HKU03x Humanity and Nature in Chinese Thought

Week 2: Confucius
Section 10: The Importance of Ren Humanity for Confucianism (Part One)

- Discourse *dào* and performance *dào* – Discourse *dào* is like the song or play or poem and performance *dào* is the interpretive performance of the play, the symphony or a reading of the poem. 德 *dé*[virtuosity] is the capacity to interpret the *dào* into a real time performance
- How does the performer know how to fine tune the performance to just this audience, time, mood, acoustics etc.? We can think of 德 *dé*[virtuosity] as an inner process (a *dào* in our central nervous system & muscle memory) in the performer that *translates* the discourse *dào* to concrete 行 *xíng*[walk:behavior]
- It's possible to follow a *dào* incorrectly, taking the wrong fork or getting off the path
- To get it right, you must be able to follow the signs
- If the names are not rectified, you won't know how to perform
- A Confucian solution to bridge the gap between discourse social *dao* and concrete performance is 仁 *ren*[humanity] --a type of 德 *dé*[virtuosity]
- *Jen* is the older Romanization spelling of 仁*rén*[humanity]
- 仁 *ren*[humanity] and 人 *ren*[person] are closely related in sound, structure and metaphorical meaning
- 仁者 人也 - Those who have humanity are human. Only humans can pick up language from being around humans in the linguistic community—a special human 德 *dé*[virtuosity]
- Confucian definition of 仁 *ren*[humanity] is evasive. Disciples offer various formulae (e.g. reciprocity) and some link it to Confucius' *silver* rule. Do not do to others what you don't like done to you. This makes it roughly equivalent to negative utilitarianism

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- Is it humanity? Kindness? Goodness? Humanity is my preferred translation for Confucius—preserves the ambiguity and the meaning link to ‘human’
- Danger of infinite regress – if 仁 *rén*[humanity] is cultivated by our practice of 禮*li*[ritual] then our intuitions about proper performance will reflect those of our teachers. If the transmission process is only 90% accurate, after several generations, it can deviate a great deal. My performance intuition will reflect all those deviations
- ‘Chinese whispers’ – each tries faithfully to pass the message but the transmission breaks down and humorous mistakes likely result
- To make the transmission reliable, 仁 *ren*[humanity] would have to be a pre-trained or innately intuitive capacity to “get things right”
- 仁 *Ren*[humanity] is responsible for more than merely *correct* performance but for elegant or beautiful performance as well
- Yo-Yo Ma (Cellist)
- 仁 *Ren*[humanity] should help us tailor our performance to specific circumstances
- 仁 *Ren*[humanity] is the capacity that helps us figure out what to do
- How did the Sages know to formulate 禮 *li*[ritual]? Because they have 仁 *ren*[humanity]
- The sages invent the 禮 *li*[rituals] to express the 仁 *ren*[humanity] to the rest of us
- 仁 *Ren*[humanity] is the solution to getting the interpretation correct