

LI AS CULTURAL GRAMMAR: ON THE RELATION BETWEEN *LI* AND *REN* IN CONFUCIUS' *ANALECTS*

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A major controversy in the study of the *Analects* has been over the relation between the two central concepts of *li* 禮 (rites, rituals of propriety) and *ren* 仁 (humanity, human excellence). Confucius seems to have said inconsistent things about this relation. Some passages appear to suggest that *ren* is more fundamental than *li*, while others seem to imply the contrary, and it is therefore not surprising that there have been different interpretations and characterizations.¹ In this essay I will present an interpretation that I believe best characterizes the relation between *li* and *ren*.²

Using the analogy of language grammar and mastery of a language, I propose that we should understand *li* as a cultural grammar and *ren* as the mastery of a culture. In this account, society cultivates its members through *li* toward the goal of *ren*, and persons of *ren* manifest their human excellence through the practice of *li*.³

I

I will begin with Kwong-loi Shun's seminal work on this subject (Shun 2002). I do so not only because Shun in his typically lucid style has provided a clear picture of this complex issue, but also because Shun's innovative interpretation and his examination of alternative interpretations are instrumental for the unfolding of my own understanding of this important issue.

Shun characterizes two major interpretations of the relation between *ren* and *li* as the instrumentalist and the definitionalist.⁴ The instrumentalist regards *ren* as the central concept in the *Analects* and interprets Confucius as regarding "the observance of *li* as standing in a mere instrumental relation to the ideal of *ren*" (Shun 2002, p. 56). Accordingly, the role of *li* is to have people cultivate and express *ren*. Shun offers two observations in favor of this interpretation. The first (A) is that there are passages in the *Analects* where Confucius appears to take *li* as playing merely an instrumental role with regard to *ren* (e.g., 3.3, 5.18).⁵ The second (B) is that there are passages in the *Analects* where Confucius seems to think that some revisions of *li* can be justified (e.g., 9.3), whereas *ren* is not subject to such revisions.

While the instrumentalist interpretation sounds reasonable to some people, there are two observations that seem to support a definitionalist interpretation. According to the definitionalist, *li* stands in a much more fundamental relationship with *ren*. In this interpretation, the ideal of *ren* is defined only in terms of the general observance of those rules of *li* that actually existed in the Chinese society of Confucius' time; the general observance of the actually existing rules of *li* is identified with *ren*. The first

observation (C) in favor of the definitionalist interpretation is that some passages in the *Analects* seem to suggest this understanding. For example, 12.1 reads:

顏淵問仁。子曰：克己復禮為仁。一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉，為仁由己，而由人哉。

Shun renders this passage as follows:

Yan Yuan asked about *ren*.

The Master said, “*Ke ji fu li* constitutes *ren*. If a person can for one day *ke ji fu li*, all under Heaven will regard him as having *ren*. The attainment of *ren* comes from oneself, and not from others.” (Shun 2002, p. 60)

While careful not to rush his own translation of *ke ji fu li*, Shun points out that whether one translates this phrase as “subduing oneself and returning to the observance of *li*” or as “succeeding in aligning oneself with *li*,” the definitionalist can cite this passage as evidence that Confucius regards *li* as constitutive of *ren*. The second observation (D) favoring the definitionalist interpretation is Confucius’ generally conservative attitude toward *li*. In the *Analects*, Confucius often regards departures from the existing *li* as mere deteriorations (e.g., 3.1, 3.17, 9.3, 16.2, and 17.21). This seems to go along with the attitude that *bu ren* 不仁, or “not *ren*,” is always a bad thing.

The dilemma appears to be that, while all four observations apparently have textual evidence, each of these two interpretations accommodates only two of the four observations, with the other two being problematic. As a solution to this problem, Shun articulates a third interpretation that would accommodate all four observations. He proposes that *li* and *ren* stand in a relation analogous to that between certain motions at a wedding ritual in a community on the one hand and getting married on the other, or to mastering a linguistic practice on the one hand and mastering a corresponding concept on the other. Shun maintains that his interpretation can accommodate all four observations. First, just as a corresponding linguistic practice is a means for one to grasp and express a concept, *li* serves as the means for us to cultivate and express *ren*. Second, analogous to the fact that a linguistic practice or expression can change over time while its corresponding concept remains the same, *li* can change over time and some of the changes can be justified, while *ren* remains constant. Third, within a community, mastering a corresponding linguistic practice is not only the necessary but also the sufficient condition for mastering the corresponding concept; similarly, within a community, mastering the *li* is not only the necessary but also the sufficient condition for mastering *ren*. Therefore, in some sense, *li* constitutes *ren*. Fourth and last, although changes in linguistic practice may take place and may be justified, there is a constraint on the extent of the revision at any given time. This gives an analogous explanation of Confucius’ generally conservative attitude toward *li* (Shun 2002, pp. 64–65).

According to Shun’s interpretation, *li* constitutes *ren* similar to the way that a wedding ritual in a community constitutes getting married and that mastering a corresponding linguistic practice in a linguistic community constitutes mastering a con-

cept. I will call this view the “constitution thesis.” Shun’s interpretation is ingenious and is a step forward toward a coherent account of various sayings on *li* and *ren* in the *Analects*. The merits of his interpretation over the other two notwithstanding, I have two qualms about it. First, in his effort to make the analogies work, Shun shifts ground. Using his marriage analogy, he writes:

[W]ithin this community, two people’s performing the appropriate motions on the appropriate occasion is both necessary and sufficient for their getting married. Moreover, performing these motions and getting married are not separate occurrences that happen to be causally related; rather, given the practice of the community, the former just constitutes the latter.

Then he writes:

On the other hand, it is not the case that getting married is defined in terms of the performance of these particular motions on ceremonious occasions of this particular kind, for otherwise we would not have been able to make sense of people’s getting married by some other ceremonial procedure in a different community. . . . [D]ifferent communities may have different ceremonial procedures for the undertaking of such commitments. (Shun 2002, p. 62)

Here Shun demonstrates, quite appropriately, a multicultural sensibility, which Confucius himself may have lacked. Shun’s argument is effective against those definitionalists that he has in mind, who hold *ren* to be defined only in terms of the actually existing rules of *li* advocated by Confucius. However, I think that today’s definitionalists surely have no problem saying that “*within this community*” getting married is defined—in the sense Shun has used in describing the definitionalist view (Shun 2002, p. 57)—in terms of the performance of these particular motions on ceremonious occasions of this particular kind. Thus, when a person asks her friends “Are you married?” she means have they done such things as exchanging rings on a particular ceremonious occasion and said “I do.” As a matter of fact, a sensible definitionalist today is most likely to acknowledge the cultural specificity of *li* in defining *ren*. For instance, in one cultural community getting married is defined as two persons of the opposite sex performing a certain ceremony at a church, whereas in another cultural community getting married is defined as two persons of either the same sex or of the opposite sex performing a ceremony without the involvement of the church. In one cultural community being able to master the expression “white snow” is defined as mastering the corresponding concept of white snow, whereas in another cultural community mastering the expression *bai xue* 白雪 is defined as mastering the same concept.

The case now is this: *without* the qualifier “within this community,” Shun cannot make his case that “two people’s performing the appropriate motions on the appropriate occasion is both necessary and sufficient for their getting married”; *with* this qualifier, it is no longer true that “it is not the case that getting married is defined in terms of the performance of these particular motions on ceremonious occasions of this particular kind.” In order to make his account work, Shun uses the qualifier on

the one hand and leaves it out on the other. In elaborating his account, Shun subsequently relies on the use and the omission of this qualifier (Shun 2002, pp. 63–66). I find this *ad hoc* shifting of grounds not only artificial but also unconvincing to definitionists.

My second qualm is about Shun’s constitution thesis, namely that the general observance of *li* constitutes *ren*. This thesis poses too close a relationship between *li* and *ren*; it cannot accommodate the fact that Confucius holds that *li* may not always result in *ren* and that persons of *ren* may not always follow the rules of *li*. In 3.3 Confucius says that “If a person is un-*ren*, what has one to do with *li*?” (人而不仁，如禮何?). This implies that one could follow the rules of *li* without being *ren*. If *li* constitutes *ren* in the same way that a wedding ceremony constitutes getting married, then this possibility—that one who follows the rules of *li* but is not *ren*—would be nonexistent.⁶ Confucius evidently holds it could exist. In 3.26 Confucius criticizes people who “practice *li* without *jing* [reverence, respect]” (為禮不敬).⁷ Being respectful is a quality of being *ren*. When asked about how to be *ren*, Confucius replies, “be deferential in daily life, be respectful in handling affairs, and be sincere in dealing with people” (居處恭，執事敬，與忠) (13.19). A person of *ren* has to have a sense of *jing* because *ren*, in the sense in which it is used here, is an all-encompassing ethical attainment. If *li* constitutes *ren*, it would not be possible for anyone to practice *li* without respectfulness, but Confucius obviously holds that such practice is possible.

Shun’s interpretation also fails to accommodate passage 15.32, in which Confucius indicates that even a person of *ren* may not always follow the rules of *li* (within the same community).

子曰：知及之，仁不能守之，雖得之，必失之。知及之，仁能守之，不莊以蒞之，則民不敬，知及之，仁能守之，莊以蒞之，動之不以禮，未善也。

I translate:

The Master said: [If one] is intelligent enough to acquire [a post], but not *ren* enough to keep it, one will lose it even if one acquires it. [If one] is intelligent enough to acquire a post, and is *ren* enough to keep it, but is not solemn (*zhuang*) when presenting himself in front of people,⁸ then the people will not respect him. [If one] is intelligent enough to acquire a post, *ren* enough to keep it, and solemn enough when presenting himself in front of people, but does not act by the rules of *li*, that is still not good.

“Solemn” is a translation of *zhuang* 莊, which in Chinese has a strong connotation of one’s appearance and falls into the category of *yi* 儀, namely the form or manner in which one performs an action. In this connection, *zhuang* is closely related to *li*. Therefore, both of the last two items in the passage above are about the form in which a person of *ren* acts. Here Confucius indicates that it is possible for a person to be *ren* yet (on occasion?) not to follow a rule of *li*.⁹ If this is the case, then *ren* is not constituted by *li*, at least not directly, as the constitution thesis implies.

Then, what about 12.1, where Confucius seems to be saying that *li* constitutes *ren*? Confucius clearly says: *ke ji fu li wei ren* 克己復禮為仁. While the specific

meaning of *ke ji fu li* remains disputable, there should be little doubt that here Confucius is saying something to the effect that if one can bring oneself to follow the rules of *li*, one can then *wei ren*. The definitionist interpretation and the constitution thesis share one important common belief, namely that *ke ji fu li* and *ren* are in some sense identical, as wedding rituals are identified with getting married (at least in the same culture).¹⁰ The constitution thesis interprets *wei* 為 as “to constitute” (Shun 2002, p. 60). This interpretation is grounded on one meaning of the word *wei*. *Wei* can mean “make” or “become,” which is close to “constitute.” I believe that there is another reading of *wei* that is more coherent with other observations of Confucius’ teachings.

In ancient times *wei* had many meanings. In the *Ci yuan* 辭源 (Sources of terms), over twenty different meanings are attributed to *wei*. Among these meanings several are relevant to our discussion: *dan-dang* 擔當, undertake; *zao-cheng* 造成, make (as in “make a mess”); *bian-cheng* 變成, become; *xue* 學, learn; *shi* 是, is (as in “A is B”); *shi* 使 or *ling* 令, cause, enable, or make (as in “make someone a better person”); and *ze* 則, result in. As is relevant to our discussion, I think *wei* 為 is quite similar to the English word “make.” When we say “x makes y” it can mean either a causal relation or a relation of constitution. The “make” in “exercise makes Mary healthy” means a causal relation, whereas the “make” in “apples make good snacks” indicates a relation of constitution. Similarly, if one interprets *wei* as *shi* 是 (is) or *bian-cheng* (become), then the sentence does appear to suggest that *li* constitutes *ren*. On the other hand, if one interprets *wei* as *shi* 使 or *ling* (cause, enable) or as *ze* (result in), then the sentence says that practicing *li* can lead to *ren* or can enable or cause a person to be *ren*. Here “cause” must be understood in a weak sense, as a necessary but not sufficient condition, similar to the way that physical exercise can cause or lead to good health but does not necessitate good health. According to this reading, one must practice *li* in order to become *ren*, but merely following the rules of *li* does not guarantee the attainment of *ren*.

Admittedly, the fact that the word *wei* has different meanings does not dictate which meaning is appropriate in interpreting 12.1. Here I will argue that in the context of 12.1 *wei* 為 is best understood to mean *ze* 則 or *shi* 使, and the sentence says that *ke ji fu li* can result in, or cause, or enable a person to be, *ren*. First, let me point out that in the *Analects* Confucius has used the word *wei* in the sense of *ze*. In 17.23, Confucius says that “a brave *jun zi* without *yi* will result in (*wei*) disorder” (君子有勇而無義為亂).¹¹ Obviously, the *jun zi* (the person) cannot possibly constitute disorder (a chaotic state of society), even though he can cause disorder. When the historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 quotes this sentence of Confucius in the *Records of History* (史記), he simply replaces *wei* 為 with *ze* 則 to avoid ambiguities (book 67). In 8.2 of the *Analects* Confucius makes a similar point: “Bravery without *li* results in (*ze*) disorder” (勇而無禮則亂). Here he uses *ze* rather than *wei*. Evidently, in Confucius *wei* can mean *ze*.¹²

Second, in 12.1 Confucius follows *ke ji fu li wei ren* with *wei ren you ji* 為仁由己. Shun renders it as “the attainment of *ren* comes from oneself.” Since the two usages of the term *wei ren* appear in the same passage, it is reasonable to think

they are likely to mean the same thing.¹³ But “attainment” and “constitution” are obviously not the same. I believe Shun’s rendering as “attainment” is much closer to the meaning of *wei* in this context than “constitution.”

The expression *wei ren* 為仁 also appears in 15.9:

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。

I translate:

Zi Gong asked about *wei ren*. The Master said, “If craftsmen want to do a good job, they must first sharpen their tools. Residing in this land, one must work with the worthy among the officials and socialize with persons of *ren* among the literate.”

In this passage, Confucius tells Zi Gong that in order to *wei ren* one must acquire good qualities by mingling with persons of *ren*. Obviously, the mingling with persons of *ren* does not constitute *ren*; the expression *wei ren* has to mean something other than “constituting *ren*.” Confucius’ philosophy is a “person-making” (*zuo ren* 做人 or *wei ren* 為人) philosophy, the idea being that one has to work on forming one’s own character to become a person of *ren*. A reasonable reading of the expression of *wei ren* 為仁 should be “[how to] make oneself a person of *ren*,” that is, to enable oneself to be *ren*. I take it that, just as Confucius gives different answers to the same question on other issues (such as *xiao* 孝, filial piety) to different people in different circumstances, in 12.1 and 15.9 he gives different directions on the same issue of how to become *ren*.

Furthermore, in 17.6 Confucius says that “to be able to practice the five virtues is to *wei ren*” (能行五者於天下為仁矣). These five virtues are respect, tolerance, trustworthiness, diligence, and benevolence (恭，寬，信，敏，惠). Now, does this mean that these five virtues constitute *ren*, or that they enable a person to be *ren*? A person who can practice these virtues is definitely very close to being one of *ren*. But it does not mean that these are sufficient for being a person of *ren*. Confucius says that “the person of *ren* necessarily has bravery” (仁者必有勇) (14.4). If bravery is a necessary condition for being *ren*, then nothing short of it, even the five important virtues listed above, can be said to constitute *ren*.

The second sentence in 12.1 is *yi ri ke ji fu li tian xia gui ren yan* 一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉， which Shun renders as “If a person can for one day *ke ji fu li*, all under Heaven will regard him as having *ren*” (2002, p. 60). I read this sentence differently: *Yi ri* 一日 here means *yi dan* 一旦, namely “once (sometime in the future).” A similar use can be found in such classics as the “Qin wu” chapter of the *Zhan guo ce* 戰國策: “the king is in old age. Once (*yi ri*) he dies and the prince takes charge, your highness is in great danger” (王之春秋高。一日山陵崩，太子用事，君危於累卵). I read *gui ren* 歸仁 to mean not “regarding as *ren*,” but *gui fu yu ren* 歸服於仁, or “moving toward *ren*.” *Gui ren* also appears in the *Mencius*: “people moving toward (the prince of) *ren* is like water running downward and animals running in the wild” (民之歸仁也，猶水之就下，獸之走壙也) (4A.9). For Mencius, people have a tendency to follow good leaders just as water has a tendency to go downward and animals have a tendency to run around in the wild. Therefore, the sentence *yi ri ke ji fu*

li, *tian xia gui ren yan* 一日克己復禮，天下歸仁焉 can mean “if one day [someone] can *ke ji fu li*, the whole world will follow him in moving toward *ren*.” For Confucius, being able to *ke ji fu li* is an indication of a person becoming *ren*. If someone (a ruler) can manage to *ke ji fu li*, people will come to follow him. This reading is consistent with the interpretation of the relation between *li* and *ren* that I will present next in this essay.

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Now I would like to formulate an alternative interpretation of the relation between *li* and *ren* that can accommodate our observations above. Following Shun, I will do so with an analogy. My interpretation may be labeled “*li* as cultural grammar.” In this interpretation I use language grammar and the mastery of a language as analogies, and suggest that we should think of *li* as cultural grammar and *ren* as the mastery of a culture. Here I use “grammar” in the sense of syntax; it means the rules whereby words or other elements of sentence structure are combined to form acceptable sentences and phrases.¹⁴ According to the interpretation I present here, a culture is analogous to a language, a person in general observance of *li* in a culture is analogous to someone who follows the grammar of a language that he or she speaks, and a person of *ren* is analogous to someone who has mastered a language. Needless to say, *li* is not literally grammar. To say that *li* is grammar is a metaphor. The nature of metaphor presupposes that the two things involved are not the same and that they have different characteristics. I should caution that all metaphors have limitations; we should not overread the metaphor of grammar used here. My tactic is to use this metaphor to elucidate some of the most important characteristics of *li* and to shed light on the relation between *li* and *ren*.

Grammar is embedded in language. It provides general rules for the use of words in constructing sentences and phrases. A child begins learning a language by hearing and saying it, usually by imitating adults’ patterns of everyday linguistic behavior. When the child is reflective, he or she will learn and develop a sense of grammar. Competent language users may speak a language without being conscious of grammar. But if a person is incompetent, we can usually point out that he or she violates grammar. Although the core of grammar remains stable, grammar does change over time. New linguistic expressions emerge and gain currency. That is the evolution of grammar and language. Today we also know that different languages have different grammars. Until the nineteenth century, in the West, Latin grammar was considered to be universally applicable to all languages. It was believed that any language deserving the name of language would have to conform to Latin grammar. Only after contacts with the languages of indigenous peoples, such as Native Americans, did Western linguists realize that different languages have different grammars, rather than no grammar.¹⁵ Understanding a language implies understanding its grammar, at least implicitly. When a person does not know the grammar of another language, he or she does not understand that language. Obviously, one can be at home with the grammar of one’s own language without understanding that of other languages.

My thesis here is that grammar gives us a good metaphor to go by in understanding the role of *li* in a culture and its relation to *ren*.

Li originally referred to religious rituals in ancient society. Its meaning was later expanded to encompass all established ethical, social, and political norms of human behavior, including both formal rules and less serious patterns of everyday behavior. We can say things about *li* similar to what we say about grammar. A culture as a form of life is like a language; *li* is embedded in a culture as grammar is in a language. As the basic rules and norms of human behavior in a society, *li* is embedded in people's everyday behavior as grammar is embedded in everyday expressions. We usually do not learn *li* in abstract forms, nor do we usually learn grammar in abstract forms. One becomes proficient in practicing *li* by following patterns of human activity in daily life, as one becomes grammatically proficient by using linguistic patterns. Although a person who has become skillful in performing *li* does not have to think about it all the time—one can act naturally in accordance with *li*—when someone does not behave appropriately, we will quickly notice that he or she violates some rules of *li*. A child begins learning social behavior by imitating adults who have learned *li*. Nevertheless, society has to figure out specific ways to teach children rules of *li*. One way or another, children have to attend the “grammar school” of *li* by learning their lessons. Early Confucians apparently thought that only the *li* of their society and time (the Zhou *li*) was *li*, and other societies were without *li* and therefore were barbarians. These Confucians were wrong about *li* just as linguists in the nineteenth century West were wrong about grammar. Different cultures have different forms of *li*.¹⁶ Understanding other peoples' *li* is necessary for one to understand their culture; learning another culture's *li* is a necessary condition for acting appropriately in that culture.

Although Confucius did not give an explicit definition of *li*, from his uses of the term we can find some characteristics of *li*. Here we can compare these characteristics, as described in the *Analects*, to grammar. First, grammar is by its nature a public property. As Wittgenstein indicated, a private language with its linguistic rules *in principle* inaccessible to the public is impossible. There is no such thing as private grammar. *Li* is also essentially a public phenomenon. As Tu Weiming has pointed out, “the problem of *li* does not even occur when one has absolutely nothing to relate to” (Tu 1979c, p. 21). *Li* presupposes both a community and people in relationships. Participating in ritual activities is necessarily a public affair (in the sense that it involves more than one person), as it is the act of relating to others in society. A private *li* that is in principle inaccessible to other people is not real *li*.

Second, grammar, at least in natural languages, is rooted in tradition. It is passed down from generation to generation. *Li* is rooted in tradition, too. It has its own evolutionary process and is not something that a later society makes up from scratch. Confucius says that “Yin followed the *li* of Xia, . . . Zhou followed the *li* of Yin” (殷因於夏禮, . . . 周因於殷禮) (2.23). There was continuity of *li* through the Xia dynasty, the Yin (Shang) dynasty, and the Zhou dynasty. Without *li*, tradition can neither exist nor survive, because the continuation of a tradition is at least in part constituted by

the continuation of *li*. The continuity of *li* through generations and dynasties sustains the continuity of the tradition.

Third, grammar has a descriptive function. By looking at how its grammar works, we can learn about a language. By comparing the grammars of two languages, we see how these languages are different. For example, a Chinese native speaker gets a sense of how the English language is different by learning how the word “the” is used in forming sentences. A native speaker of English learns the same about the Chinese language in getting to know that in Chinese sentences verbs do not have the past tense; instead in Chinese the past is indicated by using a phrase like “in the past,” “last year,” or “earlier today.” Similarly, *li* describes how people in a society behave. In understanding a society, it is important that we study its rules of *li*. Confucius did not specifically address the descriptive function of *li*. But we can infer this point from his comments on the deteriorating state of society (e.g., in 16.2). Evidently, in his view the kind of *li* in a society indicates the level of civilization of that society, and we can describe the character of a society by describing how its *li* functions. Confucius says:

I can speak of the *li* of the Xia dynasty, but [the Xia descendants in] Qi can no longer verify it. I can speak of the *li* of Yin [Shang], but [the Yin descendants in] Song can no longer verify it. [This is because] historical records are no longer adequate. If [they were] adequate, I would be able to verify it.

夏禮吾能言之，杞不足徵也；殷禮吾能言之，宋不足徵也。文獻不足故也。足，則吾能徵之矣。(3.9)

Knowing that their *li* is an important way of knowing the cultures in these societies and being able to describe their *li* indicates a knowledge of the cultures in these societies.

Fourth, grammar has an instrumental function in the learning of language. Studying grammar, either formally or informally, is necessary for linguistic competence. Grammar can be formalized; it is more about commonality than particularity in a language. So it is with *li*. The rules of *li* are formalized and can be formulated in general terms.¹⁷ For Confucius, in order to establish oneself, that is, to become a functioning and contributing member of society, a person has to learn *li*. Confucius says that “One has nothing to establish oneself on without learning *li*” (不學禮，無以立) (16.13).¹⁸ Obviously, learning to behave appropriately in accordance with *li* is a necessary step for children in becoming mature members of a community.

Fifth, grammar sets the standard for good use of language; it has regulative and prescriptive functions. Grammar issues prescriptions in the form of “Do” or “Do Not”—for example, “[Do] use a singular pronoun with a singular antecedent” and “Do not use a plural pronoun with a singular antecedent.” Under normal circumstances, being ungrammatical is not a good thing and should be avoided. Whether a person speaks grammatically or not is a measure of whether that person is literate. Similarly, *li* is a measure of appropriate social behavior; it has a regulative and prescriptive force and it serves as a directive for our actions. A violation of *li* is generally considered inappropriate or a transgression and must be avoided (12.1). Saying

someone is ignorant of *li* is a negative remark, as in Confucius' comment on Guan Zhong 管仲 (3.22). Confucius explicitly criticized Zai Wo 宰我 for not following the *li* of mourning for one's parents for three years (17.21). In Confucian classics such as the *Li ji* 禮記 and the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳 there are numerous uses of the expression "contrary to *li*" or "not in accordance with *li*" (非禮也) to register disapproval of certain actions.¹⁹ When we do things, we should do them in accordance with *li*. Confucius says that "Respect without *li* results in futility, caution without *li* results in timidity, bravery without *li* results in disorder, and straightforwardness without *li* results in hastiness" (恭而無禮則勞。慎而無禮則蕙。勇而無禮則亂。直而無禮則絞) (8.2). We usually consider respect, caution, bravery, and candor good virtues, but they cannot be appropriately practiced without being regulated by *li*. Futility, timidity, disorder, and hastiness are to be avoided by following *li*.

For Confucius, *li* is an important indicator of the health of a society. One of his major criticisms of his own time was that it was a period when "*li* was deteriorating and music was falling apart" (禮壞樂崩)²⁰, and Confucius considered it his mission to restore *li* in society. He insisted that acting not in accordance with *li* is no good (動之以禮，未善也) (15.32). He felt intolerant when the Ji family in the state of Lu used a sixty-four dancer troupe at home for entertainment, when this was appropriate only for the son of Heaven (*tian zi* 天子) and was thus a violation of the *li* (8.1). Just as a good user of language follows grammar, a good person follows *li*. Without *li*, things will go astray. Confucius maintained that by following the rules of *li* himself, a ruler could make people behave (13.4, 14.44). Confucius tells his disciples that "[If one] broadly studies the classics and regulates oneself with *li*, one will not go astray" (博學於文，約之以禮，亦可以弗畔矣夫) (12.15; see 6.25 and 9.10 for similar remarks). When Fan Chi 樊遲 asks about *xiao* 孝 or filial piety, Confucius replies: "[When parents are] alive, serve them in accordance with *li*; [after parents] die, give them funerals in accordance with *li* and hold memorial services for them in accordance with *li*" (生事之以禮，死葬之以禮，祭之以禮) (2.5). These rules of *li* tell us what to do with parents. Broadly speaking, *li* serves as guidance in our lives.

Sixth, and finally, although grammar largely remains constant over time, it does also change over time. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was grammatical in English to negate a sentence by attaching a "not" to the end of the sentence (e.g., "I see you not"). Today, this is no longer considered grammatically correct. While the analogy of *li* and grammar explains adequately Confucius' generally conservative attitude toward *li*, it also explains why he was not an absolutist on rules of *li*. Although in a society the rules of *li* largely remain constant, they can change, and Confucius was in principle not opposed to change. For example, he said that "Using linen hats has been the [ancient] *li*, but now silk hats are used. It is economical and I follow the majority" (麻冕禮也，今也純。儉，吾從眾) (9.3). So, for Confucius, certain changes in the rules of *li* can be appropriate and justified.²¹ For all these reasons, grammar provides a good metaphor for us to understand *li*.

Closely related to *li* is the concept of *ren*. In the *Analects*, the word *ren* 仁 appears more than one hundred times, yet Confucius never gives it a formal definition. It is generally accepted that *ren* can mean either one single quality of affection

among other desirable qualities in a person or an all-encompassing ethical ideal that includes all desirable qualities (Shun 2002, p. 53; Li 1999, pp. 96–97). In the *Analects*, the word appears mostly to refer to an all-encompassing ethical ideal, which is my focus here. Of numerous discussions of *ren* in the *Analects*, a large number fall into two categories. The first category is about how to attain *ren* and how to avoid going to the contrary of *ren*. This includes passages such as 1.3, 1.6, 4.7, 12.1, 12.2, 13.19, 13.27, 15.9, 17.6, 17.17, and 19.6. The second category is about what a person of *ren* would do. This includes passages 4.2, 4.3, 6.20, 6.21, 9.28, 12.3, 12.22, 14.5, 14.30, et cetera. Among the first category are various instructions that Confucius gave to his disciples on how to achieve *ren*. Because his disciples were different types of people in diverse circumstances, naturally his instructions varied in each case. They give us some clues, however, on what it takes for people to attain the ideal of *ren*. For example, one would need to be able to think before one talks (to be “slow in words”) (13.27), and one would need to be able to practice various virtues (13.19, 17.6). The second category tells us how a person of *ren* acts or what such a person is like. For example, a person of *ren* loves good people (4.3, 12.22) and also dislikes bad people (4.3), tackles difficult tasks before enjoying their fruits (6.20),²² enjoys mountains (6.21), is reticent to speak (12.3), is at peace with him/herself (4.2), and is brave (14.4) and not anxious (*you* 憂) (9.28).

These two categories of discussions of *ren* are, of course, closely related and even overlap. While the details can always be further examined, it is obvious that for Confucius a person of *ren* possesses all kinds of good qualities and is a morally accomplished person. That *ren* stands for a very high degree of virtuous achievement is also evidenced by the fact that Confucius refused to grant *ren* to his talented disciples such as Zi Lu, Zhong You, Ran Qiu, and Gong Xichi (5.8). In the *Analects*, Confucius is obviously proud of his knowledge of *li* as well as his ability to observe *li* (3.9, 3.17, 9.3). But on the question of whether he considered himself to have achieved *ren*, Confucius says, “if you talk about sageliness and *ren*, how dare I claim these?” (若聖與仁，則吾豈敢?) (7.34). Whether he was being modest or not, the fact that he did not say the same about *li* suggests that *ren* represents a higher achievement than merely observing *li*.²³ Therefore, I accept Tu Wei-ming’s interpretation that *ren* symbolizes a holistic manifestation of humanity in its “highest state of perfection.”²⁴ In our linguistic analogy in this essay, such a highly achieved state or quality is comparable to the mastery of a language. When various disciples asked him about how to become *ren*, each time he gave a different answer. This is not surprising. It would be just as hard for us to give a precise definition of the mastery of a language. If one is to instruct students on how to master a language, one probably would give different instructions to different students under different circumstances.

Merely knowing the grammar of a language does not constitute mastery of that language, even though the master of a language knows and follows grammar well. Presumably most people can follow grammar and achieve linguistic competence,²⁵ but only a small number of people become masters of a language. The master of a language is not only linguistically competent but also linguistically creative and exemplary, like Shakespeare. The master of a language is analogous to someone like

Michael Jordan in basketball. Jordan not only knows the rules of the game but has become extremely skillful and has developed the amazing ability to play the game in a style that cannot be adequately described or formulated in terms of rules.

Similarly, although *li* does not constitute *ren*, a person of *ren* as the master of a culture must know *li*, in the sense both of “know-that” and of “know-how,” and must practice *li*. On the other hand, although the general observance of the rules of *li* makes a person a good member of society, it does not necessarily make one a person of *ren*. A person of *ren* deeply understands the culture in which he or she lives and is able to manifest the best way of living in that culture. Such a person is creative, exemplary, and influential, a person whom others look up to, admire, and take as a model. Whereas *li* has an emphasis on social objectivity, just as grammar has an emphasis on linguistic commonality, *ren* has an emphasis on human subjectivity. For this reason, I am sympathetic to Tu Wei-ming’s “inwardness” characterization of *ren* as in contrast to the outwardness of *li* (Tu 1979a, p. 10). However, we should be careful not to take *li* merely as “an externalization” of *ren*, which may imply that *ren* can be obtained without *li*.²⁶ In my account, although *ren* is philosophically and ethically more significant than *li*, *ren* is not attainable independently of *li*, just as mastering a language cannot be achieved independently of its grammar.

Following my analogy of *li* as cultural grammar, we can draw several conclusions. First, learning and practicing *li* is a necessary condition for and instrumental to the attainment of *ren*. In order to master a language, a person needs to learn and have a firm grasp of its grammar. This is particularly true of those who study a second language. At first, one has to be careful and pay particular attention to the grammar. At this stage, one simply cannot speak naturally. But after one develops a sense of its grammar, speaking the language becomes natural and spontaneous. The master of a language may not need to think of its grammar as she speaks and writes. She can do so fluently even without consciously following the grammar.²⁷ Analogously, a person of *ren* is able to practice *li* naturally and with ease. It is said that at the age of seventy Confucius was able to do whatever he willed without overstepping the rules (*Analects* 2.4); he had become a master of the culture—as Shakespeare had mastered English and Michael Jordan basketball.

Second, grammar lays the groundwork for the function of language; while grammar can change, it must remain stable in order for the use of language to continue without too many interruptions. Obviously, if grammar were to change constantly, one would not be able to grasp the language, let alone master it. *Li* as the grammar of a culture must also remain stable. Without a substantial degree of stability in *li*, a culture cannot sustain itself, because it would not be able to educate its young to learn the basics of moral behavior, much less produce persons of *ren* in society. Even though merely following *li* does not necessarily make a person *ren*, a person who is *ren*, as the master of a culture, must follow *li*, at least overwhelmingly for the most part. Because of this close connection between *li* and *ren*, Confucius holds a conservative attitude toward deviations from *li*. The person of *ren* is first of all a guardian of *li*.

Third, even masters of a language may on occasion act in violation of grammar. Similarly, there are circumstances where persons of *ren* may depart from *li*. We can cite three such possibilities. The first is simply that even masters err occasionally; even master basketball players like Michael Jordan are called for committing a foul. The second possibility lies in the need to suspend *li* in exceptional circumstances. For Confucius, the concept of *yi* 義 plays a crucial role in the dynamic relation between *li* and *ren*. *Yi* means what is morally right and appropriate. Under certain circumstances, *yi* may require us to suspend *li* in order to be *ren*. In the *Mencius* there is a discussion of what a man should do if his sister-in-law is drowning. Mencius says that although according to *li* there should be no physical contact between him and his sister-in-law, he still should give his hand to save her life (4A.17). This is of course different from holding her hand in normal circumstances. Just as the master of a language knows when to trump grammar in order to achieve extraordinary effects in the use of language, a person of *ren* knows when to trump *li* for the sake of *yi*. The third possibility is to take the lead in revising the existing rules of *li*. Any change of grammar at the beginning is necessarily a kind of violation of existing grammatical rules, but this is necessary for the evolution of grammar. For these reasons, the master of a culture can occasionally depart from an existing *li* without becoming un-*ren*.

My interpretation is different from Kwong-loi Shun's in two ways. First, I reject his constitution thesis and leave some distance between *li* and *ren*. In my analogy, merely following grammar does not constitute mastering a language, whereas in Shun's analogy, performing a wedding ritual constitutes getting married. Second, the focus of my analogy is not on using a particular linguistic expression and grasping a particular concept, as Shun does; I take a more holistic approach. I do so because I believe that, in studying the relation between *li* and *ren*, *li* or the performance of *li* is best seen not as particular rules or actions but as a system of rules or actions,²⁸ and that *ren* is best understood not as particular good actions but as an achieved capacity or superior personhood realized in a cultural context.

My "*li* as cultural grammar" account is also different from the definitionalist interpretation. In my account, *ren* is not defined by *li*. My account may be characterized as a kind of instrumentalism broadly construed; it is different from the kind of instrumentalism characterized by Shun, in which *ren*, as a mere state of mind, can exist independently of the existence of *li* and is intelligible independently of *li* (Shun 2002, p. 57). My interpretation accommodates three observations of the relation between *li* and *ren* that Shun addresses, namely that the observance of *li* can be seen as a means to cultivate and express *ren* (Shun's observation A), that certain revisions of an actually existing rule of *li* can be justified (Shun's observation B), and that a general conservative attitude toward the existing practice of *li* can be supported (Shun's observation D). My reading of 12.1 explains away the problem of Shun's observation C. In my account, *ren* is not constituted by *li*. While *li* is a necessary condition for the attainment of *ren*—in the sense that *li* is one of the key elements that constitute the venue (i.e., culture) for *ren* and is the means to achieve and manifest *ren*—it is not a sufficient condition, even within a particular culture as Shun maintains. In my account, *ren* cannot exist independently of *li*, nor can one obtain *ren* without *li*,

because *li* is embedded in the culture of which the person of *ren* acquires mastery. In other words, without *li* there can be no culture for the person of *ren* to master.

Notes

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- 1 – Consequently, later Confucians have gone on different paths. For a recent account of *ren*-centered Confucians and *li*-centered Confucians in history, see Yan 2002.
- 2 – A possible objection to the attempt of this essay is that the text of the *Analects* may itself be inconsistent on the relation between *li* and *ren*. Kwong-loi Shun has addressed this issue well in his article (2002, pp. 55–56). I agree with him that while we cannot rule out the possibility of original textual inconsistency we should at least try to read the text in a coherent manner, on the basis of the principle of charity if on nothing else. I would like to add that if such attempts cannot be taken as a reduction to Confucius' own thought, they at least can be seen as reconstructions that may help us understand Confucianism.
- 3 – As two key concepts, *li* and *ren* are undoubtedly related to other concepts in Confucius. A more comprehensive study of their relation will require investigating other concepts. David Hall and Roger Ames, for example, explicate *li* and *ren* along with *yi* 義 in a kind of triadic relation (Hall and Ames 1987). I will focus on the relation between *li* and *ren* first, and will come back to their relation to *yi* later.
- 4 – These two interpretations are not intended as an exhaustive classification of interpretations found in the literature (Shun 2002, p. 58). Among scholars who hold a view close to the instrumentalist, Shun mentions Xu Fuguan and Lin Yusheng; among scholars who hold a view close to the definitionalist, he mentions Zhao Jibin and Cai Shangsi. Shun also points out that there are other

interpretations. I believe that Shun has identified two interpretations most representative of the mainstream scholarship on the *Analects*.

- 5 – Although 3.3 and 5.18 do not directly say that *li* is instrumental to *ren*, Shun makes a good case that, along with 4.13 and 2.3, the instrumentalist can interpret 3.3 and 5.18 as suggesting so (Shun 2002, p. 59). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations of Confucius in the essay are from the *Analects*, and the translations are mine. Hereafter I will only indicate section numbers as in the *Analects*.
- 6 – One could fake a wedding ceremony without getting married. But that is not the issue we are concerned with here.
- 7 – *Jing* 敬 is often translated as “reverence.” This is appropriate on many occasions. Sometimes, however, “reverence” is too strong to render *jing*. For example, in *Analects* 11.14, *men ren bu jing Zi Lu* 門人不敬子路 should probably be rendered as “The doorman did not respect Zi Lu” rather than “The doorman did not revere Zi Lu.” *Gong* 恭 can also mean “respect,” but is not as strong a word as *jing*.
- 8 – The word *zhuang* here describes *li* 蒞, which is about presenting oneself in front of people (蒞，臨也；謂臨民也), as interpreted by Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200) in his classic Commentary on the *Analects*.
- 9 – In his article Shun frequently uses the expression “revision or departure” from a rule of *li*. “Departure” is ambiguous. It can mean the revision of a rule of *li* as well as the failure to follow a rule of *li* (without coming up with a revised rule). While Shun’s own interpretation can account for the revision of a rule of *li*, it does not account for the failure by a person of *ren* to follow a rule of *li*.
- 10 – Proponents of this interpretation can cite for support the “Shao Gong” 韶公 chapter 12 of the *Zuo zhuan* 左傳, which quotes Confucius as saying “the ancients had held that *ke ji fu li* is *ren*” (古也有志克己復禮仁也), where the word *wei* is left out. This interpretation, however, is not without disputers. The *Annotations and Commentaries of the Chun Qiu Zuo Zhuan* 春秋左傳註疏 in book 45 cites the Song scholar Hu Zhi Tang 胡致堂 as contending that “the master takes *ke ji fu li* to *wei ren*, not that *ke ji fu li* is *ren*” (夫子以克己復禮為仁，非指克己復禮即仁也).
- 11 – *Jun zi* 君子 has been translated as “gentleman,” “superior person,” and “exemplary person.” In the *Analects* it appears to denote a person of good moral quality, even though such a person has not achieved the status of a person of *ren*.
- 12 – Similar uses of *wei* are also present in other classic Confucian texts in ancient times. In the *Yijing* 易經, for example, the chapter “Jing” 井 states: “The well water is cleaned but not used; it causes sorrow in my heart” (*Jing xie bu shi, wei wo xin ce* 井渫不食，為我心惻). In his classic *Yijing* Commentary, the

Tang scholar Kong Yingda (孔穎達) (574–648) writes, “‘Wei’ means ‘cause’” (*Wei, you shi ye* 為，猶使也).

- 13 – Reading two meanings into *wei ren* can be traced back to Zhu Xi, who interpreted the two occurrences of *wei ren* in 12.1 to mean “is *ren*” and “practicing *ren*,” respectively (see chapter 41 of the *Zhu Zi yu lei* 朱子語類). Zhu’s reading was later severely criticized by the Japanese Confucian scholar Ogyū Sorai 荻生徂徠 (1666–1728), who insisted on the one meaning of *wei ren* in section 12.1 and argued that “*wei ren* means practicing the philosophy of settling the people. It does not say that *ke ji fu li* is *ren*” (為仁者，行安民之道也，非謂克己復禮即仁也) (quoted in Zhang 2004, p. 187). Ogyū Sorai’s interpretation is consistent with that of the Cheng brothers’ (程頤，程顥) interpretation of *wei ren* in *Analects* 1.2. The Cheng brothers differentiated between “the root of *wei ren*” and “the root of *ren*,” and consequently between *wei ren* and *ren*. In 1.2, Confucius says “filial piety and brotherly love are the root of *wei ren*” (孝弟也者，其為仁之本與). The Cheng brothers comment: “it says that filial piety and brotherly love are the root of *wei ren*, not the root of *ren*” (言為仁之本，非仁之本也) (二程集 [Collected works of the Cheng brothers], vol. 1, chap. 11). For them, *wei ren* here means “to practice *ren*” (行仁), not “to be *ren*” (即仁).
- 14 – I do not intend to get into the enormous literature on linguistic theories of grammar. Instead, I will stay with the traditional and commonsense understanding of grammar as we commonly know it. Roger Ames and David Hall have called *li* 禮 “social grammar”: “*Li* are a social grammar that provides each member with a defined place and status within the family, community, and polity” (Ames and Hall 2001, p. 70). I use “cultural grammar” to emphasize that *li* is an accomplished form in which life expresses itself, as Confucius evidently considers *li* to be a hallmark of civilization. Early Confucians presumably did not think that “barbarian societies” had *li*, even though these societies had their own social rules. I also want to suggest that *li* is a cultural phenomenon and is culture-specific, even though early Confucians may not have thought this way. The same society may have two cultures; there may be two sets of *li*, namely two forms of life with different grammars. Another difference between me and Ames and Hall is that while they emphasize the social-ontological dimension of *li*, namely the function of *li* in assigning people appropriate places in society, I emphasize the performing dimension of *li*, namely the function of *li* in guiding people’s actions. The two dimensions are, of course, related.
- 15 – For a discussion of these concepts of grammar, see Williams 1998, pp. 122–129.
- 16 – If Chomsky’s theory of “universal grammar” is correct, it raises an interesting question for us: is it possible that underneath the surface differences between rules of *li* in different cultures there is at a deeper level a universal structure of *li*, as underneath the surface of different grammars there is at a deeper level a universal grammar? I leave the question open in this essay.

- 17 – My approach is different from that of Roger Ames, who emphasizes the particularity and uniqueness of *li* actions (Ames 2002). Also see Hall and Ames 1987, p. 97.
- 18 – This is an indirect quote from Confucius’ eldest son Bo Yu 伯魚. In 20.3 there is a similar quote directly from Confucius, but the word used there is *zhi* 知 (know) rather than *xue* 學 (learn). Some commentators have interpreted *li* here as referring to the *Li ji* (Book of rites). In 20.3 it is suggested otherwise because there the sentence parallels *bu zhi ming* 不知命, namely not knowing the *ming* (destiny). Even if the word refers to the *Li ji*, it does not jeopardize my interpretation of the relation between *li* and *ren*, because the *Li ji* is all about *li*.
- 19 – For example, in the “Tan Gong Xia” 檀弓下 chapter of the *Li ji*, sections 39 and 45; in the *Zen Zi wen* 曾子問, section 18; and in numerous chapters of the *Zuo zhuan*, the *Yin Gong Year One* 隱公元年, the *Yin Gong Year Five* 隱公五年, and the *Yin Gong Year Eight* 隱公八年.
- 20 – This expression may be traceable to *Analects* 17.21.
- 21 – Confucius’ own attitude toward the change of *li* may be too conservative to suit our modern taste. There is, however, a resource in the Confucian tradition for a more liberal position. For instance, the “Li Qi” 禮器 chapter of the *Li ji* states: “as for *li*, timing is the more important” (禮·時為大), suggesting that *li* has to adjust to specific situations.
- 22 – This passage can also be interpreted as saying that a person of *ren* will come to the front in a difficult situation and stay behind when claiming credit.
- 23 – In most places in the *Analects* Confucius indicates that *ren* is an achieved capacity that requires considerable effort. The only seeming exception is in 7.30, where Confucius says that *ren* is not far away: “Is *ren* far away? If I desire *ren*, *ren* is right here” (仁遠乎哉？我欲仁，斯仁至矣). Commentators on the Confucian classics, including such ancient authorities as He Yan 何晏 and Xing Bing 邢昺, have interpreted *ren* here as *ren dao* 仁道, namely the “way of *ren*” or the “way to become *ren*.” This is similar to Confucius’ saying that he has not seen anyone who lacks the capacity to learn to become *ren* (我未見力不足者) (4.6). It is also possible that here Confucius uses *ren* to mean the capacity of compassion or benevolence, as later expounded by Mencius. Another fact about Confucius’ use of *ren* is that while being *ren* is a standard so high that few people can reach it, being un-*ren* (不仁) is a very harsh criticism that few people would accept. Therefore, we should not equate not being “a person of *ren*” (仁人) with being “a person of un-*ren*” (不仁之人).
- 24 – Tu 1985, p. 87.
- 25 – Mastery of a language is more than mere linguistic competence. Linguistic competence is the systematically internalized knowledge of a language, including speaking, understanding, reading, and writing. While the knowledge

of grammar (syntax) is essential to linguistic competence, it contributes to but does not constitute mastery of language.

- 26 – Here I disagree with Tu Wei-ming, who holds that *ren* “is not caused by the mechanism of *li* from outside” (Tu 1979b, p. 9).
- 27 – A person who is highly competent in a language can speak fluently without being conscious of grammar, too, but may be less so when writing. It can be argued that, in this regard, the difference between a person of high competence and a master is a matter of degree.
- 28 – Li Zehou recently interpreted *li* as *li zhi* 禮制, namely a system of *li* (Li Zehou 2004, p. 11).

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