in the original text with a universal subject such as 'person', 'someone', etc., may have contributed to the leadership dimension of Confucius's *ren* being overlooked and made it difficult to establish the connection between *ren* and virtuous leadership.

It may be speculated that Zigong presents this hypothetical case to confirm his own understanding of *ren*. The case seems to show that Zigong understands, correctly, that in order for someone to be called *ren*, a prerequisite is that the person in question has to be a leader or would-be leader. Unfortunately he overshoots the mark, for Confucius's notion of *ren* is more down-to-earth, commonsensical, and pragmatic than Zigong has expected. Confucius's rhetorical question with a tinge of disapproval bursts Zigong's own lofty and grandiose bubble of *ren*: *he shi yu ren* 何事于仁? 'Why bring *ren* into the discussion?' (Watson, 2007, p. 46). The Master goes on to say: '[Such a ruler as you've described] must be a sage. Even Yao and Shun would have found it difficult to accomplish as much' (Lau, 1992, p. 55, modified). Yao and Shun are two sage rulers of antiquity, and comparing this hypothetical 'person' with them further shows that he is an imaginary ruler.

Zigong thinks that *ren* must be a lofty and extraordinary leadership quality, but it turns out to be more mundane than he has expected. Having pointed out that Zigong's hypothetical ruler would be overqualified for the epithet '*ren*', Confucius goes on to reiterate and clarify the meaning of *ren*. What he says, on the basis of what has been discussed thus far, may be rendered along the following lines: 'A virtuous leader (*ren zhe* 仁者) is someone who, because he himself wants to gain a leadership position, helps like-minded others gain leadership positions' (author's translation). One does not have to be an actual official in order to help others gain official appointments. Confucius himself is a case in point: he wants to be in a leadership position but clearly the rulers of his time are not virtuous and unwilling to hire him. So Confucius's way of helping his disciples is not to promote them to leadership positions but teach them how to transform themselves into qualified candidates for government positions. But the statement just cited has often been taken as being constitutive of Confucius's 'Positive Golden Rule'. Although there may be some justification for interpreting it as an ethical rule of universal application, we should not lose sight of its leadership dimension. It is interesting to note that while the key word *li* 立 in Confucius's 'Positive Golden Rule' has been rendered in nonspecific terms such as 'taking one's stand' or simply 'standing', in nearly all the translations I

have consulted, the same term *li* 立 in another passage (*Analects*, 4.14) is translated as ‘having official position’, which is clear and definite. I have not seen any justification for such discrepancy or inconsistency, and it seems to me that when the meaning of one instance of a word is obscure, another instance of the same word whose meaning is clear should, *prima facie*, be used to shed light on the obscure one, especially when both instances of the same word appear in the same text, and are presumably uttered by the same speaker. If this had been the case, it would not have been difficult for us to realize that Confucius’s ‘Positive Golden Rule’ has a much narrower application, that is, only to virtuous leaders.

The most qualified person capable of helping aspiring or would-be leaders become leaders (*li* 立) would be a virtuous leader of superior rank. When a feudal lord asks Confucius how to make the common people willingly obey his authority, Confucius replies that he should promote the upright *zhi* 直 and place them above the crooked *wang* 枉 in the social hierarchy (*Analects*, 2.19). Promoting the upright or worthy *xian* 賢 is helping them become leaders or leaders of higher rank (*Analects*, 2.19, 12.22, 13.2), which is a hallmark of virtuous leadership. Confucius singles out Zang Wenzhong 臧文仲 (a high official in the state of Lu 魯) as exemplifying the quality antithetical to the virtuous leadership (*ren* 仁), for even though this official knows that someone by the name of Liu Xiahui 柳下惠 is worthy of being a leader, he does not help him become one (*bu yu li* 不與立) (15.14). If *li ren* 立人 (helping the worthy gain official positions) constitutes *ren* 仁 (6.30), the high official Zang Wenzhong is clearly disqualified from having such an honor. If he is not *ren*, then he is not fit to rule. No wonder Confucius asks, ‘Is Zang Wenzhong not one who does not deserve his position?’ (Lau, 1992, p. 153, modified). Slingerland’s translation of the same sentence is closer to the original: ‘As for Zang Wenzhong, was he not a thief of official positions [*qie wei zhe* 竊位者]?’ (Slingerland, 2003, p. 180). To be a ‘thief of official positions’ is to be an official without legitimate qualifications. Clearly, having *ren* or being *ren* is what make a person qualify for an official position. This demonstrates, once again, that *ren* is the *leadership* virtue.

17.21

In this *ren*-denying passage, Confucius calls his disciple Zai Wo 宰我 *bu ren* (不仁). If *ren* refers to virtuous leadership, Confucius can be understood as predicting that Zai Wo, a would-be leader, will not become a virtuous leader. But on what grounds is Confucius’s prediction based? Zai Wo is arguing that the three-year mourning period for deceased parents should be reduced to one year. I would like to call attention to the perspective from which he presents his case. Zai Wo argues,

If the gentleman (*junzi* 君子) goes three years without performing rituals *wei li* 爲禮, the rituals are certain to decline; if he goes three years without performing music *wei yue* 爲樂, music is certain to be lost... (Watson, 2007, p. 124)

That a *junzi* is a leader or would-be leader is revealed by the fact that he performs (or participates in performing) rituals and music, two important responsibilities of an official in the time of Confucius. Confucius’s rebuttal does not aim at Zai Wo’s

argument, though, which may be called ‘argument from the responsibilities of a government official’. Instead, he focuses on the kind of life to which an official is entitled under normal circumstances and the emotional dissonance the uninterrupted continuation of such a life would engender if the mourner were a virtuous official. Confucius asks Zai Wo if he would feel right enjoying eating rice (a luxury food in ancient China) and wearing a brocade robe. Zai Wo says yes.

Confucius says, ‘If you would feel right, then do so. But when a *junzi* is in mourning, if he ate fine food, it would have no savor; if he listened to music, it would bring no joy; if he lived in ease, it would not feel right. Therefore, he does not do so. But since you would feel right, you may do so.’ (Watson, 2007, p. 124, modified)

Confucius’s point is that measured against the norm that the *junzi* (the virtuous leader) embodies, Zai Wo is deficient in his affection towards his parents. A *junzi* will not enjoy fine food and music when he is in mourning, as he will feel a terrible sense of loss and tremendous grief for the passing of his parents. He will feel so because he has deep affection for and gratitude to them. His affection and gratitude stem in part from the fact that during the first few years of his life he was completely dependent on his parents’ tender loving care. That Zai Wo would feel right enjoying eating fine food, wearing brocade robes, and listening to music seems to indicate that he does not have filial piety *xiao* 孝. While arguably filial piety in itself may not have immediate bearing on virtuous leadership, a lack of filial piety may serve as a fairly reliable indication that the individual in question will not become a virtuous leader, for being filial is said to constitute the root of *ren* (*ren zhi ben* 仁之本) (*Analects*, 1.2). It is in this sense, we have good reason to believe, that Confucius calls Zai Wo *bu ren* (meaning ‘Zai Wo will not become a virtuous leader’). That said, we might not be able to completely rule out an alternative explanation. Recall that Confucius in one of the definitional passages defines a virtuous leader as someone who overcomes his own ego and restores ritual (*Analects*, 12.1). The way for a leader to restore ritual is to perform every action in accordance with the ritual rules, rather than attempt to modify, amend or reform them. Although Confucius accepts some modifications to certain inessential details of ritual (*Analects*, 9.3), he is adamant about its core prescriptions and practices, that is, the parts concerning reverence or respect for gods, ancestors, parents, and political authorities. If upholding the essential part of ritual is an important criterion for virtuous leadership, we can see how far the disciple Zai Wo’s proposal deviates from it.

Conclusion

If there is an ambiguity as to whether Confucius’s teachings are primarily about how to become a virtuous person or how to become a virtuous leader, the present article is an attempt to lay that ambiguity to rest, as I have shown through my careful and systematic analyses of the twelve *ren*-passages in the *Analects* that *ren* 仁, commonly regarded as central to Confucius’s thought, is a multidimensional *leadership* virtue.

As I pointed out earlier, calling attention to this dimension of Confucius's notion of *ren* is not incompatible with the emphasis that has been frequently given to the egalitarian aspect of the concept. Although everyone can and has the right to engage in the cultivation of the virtue of *ren*, only someone who whole-heartedly and persistently practices *ren* can possess *ren* (to a substantial degree), and only such a person is worthy of being a leader. It is in this sense that it may be said that *ren* is the leadership virtue and foundation of government. Although contemporary society is much more different and complex than the one in which Confucius lived, most constituent virtues he subsumed under *ren* have not lost their relevance. Respect for virtuous superiors, wisdom, principled loyalty, tolerance of the minor faults on the part of subordinates, trustworthiness, loving the worthy, and caring for the common people can all be used as evaluative criteria for determining whether someone is qualified for a leadership position or whether a leader should remain in office.

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