



Confucian Virtue Ethics and Confucian Character Education

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Some reflections on an empirical approach to this question

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary* online, ‘universal’ means ‘existing everywhere or involving everyone.’¹ The most minimal version of ethical universalism claims that ethical principles or virtues ‘hold for all and not merely for some, that is, for everybody without exception’ (Online guide to ethics and moral philosophy²). Understood in this way, the theme of the conference ‘Are virtues universal or local’ is meant to investigate whether the virtues hold for everybody and everywhere. For that sake, a large-scale empirical study seems imperative and it is intended to cover ‘everybody and everywhere’ or at least representative samples of which.

Regarding this topic, a collective work under C. Peterson and M. E. P. Seligman’s lead on the ‘classification of character strengths and virtues’ (CSV for short) (2004) is a case in point. As the chapter title ‘Universal virtues?—Lessons from history’ shows, they aim to explore whether there exist certain virtues which hold for everyone. Very often, they encounter the objection that ‘there are no strengths and virtues valued across all cultures’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 33). Peterson and Seligman remark that since they cannot imagine parents in any culture looking at their newborn infants with indifference towards the possibility that they may grow up to be ‘cowardly, dishonest, easily discouraged, pessimistic, and cruel’ they tend to believe that ‘Perhaps there are after all some ubiquitous, if not universal, virtues.’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.33). To verify this idea, a systematic investigation is carried out. CSV is composed of two steps. The first step is historical by nature. They review an extensive literature of early thinkers on virtues from three influential traditions, i.e. China, South Asia (India, mostly), and the West; they represent six dominant religious and philosophical traditions around the world: Confucianism and Taoism; Buddhism and Hinduism; Athenian philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005, p.203; Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.31). Their respective representative texts (e.g. the *Analects* for Confucianism and the *Ten Commandments* for Judaism) are selected to be examined to distill a catalog of virtues. Next is to examine whether these various virtue catalogs converge on some points (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 33). These points of convergence are their concern of interest.³

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Retrieved

from

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/zht/%E8%A9%9E%E5%85%B8/%E8%8B%B1%E8%AA%9E/universal>

² Retrieved from http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/cavalier/80130/part2/Routledge/R_Deontology.html

³ After reviewing the pertinent literature, they combine redundancies and identify several dozens of candidate positive traits. However, the quantity is so large that it necessitates a method of consolidating the various positive traits. After scrutinising the candidates and looking for common features, they come up with 10 criteria to further winnow the list

Finally, they obtain 24 strengths of character, about half of which meet the 10 criteria while the rest meet most of them. Peterson and Seligman condense the collected lists of virtue (i.e. character strengths) by 'locating thematically similar virtues and classifying them under an obviously emerging core virtue' which represents 'an abstract ideal encompassing a number of other, more specific virtues that reliably converge to the recognizable higher order category' (Dahlsgaard & Peterson, 2005, p. 204). It results in 6 core virtues, dubbed 'the High Six', and 24 character strengths (please see appendix 1).

It is summarised that 'The primary lesson we learn from *the historical exercise* described in this chapter is that *there is a strong convergence across time, place, and intellectual tradition about certain core virtues.*' And 'Although others may appear on some lists and then be lost again, *certain virtues, either explicitly or thematically, had real staying power.*' (italics, mine) (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.50) The six broad virtue classes are claimed to be ubiquitous (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.51).⁴ 'They claim to have come up with more or less universal virtues.' (Oudenhoven, Raad, Timmerman, Askevis-Leherpeus, Boski, & Carmona, et al., 2014, p.2).

CSV is a 'historical' study in that the designated virtues are distilled from the various religious sources and philosophical traditions developed long time ago. The virtues in question are considered by these thinkers to be 'crucial for human thriving' and 'make for the most exemplary person or lived life' (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.34). The problem is that it is unclear whether they still hold for modern people. In this regard, the study of J. P. V. Oudenhoven et al. (2014) helps to fill the gap. At the outset, they share Peterson and Seligman's concern. As stated, 'We want to know to what extent virtues are universal, or rather culturally specific.' (Oudenhoven et al., 2014, p.1) However, they adopt a different approach. In contrast to a historical approach, 'We want to base our research of virtues on those personal characteristics that *contemporary laypersons see as virtues*, rather than on what their religious or spiritual affiliation tells them to do.' (italics, mine) (Oudenhoven et al., 2014, p.2) To this end, they ask the respondents (2908 university students from 14 countries⁵) to firstly freely list the virtues 'which you would like to bring into practice in daily life' and secondly rank a set of 15 virtues⁶ according to their perceived importance.

(Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp. 15, 16-17). They are: fulfilling, morally valued, does not diminish others, nonfelicitous opposite, traitlike, distinctiveness, paragons, prodigies, selective absence, and institutions and rituals (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, pp.16-28).

⁴ However, two caveats deserve to be mentioned. Firstly, the High Six are not equally ubiquitous nor are they equally explicitly mentioned. For instance, courage (usually as physical valor) is said to be missing even thematically from 'the Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian traditions'. But that does not mean that bravery is not valued at all in these traditions, especially if bravery is understood in a broader sense (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.50). This seems to be concerned with the different degrees of emphasis put on each virtue in the various traditions. Secondly, some culture-bound, i.e., 'non-ubiquitous' virtues are found such as magnificence in the Greek tradition and certain role-related or class-defined virtues in the Confucian tradition (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.51).

⁵ The 14 nations include 2 North and South American countries (i.e. the USA and Mexico), 9 European countries (Spain, Czech Republic, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Austria, Germany, Poland, Norway, and France), and 3 Asian nations (Malaysia, India, and Hong Kong) (see table 1, Oudenhoven et al., 2014, p.4).

⁶ These virtues are found in Van Oudenhoven et al.'s previous study in 2012. That study adopts a free response procedure and the respondents are teachers, students, politicians and adults from various religious and non-religious backgrounds in the Netherlands. These most frequently mentioned virtues in the Netherlands are respect, justice, wisdom, joy, resolution, mercy, reliability, hope, courage, faith, moderation, openness, modesty, love and helpfulness (Oudenhoven et al., 2014, p.2)

Their conclusion is as follows: ‘There appear to be some country specific virtues, such as generosity in France, but also some relatively universal virtues, most notably honesty, respect, and kindness.’⁷ (Oudenhoven et al., 2014, p.1) It is worth noting that their operational definition of ‘universal virtues’ is as follows: ‘a virtue is—relatively—universal if the freely mentioned virtue is shared by more than half of the nations as one of the ten most frequently mentioned virtues’ (Oudenhoven et al., 2014, p.3). That is to say, a virtue counts as ‘universal’ if and only if more than 7 nations rank it as one of the top ten most frequently mentioned virtues. For that matter, ‘reliability’ and ‘humour’ cannot count as universal virtues since they are mentioned only by 5 nations among the top ten virtues. On the other hand, France is the only one country that ranks ‘generosity’ among the top ten virtues (in fact, it is the top one virtue) and therefore it is classified as a culture-specific or a culture-bound, ‘non-ubiquitous’ virtue in Peterson and Seligman’s term. However, it seems plausible to think that the other 13 countries would readily recognise ‘generosity’ as a virtue even though it is not among the top ten virtues that the respondents would like to bring into practice in daily life.

On the whole, the aforementioned two empirical studies aim to explore the questions ‘whether there are universal virtues’ and ‘to what extent virtues are universal’. Both of them answer the first question affirmatively: Yes! There are universal virtues in the sense of being cross-cultural and transnational. However, due to the very inevitable limitation, these empirical studies cannot really conduct a survey covering everyone in the world. For that matter, it must be emphasised that the so-called ‘universal’ virtues are designated with qualifications. Oudenhoven et al.’s operational definition of universal virtues is a strong case in point. They lower down the benchmark for any virtue to be universal. In view of these, the most promising conclusion they can arrive at is that ‘there are “ubiquitous”, if not really universal, virtues’ (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p.33) and ‘there are some “relatively” universal virtues’ (Oudenhoven et al., 2014, p.1). Are there really universal virtues *per se*? It has not been sufficiently answered.

Confucian virtue ethics and Confucian character education

The Analects (pronounced *Lunyu*) means literally the ordered sayings of Master Kong. It was generally acknowledged to be put together after the death of the historical Confucius (551-479 BC.) (Slingerland, 2001, p.97). It comprises conversations between the Master and his disciples, anecdotes about the Master’s conduct in various situations and selected admonitions from the mouths of the Master and some of his disciples (Slingerland, 2001, p.106). *The Analects* is a critical text for us to understand Confucius’ ethics. Even though it is not a formal treatise on ethics, it is by no means simply aphoristic; rather, it contains an implicit conceptual framework for ethics (Mahood, 1974, p. 301).

This volume consists of twenty books which comprise 499 chapters. The major topics include what is *ren* 仁 (as a general virtue, perfect virtue), how to be a *junzi* 君子/gentleman (namely, a *ren* person 仁人 or a

⁷ In fact, there are 5 virtues qualified as ‘universal’ since they are mentioned by at least half of the 14 nations among their top ten. They are respectively honesty (14 nations), respect (11 nations), kindness (10 nations), openness (9 nations), and tolerance (8 nations) (Oudenhoven et al., 2014, p.4).

zen zhe (仁者), rich descriptions of *li* (禮) / ritual propriety and filial piety (孝), the significance of making friends⁸ (友) and role models for cultivating virtue. On the whole, *the Analects* is centred chiefly on moral self-cultivation (修己、修身、正己、正身). And the ideal personality or a fully realised human being in Confucianism is represented by the notion of ‘gentleman’ (*junzi*) (Wong, 2011, p.73).

Virtuous person and virtuous official

S. Luo makes a strong case that *the Analects* has abundant textual evidence (e.g. 12.2, 14.43) showing that “the primary objective of Confucius’s teachings is to make his disciples ‘fit to take part in government’” (Luo, 2012, p.17). When Tszu-lu asked about the gentleman, Confucius said, “He cultivates himself in reverence”, “He cultivates himself so as to give rest to others [his clan]”, “He cultivates himself so as to give rest to all the people [in the empire]—even Yao and Shun found it difficult.” (修己以敬、修己以安人、修己以安百姓，堯舜其猶病諸。(14.43) For that matter, *the Analects* is not only concerned with how to become a virtuous *person* but also how to become a virtuous *leader* serving the government and practicing virtue politics (Luo, 2012, p.17). This is because in that disturbing time a *ren* government official can have much greater influences on society as a whole than merely a virtuous commoner (Luo, 2012, p.17). This is in line with Confucius’s attitude towards the social unrest. He does not want to be a virtuous recluse; he said “Sell it! Sell it! I am one waiting for such a merchant.” (沽之哉！沽之哉！我待賈者也！(9.13) He said to Yen Yuan, “When employed, to put it [the Way] into practice; when unemployed, to keep it in store—perhaps only you and I are capable of this.” (用之則行，舍之則藏，惟我與爾有是夫。(7.11)

The virtuous official is expected to act as a role model for his subordinates and in so doing, he takes the responsibility of educating his people to be virtuous as well. This is in tune with Confucius’s idea of *ren*/benevolence/humanity to the effect that “It is to love all men.” (愛人 (12.22) “If the gentleman acquires the Way, he loves men.” (君子學道則愛人 (17.3). “Can you [an official] love them without making them toil? Can you be loyal to him [the sovereign] without admonishing him?” (愛之，能勿勞乎？忠焉，能勿誨乎？(14.7) The *zen zhe* is one who, wishing to establish himself, seeks also to establish

⁸ Confucius’s disciple, Master Zeng once said, “The gentleman uses culture [referring to the Six Classics, namely, ritual propriety, music, archery, charioting, poetry, and arithmetic] to associate with friends; he uses friends to promote *ren*/humanity.” (12.24) 曾子曰：君子以文會友；以友輔仁。Likewise, when Zi-gong asked how to cultivate *ren*/humanity, the Master put it, “If an artisan wishes to perfect his craft, he must first sharpen his tools. Living in this state, serve the worthy of its ministers and befriend the humane of its *shi* [the scholars].” (15.10) 子貢問為仁。子曰：工欲善其事，必先利其器。居是邦也，事其大夫之賢者，友其士之仁者。In this passage, by analogy, Confucius bluntly regarded humane friends as a tool to sharpen one’s character. This idea reminds us of Aristotle’s ideal type of friendship, i.e. virtue-friendship (Aristotle, trans. 1992, p. 196).

others; he who wishes to gain perception [i.e. to gain a thorough understanding of the Way of humanity, Huang, 1997, p.86] helps others to gain perception. 夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲達而達人(6.30). For that matter, *the Analects* is a treatise not only on ethics but also on politics. This volume as a whole is mainly concerned with character education, both of a would-be *ren* person's own moral self-cultivation and that of his subjects.

Confucius put supreme emphasis on the virtuous official's role of acting as a model for his people. When Ji Kang-zi asked Master Kong about government, he replied: "Government means correctness/rectification. If you take the lead in being correct, sir, who dares remain incorrect?" 季康子問政於孔子，孔子對曰：政者，正也，子帥以正，孰敢不正？(12.17) Also, "If you yourself are correct, even without the issuing of orders, things will get done; if you yourself are incorrect, although orders are issued, they will not be obeyed." 其身正，不令而行；其身不正，雖令不從。(13.6) "If you can set yourself correct, what difficulty do you have in conducting state affairs? If you cannot set yourself correct, how can you correct others?" 苟正其身矣，於從政乎何有？不能正其身，如正人何？(13.13) Clearly, for Confucius, state affairs have to do with correcting people and that is the official's job.

To this end, he must set himself correct and become virtuous/*ren* in the first place. That is because people are looking for the lead of their rulers who can act as lively models for imitation. For that matter, Confucius repeatedly admonished his disciples who were expectedly would-be virtuous leaders that "If you desire goodness, the people will be good accordingly. The gentleman's moral character is wind and the small man's [i.e. the common people's] moral character, grass. When the grass is visited by the wind, it must surely bend." 子欲善，而民善矣！君子之德風；小人之德草；草上之風必偃。(12.19) The people's character is likely to be corrected by the virtuous leader's moral character. Besides, the other side to the same coin is this: Zi-gong said: "The gentleman's errors are like the eclipses of the sun and the moon. When he makes one, everyone sees it; when he corrects it, everyone looks up to him." 子貢曰：君子之過也，如日月之食焉。過也，人皆見之；更也，人皆仰之。(19.21) In sum, virtuous leaders are moral exemplars for the common people to look for, to imitate, and to emulate.

Since *the Analects* is concerned with how to become virtuous, a follow-up question is how to do this? Regarding this, a series of core concepts in *the Analects* come to the fore including *ren*, *li*, and *yi*義.

Ren/Perfect virtue as the ideal character is applicable to all, realisable through practice, learning, and self-cultivation

Wing-Tsit Chan 陳榮捷 in his seminal paper entitled "The evolution of the Confucian concept *Jên*" indicates that "*jên* is essentially a Confucian concept, and it was Confucius (551-479 [BC]) who made it really significant." (Chan, 1955, p.295) In the pre-Confucian texts, *jên/ren* is mentioned only occasionally and in all cases it denotes "the particular virtue of kindness, more especially the kindness of a ruler to his subjects." (Chan, 1955, p.295) Different from that, *jên* in Confucius's usage undergoes a radical

change. Specifically, three points are remarkable. First of all, *jên* is made a central theme of *the Analects*. 58 of the 499 chapters (i.e. 11.6%) are devoted to the discussion of *jên* and it appears 105 times (Chan, 1955, p.296). Secondly, Confucius transformed the ancient meaning of *jên* as a particular virtue into what was appropriately translated as “perfect virtue”, that is, *jên* in the sense of the general virtue, an inclusive virtue, moral life at its best (Chan, 1955, p.297). Finally, *jên* is no longer a special characteristic of rulers but “a quality applicable to all human beings” (Chan, 1955, p.299).

For Confucius, *ren* is not the monopoly of highborn people. *Ren* is open to all people to attain instead. Likewise, the ideal character of “a complete man” (成人) (14.12) is assumed to be valid for all people (Slingerland, 2001, p.117). This is what E. Slingerland calls “the claim to universality”; “an appeal to universality is part of the structural vision of *the Analects*.” (Slingerland, 2001, p.117). At the outset, it needs to be noted that *ren* has been translated into many different English terms⁹ and this fact shows that *ren* is an exceedingly complicated concept (Chan, 1955, p.295). In general, *ren* in Confucius’s usage has two meanings. One is *ren* as a particular virtue (in a few cases). In this narrow sense, *ren* is best translated as “benevolence” and it is often contrasted with wisdom and courage (e.g. 9.29, 14.29) (Chan, 1955, p.297; Cua, 2002, p.127) and mentioned along with being clever, trustworthy, forthright, courageous, unbending and so on (Yu, 1998, p.324). The other is *ren* as perfect virtue and it acts as “an articulation and specification in the context of a moral ideal of Confucius” (Cua, 2002, p.127). *Ren* as a general virtue and moral excellence at its best, includes a set of particular virtues such as filial piety, wisdom, truthfulness, courage, loyalty, “earnestness, liberality, truthfulness, diligence, and generosity” etc. 恭寬信敏惠(17.5)

It seems that for Confucius, *ren* is a distinguishing potential of human beings. As a potential common to all people, it awaits to be realised. As put, “Is *ren*/humanity so remote? If I desire *ren*/humanity, there comes *ren*/humanity!” 仁遠乎哉？我欲仁，斯仁至矣(7.30) The root/origin of *ren* is inside everyone, be he of noble birth or from a lower social stratum (Don’t forget that many of Confucius’s disciples are in the latter category). In reply to Yen Yuan’s question about perfect virtue, Confucius asks a rhetorical question, “The practice of *ren*/humanity rests with oneself. Does it rest with anyone else?” 為仁由己，而由仁乎哉？(12.1) *Ren* is not inborn but awaits everyone to cultivate and realise to the full. Moreover, it is not beyond anyone’s reach. “Is there anyone who can, for a single day, exert his energy on *ren*/humanity? I have never seen any whose ability is insufficient. There may be such people; only I have not seen any.” 有能一日用其力於仁矣乎？我未見力不足者。蓋有之矣，我未之見也。(4.6) As a consequence, when Zan Ch’iu said, “Not that I do not like your Way, sir, but that my ability is insufficient.” The Master admonished him that “Those whose ability is insufficient give up halfway. Now you have drawn a halting line.” 冉求曰：非不說子之道，力不足也。子曰：力不足者，中道而廢。今女畫。(6.12)

⁹ To name some, “benevolence, love, altruism, kindness, charity, compassion, magnanimity, perfect virtue, goodness, true manhood, manhood at its best, human-heartedness, humaneness, humanity, ‘hominity’, man-to-manness” (Chan, 1955, p.295).

That said, Confucius did not believe that human nature is naturally attracted to *ren* (Yu, 1998, p.332). A straightforward evidence is this: the Master said, “I have not seen a person who [naturally] loved virtue, or one who [naturally] hated what was not virtuous.” 我未見好仁者，惡不仁者。(4.6) Also, the Master said, “I have not seen one who loves virtue as he loves beauty.” 吾未見好德，如好色者也。(9.18) For that matter, Confucius claimed that *ren* is “to overcome oneself and to return to *li*”. Overcoming oneself in question has to do with disciplining one’s natural inclinations.

As noted above, *ren* is not the private property of aristocrats; it is open to all men irrespective of births¹⁰, social ranks, or intelligence. That is because “By nature, people are close to one another; through practice, they drift far apart.”¹¹ 性相近也，習相遠也。(17.2)

Furthermore, some textual evidences indicate that *ren* as an ideal character is considered to be suitable and applicable for all peoples. For instance, when Fan Chi asked about *ren*/humanity, the Master said: “Conduct yourself with respect; perform your duties with reverence; treat others with wholehearted sincerity. *Even if you should journey to the Yis and Dis, you cannot abandon these.*” (italics, mine) 樊遲問仁。子曰：居處恭，執事敬，與人忠；雖之夷狄，不可棄也。(13.19) Yi and Di are ancient names for the non-Chinese tribes respectively to the East and the North of China proper. And “The Yis and Dis” is utilised to represent all of the non-Chinese tribes on the borders of China (Huang, 1997, p.59). *Ren*/Humanity will work in foreign countries, too. Confucius once commended these foreign tribes for respecting their rulers, saying “Even the Yis and Dis have regard for their sovereigns, unlike the various states of Xia, which have none.” 夷狄之有君，不如諸夏之亡也。(3.5) That is, *ren* is an ideal not restricted to the Chinese people.

¹⁰ When the Master speaking about Zhong-gong, said: “A plough-ox’s calf, with red hide and well-shaped horns—even though men might not want to use it [for sacrifice], would the mountains and rivers [i.e. the gods of both] abandon it?” (6.6) 子謂仲弓，曰：犁牛之子騂且角，雖欲勿用，山川其舍諸？ This passage indicates that even though Zhong-gong came from an ignoble family, Confucius claimed that only if he had great capabilities and virtues, he still had a chance to be adopted as an official. This idea appears repeatedly in *the Analects*, see 1.16, the Master said, “Do not worry about men [people in high positions] not knowing you; rather, worry about incapability and ignorance.” In 4.14 the Master put it, “Do not worry about having no office; rather, worry about whether you deserve to stand in that office. Do not worry about nobody knowing you; rather, seek to be worth knowing.” Also 14.31 (Do not worry about men not knowing you; rather, worry about your incapability.), 15.19 (The gentleman worries about his incapability; he does not worry about men not knowing him.).

¹¹ That goes with two exceptions: “Only the highest of the wise and the lowest of the stupid do not change.” 唯上知與下愚，不移。(17.2) The former do not change through practice, because they are the sages who “know it [the Way] at birth” 生而知之者; the latter are “those who do not learn even when baffled” (16.9; Huang, 1997, pp.165-166) 困而不學。 For the great majority of people, they belong to the middle category between the wisest and the stupidest, and they drift far apart mainly through practice, learning, and self-cultivation. Confucius claimed to be one of them, saying that “I am not one who knows it at birth, but one who loves antiquity and assiduously seeks it [the Way].” 我非生而知之者，好古，敏以求之者也。(17.20)

Bending one's mind on ren as a precondition for self-cultivation

For anyone to make effort on self-cultivation, a prerequisite is to set one's will on virtue first志於仁 (4.4). That is the motivational or volitional aspect of self-cultivation. Confucius put great emphasis on determination and setting one's will on learning, virtue, truth, and the Way (e.g. 1.11 "look at the bent of his will"觀其志; 2.4 "I had my mind bent on learning"志於學; 4.4 "the will is set on virtue"苟志於仁矣; 4.9 "a scholar whose mind is set on truth"士志於道; 7.6 "Let the will be set on the Way"志於道) That is because "The three armies may be robbed of their supreme commander, but the will of even a common man cannot be taken from him." 三軍可奪帥也，匹夫不可奪志也。(9.26) Only when a common man sets his mind on learning to be virtuous/*ren*, can the enterprise of moral self-cultivation possibly be undertaken in the first place? "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." 志士仁人，無求生以害仁，有殺身以成仁。(15.9)

The above indicates that for Confucius, the ideal character, *zen zhe*/the gentleman is up to everyone who is determined to set his will on virtue. *Zen* is not restricted to a given set of people in that *zen* is the potential residing in every person. Confucius's emphasis on determination explains why the notion of "self" cultivation is characteristic of his ethics. But does it mean that the cultivation of virtue cannot begin until one sets his will on it? Probably not. Take Confucius for instance. He said, "At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning." 吾十有五而志於學(2.4) With that said, it is plausible to suppose that before fifteen, the inculcation of virtue has begun and the enterprise was mainly initiated by his caretakers. Confucius's stress on self-cultivation instead of education initiated by others is explainable for his audience have determined to study with him. Confucius in the *Analects* was not in the business of teaching children (Slingerland, 2001, p.109).

The primacy of li

With regard to Confucius's character education the best place to start is with *li*/ritual propriety. *Li*/ritual propriety is Confucius's greatest preoccupation and the foundation of his virtue curriculum¹² (Sarkissian, 2010. p.2). As said, "The practice of *ren* is the lynchpin of Confucian ethics." (Flanagan, 2011, p.169). Confucius said to his son, Bo-yu that "If you do not learn *The Rituals*, you have no way of establishing yourself."(16.13) (The same idea also appears in 8.8 and 20.3.) *Li* is the first step to take on learning to be a gentleman.

That is because *li* as a traditional repository of rules guiding personal behaviour and interpersonal relations (Chong, 1998, p.104) pervade all areas of life. The rites act as a code of propriety governing all phases of human life including human conduct, etiquettes governing family life and social relations,

¹² Confucius's curriculum also included the study of music, poetry, archery, and history, all considered important to cultivating virtue (Sarkissian, 2010. p.2). In *the Analects*, Confucius's remarks on archery are intended to emphasise the link between archery and the rituals and uphold the value of the rituals.(see 3.7 and 3.16).

state affairs, rulership, religious sacrifices etc. (Huang, 1997, p.50). The coverage of *li* includes all important affairs involved from birth to death (e.g. 2.5, Book10). No one can lead a decent life or behave properly without following the guidance of *li*, even the sovereign (e.g. 3.19). The rites work as definite rules or principles regulating people's behaviour in different contexts, be it alone or in relation to others. The Master said to Yan Yuan, "That which does not conform to the rituals—do not look at it; which does not conform to the rituals—do not listen to it; that which does not conform to the rituals—do not say it; that which does not conform to the rituals—do not do it." (12.1) 非禮勿視，非禮勿聽，非禮勿言，非禮勿動。 Since "Nothing can be accomplished without norms or standards." it is plausible that Confucius would recommend character education begin with the learning of the rites.

Among other things, Book 3 and 10 are most directly centred on *li*. Book 10 is usually read as a record of the various ritual norms followed by Confucius and many readers have been amused, intrigued, or baffled by it (Tan, 2002, p.411). Two examples are as follows: "He [Confucius] would not sleep like a corpse, nor attend to his appearance at home." 寢不尸，居不容。(10.17) "If the mat was not set right, he would not sit." 席不正不坐。(10.7) In order to dispel the apparent ridiculousness, we need to understand what Confucius exactly expected of *li* in terms of its function and real value in virtue education.

I would like to argue that as a starting point of virtue education, the function of *li* for Confucius is like that of laws for Protagoras. In Plato's *Protagoras*, Protagoras remarked that the state compelled the young to learn the laws with the aim of making them "live after the pattern which they [i.e. laws] furnish, and not after their own fancies" (Plato's *Protagoras*, p.19). Likewise, the rites set up the principles of right acts which are to be utilised to guide the young in their conduct. *Li* is intended to offer the explicit codes of behaviour to be followed. Those transgressing *li* are to be corrected.

Confucius took great pains to highlight the "restraining" and "regulating" effect *li* has on human behaviour (as well as human psychology, I would argue later). "A gentleman...*restrains* himself with the rituals is not likely to betray." (italics mine) 君子.....約之以禮，亦可以弗畔矣夫！(6.27, 12.15) His distinguished disciple Yan Yuan once praised Confucius for being good at "*restraining* me with the rituals" 約我以禮(italics mine) (9.11). Also, in replying to Yan Yuan's asking about *ren*/humanity, the Master said, "To restrain oneself and return to the rituals constitutes *ren*/humanity." (12.1) 子曰：克己復禮，為仁。 Underlying Confucius's practice is his belief that "Those who err through self-constraint are rare indeed." 以約失之者，鮮矣。(4.23) That is because *li* represents the guiding rules preventing people from error and directing people towards right behaviour. Apparently, the restraining effect of *li* is on outward performance.

The restraining effect *li* exerting on human behaviour also executes at the level of state government. The Master admonished [his disciples] that "If you govern them [common people] with virtue and *regulate them with the rituals*, they will have a sense of shame and flock to you." (italics mine) 道之以德，齊之以禮，有恥且格。(2.3) Also, Master You said: "But if you...do not use the rituals

to regulate it, it will not work either.” 不以禮節之，亦不可行也。(1.12) That is to say, Confucius agreed that the rites are also a worthwhile educational measure for virtuous leaders to take.

The essence of li: the proper spirit—the genuine and sincere feelings to express properly by li

G. H. Mahood claims that “Too many western-oriented philosophers conceive *li* in narrow ritualistic terms, forgetting that Confucius asked: ‘Are gems and silk all that is meant by propriety?’” (Mahood, 1974, p.305) A proper understanding of the rich meanings of *li* is a requisite for figuring out its role in Confucius’s character education. I shall argue that *li* is best understood in two respects: outwardly, *li* refers to the various ritual norms prescribing what to do rightly amounts to in different contexts; internally, *li* has to do with proper moral psychology such as feelings, motivations, desires etc. [內外兼修] In other words, *li* takes the form of various rituals and norms while the substance of *li* is the proper spirit in which they are carried out.

For Confucius, if the rites are practiced without simultaneously involving the agent’s proper feelings or attitudes, *li* is deadened or collapses. To name some textual evidence in support of this. When Lin Fang asked about the “essence” of the rituals, the Master replied: “A great question indeed! In the rituals, frugality is preferred to extravagance; in mourning, deep sorrow is preferred to minute attention to observances.” 林放問禮之本。子曰：大哉問！禮，與其奢也，寧儉；喪，與其易也，寧戚。(3.4) This is a key chapter to elaborating *li*. This grammar indicates that Confucius was trying to balance two values, i.e. frugality and extravagance on the one hand and deep sorrow and observances on the other. When conducting the rituals, Confucius preferred frugality to extravagance. That is because he was afraid that people may misplace the value of practicing *li* on the formality of the rituals. *Li* becomes specious. As a matter of fact, the real value of the rituals does not lie in pompous observances but lies in genuine and sincere feelings (e.g. sorrow). The lack of sincerity of feelings and attitudes (or lack of proper feelings, I would say) in performing a ritual action negates its point (Chong, 1998, p.111). A metaphor for this goes as follows: Believing that “Just like a lady must have natural good looks before cosmetics can enhance her beauty.” (Huang, 1997, p.60), the Master said to Zi-xia: “Painting comes after a white ground.” 繪事後素 Zi-xia responded instantly: “So the rituals come after too?” 禮后乎？(3.8) The question is after “what”? I contend that originally the rituals come into existence only after people have genuine feelings to express appropriately. This is supported by Mahood’s idea below:

The Chinese recognise that there is in some sense a given datum in the form of a human nature with natural needs (for example, the natural impulse towards showing affection); but they also recognise that the universalisation of moral rules which exist to satisfy those need is a pre-requisite. The merely personal “felt” experience requires the sanction of universalisability that *li* provides (Mahood, 1974, pp.306-307).

Mahood goes further to make a connection between the universalisability of human needs such as showing affection (say, deep sorrow) with that of *li*. That is to say, the rituals are the natural outcome

of the human need to express their sincere feelings. When explaining “Painting comes after a white ground” Huang says that “This in turn means figuratively that simplicity comes before refinement, or humanity comes before the rituals.” (Huang, 1997, p.60) Simple and pure human feelings must come before the rituals are to be practiced. It holds also in worship. “When offering sacrifices [to the spirits of his ancestors], he *felt* as if the spirits were present; when offering sacrifices to the gods, he *felts* as if the gods were present.” 祭如在，祭神如神在。(italics mine) (3.12) This chapter demonstrates the Master’s reverence in worship. Likewise, when responding to Zi-you’s query about filial piety, Confucius said, “Nowadays filial piety merely means being able to feed one’s parents. Even dogs and horses are being fed. Without reverence, how can you tell the difference?” (2.7) 今之孝者，是謂能養。至於犬馬，皆能有養；不敬，何以別乎。 Without sincere attitudes and genuine feelings, the conduct of *li* (e.g. worship rituals and codes of filial piety) is simply formalistic and empty.

Accordingly, Confucius thought highly of the sincerity of the ruler’s feelings and attitudes. The Master said: “If a man is not *ren*/humane, what can he do with the rituals? If a man is not humane, what can he do with *ren*/music?” 人而不仁，如禮何？人而不仁，如樂何？(3.3) The man in question specifically refers to the sovereign (Huang, 1997, p.59) or an official in authority. If the leader is not firstly courteous and deferential to his people, what can we expect of him to do with the rituals as well as music in store? The Master said, “Seated on high, he is not lenient; performing the rituals, he is not reverent; confronting mourning he is not grief-stricken – How can I bear to look at all this!” 居上不寬，為禮不敬，臨喪不哀，吾何以觀之哉？(3.26) If the leader doesn’t have proper attitudes and feelings towards his people, “rites collapse and music spoil” is around the corner and the Master cannot bear to see it.

In sum, the Master said: “‘The rituals, the rituals,’ they say. Do they merely refer to jade and silk?” 禮云禮云！玉帛云乎哉！(17.9) Jade and silk were used as gifts in offering tribute or making friends; they were merely instrumental to showing reverence (Huang, 1997, p.168). Jade and silk are simply the appropriate means or the form of *li* being taken to show reverence. The spirit and the essence of *li* is the kindly feelings and best regards (e.g. reverence). For the young, the observance and practice of *li* in its various forms serves to shape their character, “motivating one to behave, desire, feel and act in the required ways.” (Chong, 1998, p.101)

li and yi, wén zhì bīn bīn

As noted, *li* has two aspects: the form and the substance. Confucius stressed over and over again that the essence of *li* is the sincere attitudes and feelings. With that said, it needs to be noted that Confucius deliberately avoided the risk of emphasising the essence/spirit/substance of *li* at the cost of the form of *li*. Rather, the Master said,

When *zhi*/simplicity surpasses *wen*/refinement, one is a peasant; when *wen*/refinement surpasses *zhi*/simplicity, one is a pedant. Only when *wen*/refinement and *zhi*/simplicity are well blended (*wén zhì bīn bīn*) can one become a gentleman 質勝文則野，文勝質則史。文質彬彬，然後君子。(6.18).

Zhi literally means unadorned nature, rustic substance¹³ and *wen* refinement, adornment. A gentleman's *zhi* and *wen* are equally matched: in order to express his plain and simple feelings properly the refined *li* comes to his aid or rather is at his disposal. It is the case because a gentleman's previous virtue education has equipped him with refined forms of *li* by means of which his earnest feelings can be properly expressed. A closely related chapter runs as follows:

Ji Zi-cheng said: What the gentleman needs is simplicity, that is all. *What does he need refinement for?*
棘子成曰：「君子質而已矣，何以文為？」

Zi-gong said: What a pity that Your Excellency should have made such a remark about the gentleman! Even a team of four horses cannot overtake the tongue. *Refinement is as important as simplicity; simplicity is as important as refinement.* The hide of a tiger or a panther stripped of its hair is not any different from that of a dog or a sheep stripped of its hair. 子貢曰：「惜乎，夫子之說君子也，駟不及舌！文猶質也，質猶文也；虎豹之鞞，猶犬羊之鞞。」(italics, mine) (12.8)

Zi-gong's response reinforced his Master's point about the importance both of *wen* and *zhi* and the well match of *wen* with *zhi*, form with substance, refinement of *li* with the proper spirit of *li*. Zi-gong went further to draw an analogy. His analogy is meant to underscore the significance of the refinement of *li*.

The regulation of emotions by li—To restrain oneself and return to the rituals constitutes humanity (12.1)

Once the spirit of *li* is formalised and represented in the various rituals, these rites and norms can act in turn to restrain one's feelings and prevent them from going to extremes. An interesting example shows up in chapters through 11.8 to 11.11 concerning Yan Yuan's death. When he died, the Master lamented him excessively and said: "Alas, Heaven is killing me! Heaven is killing me!" (11.9) Confucius's followers said to him: "Sir, you are grieving to excess." The Master replied: "Am I? If I do not grieve for this man excessively, for whom else should I?" (11.10) These two passages demonstrate that Confucius believed that Yan Yuan's death deserved his lament, and his deep sorrow for Yan Yuan was justified and appropriate. In fact, Confucius would not consider his grief and lament really go too far.

With that said, when Yan Yuan's father Yan Lu requested the Master's carriage to serve as Yan Yuan's outer coffin, Confucius declined him. He gave two reasons (11.8): firstly, when his own son, Li (Bo-yu) died he had only an inner coffin and no outer coffin. Secondly, according to the rituals, a minister couldn't go on foot and must be carried by a carriage. Since Master Kong once served as a minister in Lu, he could not go on foot. Another event is this: when Yan Yuan's classmates wanted to bury him handsomely, the Master said: "That will not do." (11.11) That is because as stipulated in the rituals, funeral expenses should accord with the financial status of the deceased's family (Huang, 1997, p.118).

¹³<http://dict.revised.moe.edu.tw/cgi-bin/cbdict/gweb.cgi?ccd=p7icU2&o=e0&sec=sec1&op=v&view=0-1>

Yan Yuan came from a notoriously impoverished family so the Master disapproved of his disciples' suggestion.

This case shows that even when Confucius was deeply grieved at his favorite disciple's death, he still stuck to the rituals and did not break *li* to bury Yan Yuan handsomely. If he had chosen to do so he would have been criticised for "letting emotions screw up his decisions." That would be a defect in character: letting one's grief and sorrow go too far to hit the mark of *li*. In the case of Confucius, his deep sorrow was expressed in a way in congruent with the restriction of *li* (specifically, funeral rituals). Confucius is a living example of his saying "To restrain oneself and return to the rituals constitutes *ren*/humanity." (12.1) Moreover, this is also an instance of "harmony" (in Huang's translation) or "natural ease" (in J. Legge's translation, 2015, p.18). As put by Master You, "In practicing the rituals, a natural ease is to be prized." 禮之用，和為貴。(1.12) That is to say, ideally, a natural ease or harmony is to exist between one's sincere feelings/*chih* and (the forms of) the rituals/*wen*.

At this juncture, it needs to be noted that *li* is often translated as "ritual propriety". Propriety connotes the idea of what is proper (Legge, 2015, p.21). This translation implies that properness or righteousness has been imbued or written into the rituals. The properness in question is *yi*義。Yi "in its traditional interpretation, means the doing of what is yi [宜]-suitable, or appropriate." (Chong, 1998, p.113) In short, *yi* is written into *li*; it explains why *li* is frequently translated as ritual propriety. Regarding the relation between *yi* and *li*, Confucius said: "The gentleman in everything considers righteousness (*yi*) to be essential. He performs it according to (*li*) the rules of propriety." 君子義以為質，禮以行之(15.18) *Yi* is integrated into *li*. For that matter, the ritual propriety itself is of great educational significance. When receiving ritual education one is starting to learn what is righteous or appropriate to do. He is beginning to establish himself by learning how to conduct himself and interact with others properly.

Moreover, it is plausible to suppose that *yi* is concerned with the appropriateness not only of outward behaviour but also of inner feelings. That is, the two aspects of *li*, namely, *wen* and *chih*, form and substance, must be in congruent with *yi* and suitable accordingly.

Ideal: the harmony between the rituals and inner feelings

A well-known self-description of Confucius goes as follows:

At fifteen, I bent my mind on learning; at thirty, I was established; at forty, I was free from delusion; at fifty, I knew the decree of Heaven; at sixty, my ears became subtly perceptive; *at seventy, I was able to follow my heart's desire without overstepping the rules of propriety.* (italics mine) (2.4) 吾十有五而志於學，三十而立，四十而不惑，五十而知天命，六十而耳順，七十而從心所欲，不踰矩。

Acting in accordance with one's inclinations without transgressing the rituals and norms is an ideal for Confucius. It is "the ideal of living naturally" (Sarkissian, 2010, p.1) or rather living at natural ease.

Specifically, this natural ease refers to the harmony between Confucius's desires and the rules of propriety. At this final stage, Confucius's inner feelings and attitudes are in complete harmony with *li*. Therefore, he can simply follow his heart's desire to hit the mark of *li*. This is the case because Confucius's desires, feelings, and attitudes had been successfully disciplined and regulated by the ritual propriety, and consequently his inclinations became appropriate, *yi*.

A case in point is as follows. Zai Wo asked Confucius about the three-year mourning for parents, saying that one year was long enough.宰我問：三年之喪期已久矣！期可已矣。(17.19) The Master replied, "Eating rice and wearing brocade—do you feel at ease?" 食夫稻，衣夫錦，於女安乎？Zai Wo said: "I do." The Master said,

If you do, then do so! When the gentleman is in mourning: eating delicacies, he does not relish their good taste; listening to music, he does not feel any happiness; living at home, he does not enjoy its comfort. Therefore, he does not do so. Now, if you feel at ease, do so! (17.19)女安，則為之！夫君子之居喪，食旨不甘，聞樂不樂，居處不安，故不為也。今女安，則為之！

At first, the Master suggested Zai Wo simply follow his heart. He wanted his disciple to see whether his innovative idea can pass the test of heart. And then Confucius elaborated on the stark difference between Zai Wo's current state of heart and that of a gentleman. Confucius intended to take a gentleman's heart as the benchmark against which Zai Wo should gauge the gap between himself and the gentleman and accordingly "correct" himself.

Confucius conjectured that even if the period of mourning had been reduced to one year, after competing this ritual, the gentleman still could not really relish comfortable living of any kind. Even if the ritual were de-regulated, the gentleman could not feel ease when enjoying delicious food, good music or cosy shelter. As a result, he would rather retrieve the three-year mourning.

The cultivated inner feelings of an ideal character can act as a guide to his life. A straightforward passage is this: the Master said, "It is only the truly virtuous man, who can love, or who can hate, others."唯仁者，能好人，能惡人。(4.3) That is because his love and hatred is noble, appropriate and in accordance with the mean. Related to this, when Zi Gong asked "What do you say of a man who is loved by all the people of his neighborhood?" 鄉人皆好之，何如？The master replied, "We may not for that accord our approval of him."未可也。"And what do you say of him who is hated by all the people of his neighborhood?" 鄉人皆惡之，何如？The Master said, "We may not for that conclude that he is bad. It is better than either of these cases that the good in the neighborhood love him, and the bad hate him."未可也。不如鄉人之善者好之，其不善者惡之。(13.24) Clearly, Confucius regards the virtuous people's love and hatred as an objective standard of judgment. He would say a man who intends to

please everyone, be he virtuous or not, in one's village, a thief of virtue. 鄉原，德之賊也！ (17.11) He steals the name of virtue since he is not really virtuous; what he seeks is honour (false reputation) bestowed by villagers who are not qualified as good judges of virtue.

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Appendix 1 classification of character strengths and virtues

6 core virtues	Definition of each virtue	24 character strengths
1.wisdom and knowledge	Wisdom is a type of intelligence and knowledge hard fought for, and used for good; it 'involves exceptional breadth and depth of knowledge about the conditions of life and human affairs and reflective judgment about the application of this knowledge'; wisdom is 'good judgment and advice about important but uncertain matters of life' and therefore it is a kind of practical intelligence.	1.creativity 2.curiosity 3.open-mindedness 4.love of learning 5.perspective
2.courage	To follow Cicero's lead, courage is abstractly defined as 'the deliberate facing of dangers and bearing of toils', since 'without courage, we cannot hold out against the worst in ourselves or others' in Comte-Sponville's words.	6.honesty 7.bravery 8.persistence 9.zest
3.humanity	Humanity is a core virtue involved in relating to another, and hence is interpersonal in character. Humanity generally leads to altruistic or prosocial behaviour, and it is distinguished from justice in doing more than what is only fair.	10.kindness 11.love 12.social intelligence
4.justice	Justice refers generally to that which makes life fair, and it is believed that some standard must be put into	13.fairness 14.leadership

	practice to protect what is fair among people; justice is therefore civic in nature.	15.teamwork
5.temperance	Temperance is the virtue of control over excess; it is meant to include any form of auspicious self-restraint, self-denial, and self-efficacy and self-regulation. It is believed that temperance is ultimately generous to the self and others.	16.forgiveness 17.modesty 18.prudence 19.self-regulation
6.transcendence	Transcendence is defined as the connection to something or someone higher or larger than oneself which is the source of meaning or purpose. It is stressed that what is transcendent need to be sacred but need not to be divine; transcendence can be something or someone earthly that inspires awe, hope, or even gratitude; also, it makes an individual feel small but not insignificant.	20.appreciation of beauty 21.gratitude 22.hope 23humor 24.religiousness

Source: Summarised from Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Peterson and Park (2011, p. 49)