

WHY OBSERVING *LI* IS NOT THE INSTRUMENT TO ATTAIN *REN*: ON THE RELATION BETWEEN *REN* AND *LI* IN THE *ANALECTS*



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I. Introduction

Ren 仁 and *li* 禮 are important concepts in Confucian philosophy. The relation between *ren* and *li* has also been a topic of interest for scholars from ancient times to the present.¹ As David Wong argues, the relation between *ren* and *li* may motivate an understanding of social norms and morality that transcends cultural boundaries (Wong 2021, §2.2). Many scholars have made several influential contributions to this topic.² Generally, they interpret *li* as a means of attaining *ren*, and consider *li*'s role in moral self-cultivation to be one of the core characteristics of Confucian philosophy. This article attempts to subvert this notion. I try to demonstrate, at least in the *Analects*, that Confucius does not hold the idea that observing *li* is instrumental to attaining *ren*.

Before beginning the discussion, a conceptual clarification of *ren* and *li* is necessary. Opinions remain divided as to what exactly is meant by *ren* and *li*, and there may never be a sole correct answer because different interpretations of these concepts depend on the hermeneutic framework that scholars adopt to understand Confucius' philosophy. Here, I remain neutral and choose not to translate *ren* and *li*. However, "*ren*" and "*li*" have some core features that any reasonable interpretation should account for. For "*ren*," it is that *ren* is a noble virtue, a quality that a morally perfect person possesses. In contrast, the core feature of "*li*" is its prescription of normative codes of behavior across a range of social contexts, including ceremonial, political, moral, and other aspects of daily life.

As two ancient concepts in Confucian philosophy, *ren* and *li* have had very different receptions in modern society. *Ren*, owing to its complex and flexible connotation, seems easy to interpret and accept as a relevant virtue in modern society. For example, Chenyang Li has argued that Confucian *ren* shares many similarities with feminist care ethics, and that it is possible to interpret Confucianism as a philosophy with feminist elements (Li 1994). In contrast, Confucianism's overemphasis on *li* seems out of step with modern society. In a critique of Li's proposal, Ranjoo Seodu Herr argues that Confucianism is incompatible with feminism because *li* in Confucianism is often ossified and used as a tool to subjugate women (Herr 2003, p. 481).

Similarly, Lijun Yuan argues that the relation between *ren* and *li* in the *Analects* leads to a dominant ideology in Chinese history that justifies rigid compulsory rules (*li*) and suppresses women (Yuan 2002, p. 112). Beyond the issue of gender, *li* also poses an obstacle to reconciling Confucianism with contemporary mainstream political philosophy. Some scholars maintain that Confucianism's emphasis on *li* makes it authoritarian, requiring individuals to act according to certain codes of behavior that are only appropriate for their social status (Guo 2013, p. 49). Furthermore, Howard Curzer summarizes more than twenty aspects of *li* that conflict with many modern ideological concepts, such as the appropriation of resources and time, hostility to individuality, impeding social mobility, stifling creativity, and destroying the authentic nature of human relationships (Curzer 2012, p. 306). Confucian philosophy is often criticized precisely because of its obsession with *li*, which is seen by critics as being rigid, archaic, and oppressive.

Nevertheless, many Confucian scholars hold an optimistic attitude toward *li*. They argue that *li* is a distinctive feature and an important value that Confucianism can bring to modern ethical lives. One of the approaches to dissolving the oppressive side of *li* is to argue that *li* is closely related to *ren* so that *li* does not overlook individual particularity. But this approach will not work if we still insist that *li* is the means to attain *ren*. We would force some people to follow *li* on the grounds that doing so is in their long-term moral interests.

This article argues that *li* is not the means to attain *ren* but is merely an outgrowth and externalization of *ren*. Such an interpretation will help to address criticisms that *li* is oppressive. In what follows, first, I outline four explanations of the *ren-li* relation (weak instrumentalism, strong instrumentalism, conservative definitionalism, and liberal definitionalism). Aside from liberal definitionalism, these explanations all imply an instrumentalist understanding of *li* that, I argue, leads to unacceptable contradictions. After that, I analyze *Analects* 12.1, a key passage that is often used as evidence for an instrumentalist understanding of *li*, and argue that this is an incorrect interpretation of the passage. Finally, I propose a way to attain *ren* without relying on the observance of *li*.

II. Instrumentalism and Definitionalism

Kwong-loi Shun presents two possible positions on the relation between *ren* and *li*: instrumentalism and definitionalism (Shun 1993, pp. 460–466). I follow Shun's taxonomy and differentiate specific explanations within each stance.

According to those who subscribe to instrumentalism, the observance of *li* is the instrument for attaining *ren*. Scholars in this camp are split between weak instrumentalism and strong instrumentalism according to their views on the necessity and priority of *li* over *ren*.³

Weak instrumentalism contends that *li* is the means to attain *ren*. But *li* is neither the only means nor a necessary condition to attain *ren*. Another thesis of weak instrumentalism is that *ren* is ontologically prior to *li*. So if there are more effective means to attain *ren* besides *li*, they can replace *li*. Lin Yu-Sheng is approximately a weak instrumentalist (Shun 1993, p. 462). Lin contends that *ren* has priority over *li*, and that *li* is a means to become *ren*. When a certain rule of *li* is not suitable, it should be reformed (Lin 1974, p. 194).

The second view in the instrumentalist camp is strong instrumentalism. Strong instrumentalism also maintains that *li* is a means to attain *ren*. But in contrast to weak instrumentalism, it claims that *li* is the necessary means to attain *ren* and that *li* is prior to *ren*. Benjamin Schwartz is a representative of this view. He thinks *ren* is submissive to *li* (Schwartz 1985, p. 80). If *ren* is unconstrained by *li*, it will go astray. So, Schwartz says, in Confucius' philosophy, only through the established channels of *li* can one attain the moral excellence of *ren* (ibid., p. 77). Chenyang Li is also a supporter of this strong instrumentalism (Li 2007, p. 321). He thinks *li* is the cultural grammar of society. The observance of *li* is a necessary means to cultivate *ren*, just as knowing grammar is necessary to master a language. He also implies that *li* is prior to *ren* by saying that *ren* cannot exist independently of *li* (ibid., p. 323). In contrast to weak instrumentalism, strong instrumentalism allows little departure from *li* to be *ren*. The tie between *ren* and *li* is tighter than in weak instrumentalism.⁴

The second strand of the scholarship on the relation between *ren* and *li* characterizes the relation in terms of "definition." Those who subscribe to definitionalism are split into two factions based on what they view as the definiens and definiendum in the relation.

One kind of definitionalism in this camp thinks *ren* is defined in terms of *li*. In this view, observing *li* is a sufficient and necessary condition for being a person of *ren*. It is much stronger than strong instrumentalism by adding a sufficient condition. Another thesis is that *li* is ontologically prior to *ren*. Herbert Fingarette is a representative of this view. Fingarette attempted to specify the definition or definite traits of *ren* in the *Analects*. From passages 6.28 and 12.1, he concludes that *ren* is defined by *li*. According to Fingarette, "where reciprocal good faith and respect are expressed through the specific forms defined in *li*, there is *jen's* way. *Jen* (*ren*) and *li* are two aspects of the same thing" (Fingarette 1972, p. 42).⁵ As Shun observes, Fingarette's definitionalism leaves little room for revisions of *li* because it implies that *li* is primary. This view generally holds a conservative attitude about *li*. As he puts it, "*Jen* (*ren*) develops only so far as *li* develops; it is the shaping of oneself in *li*" (Fingarette 1972, p. 48). Hence, I call it "conservative definitionalism." Shun also identifies Zhao Jibin and Cai Shangsi as supporters of this view (Shun 1993, p. 462). Karyn Lai also seems to be a supporter of conservative definitionalism by saying, "*ren* is

characterized in terms of *li*" and "it is not obvious that *ren* is a 'concept' that has primacy in relation to *li*" (Lai 2014, p. 87).

In contrast to conservative definitionalism, there is liberal definitionalism. Liberal definitionalism maintains that *li* is defined in terms of *ren*. It turns around the definiendum and definiens in conservative definitionalism.⁶ Tu Wei-ming holds this view. He claims that *li* is the externalization of *ren* under certain social conditions. As a kind of inner morality, *ren* needs to express itself through *li*. For example, the mourning rituals for parents are the externalization of filial piety, a crucial constituent of *ren*. Tu adds that "*ren* as an inner morality is not caused by the mechanism of *li* from outside. It is a higher-order concept which gives meaning to *li*" (Tu 1968, p. 34). In his view, *li* is revisable if it no longer embodies the spirit of *ren* (ibid., p. 36). Thus, it is proper to call this view liberal definitionalism.

Among the four explanations of the relation between *ren* and *li*, liberal definitionalism is an exception in the sense that it does not presuppose an instrumental value of *li* to attain *ren*. Both strong and weak instrumentalism support the view that *li* is a means to attain *ren*. Conservative definitionalism thinks that the observance of *li* defines the attainment of *ren*. Thus, according to it, it is unthinkable that a person can become *ren* without observing *li*. For convenience, I refer to the view that observing *li* is the instrument for people to attain *ren* as "the instrumentalist thesis." Weak instrumentalism, strong instrumentalism, and conservative definitionalism all endorse the instrumentalist thesis.

Tu's version of liberal definitionalism also implicitly supports the instrumentalist thesis. He thinks that there is a kind of mutual dependability between *ren* and *li*. He uses Mou Zongsan's metaphor that *li* is a window of *ren* to illustrate the relation (Tu 1968, pp. 36–37). *Ren* will be suffocated without *li* as a way to expose it to the outside. This view suggests that *li* is necessary for becoming *ren*. At the same time, Tu holds that "*ren* without the manifestation of *li* is also inconceivable" (Tu 1972, p. 188). Tu's explanation of *ren* and *li* occasionally contradict each other. On the one hand, he holds that the externalization of *ren* is not necessarily represented by *li* (Tu 2018, p. 459). On the other hand, he holds that it is impossible that there is something external to *li* that can embody *ren* (Tu 2018, p. 465). This shows that Tu's explanation of the relation between *ren* and *li* is ambiguous, if not self-contradictory.

III. Why Is Observing *Li* Not the Instrument for Attaining *Ren*?

If we were to endorse that observing *li* is the instrument to attain *ren*, four contradictions seem to follow.

The first contradiction is between the instrumentalist thesis and Confucius' aversion to formalism. If a person can become *ren* by observing *li*, it is permissible for a person to observe *li* without any *ren* at the beginning.

When an uncultivated and non-*ren* person begins to observe *li*, at that moment he is exactly a person who is observing *li* but not being *ren*. However, if a person can observe *li* without being *ren*, she is not observing *li*, according to Confucius. Confucius said, "A man who is not *ren*—what has he to do with *li*?" (3.3).⁷ "When we say, 'the *li*, the *li*', are we speaking merely of jade and silk?" (17.11). For Confucius, a person must observe *li* with inner *ren*. Otherwise, she is not genuinely observing *li*. This is the dilemma: if instrumentalism is right, the precondition to becoming *ren* is to observe *li*. However, the precondition to observing *li* is to have inner *ren*. Schwartz, a typical instrumentalist, also realizes this point (Schwartz 1985, p. 82). But he does not think this is a problem. Instead, he thinks this reflects a dynamic relation between *ren* and *li*. But a dynamic relation is possible only after the parties can begin to interact with each other. It is like a seesaw, where someone first has to stomp on the ground to give the seesaw an initial force. Otherwise, it is a deadlock.

There are two ways to get out of this deadlock. One is to admit that a person can observe *li* without *ren* while maintaining that observing *li* can help her attain *ren*. This is a consistent corollary of instrumentalism. But we barely see any instrumentalists that opt for this view because they cannot ignore Confucius' more explicit and strong aversion to formalism in the observance of *li*. The other way out of the deadlock is to deny that observing *li* can help someone attain *ren* while holding that being *ren* is a necessary condition for observing *li*. Considering that Confucius strongly opposed the formalism of *li* (2.7, 2.8, 3.26, 17.11), the second solution is much more promising.

The second contradiction caused by accepting the instrumentalist thesis is between *li* as a universal principle and Confucius' situated teachings. On the one hand, it is well known that Confucius gave different advice to different disciples based on their character traits (11.22). Even when the same student, Fan Chi, asked about *ren* at different times, Confucius' answers differed (6.22, 12.22, 13.19). From these passages it is obvious that Confucius endorses the view that different people in different situations have different ways of becoming *ren*. On the other hand, *li* as an external ritual or principle is uniformly applicable. One function of *li* is to make people behave uniformly. In 2.3, Confucius said that governors need to use *li* to provide uniformity of behavior (齊之以禮). The requirements stipulated by *li* are aimed at the uniform behaviors of people and do not consider the particularity of every person.⁸ Thus, if *li* is the way to attain *ren*, it is hard to see why Confucius gives different advice rather than just asking them to follow the requirements of *li*. The best explanation is that Confucius thinks that it is situated teachings rather than uniformized *li* that can help people attain *ren*.

Many scholars notice the problem with the inflexibility of rituals. Hagop Sarkissian notices that there are possible situations where one is not familiar

with *li*, where one ritual may conflict with another, or where no standard ritual has ever been established (Sarkissian 2014, p. 111). *Li*, as strict established norms, cannot work in these circumstances. Sarkissian thinks that *yi* 義 (righteousness) comes into play in these situations. *Yi* offers guidelines for people when they do not know how to behave according to *li*.

David Hall and Roger Ames also recognize that there are many situations in which *li* is not applicable in a perpetually changing world. They not only think that *yi* provides guidelines for people to decide what is right in these situations but also attach a fundamental role to *yi*, which is that *yi* is the capacity to originate and revise *li*. They believe that a person of *yi* can transcend a personal perspective, dissolve the distinction between oneself and the world, and thus become a person-in-context and achieve self-realization (Hall and Ames 1987, pp. 94–95). *Li* originates in the creative activities of such early self-realized people. Thus, Hall and Ames think we should also understand *yi* as a creative force by which we can establish new rituals (Hall and Ames 1987, pp. 109–110).

But where is *yi* from? How do people know which action is *yi*? Hall and Ames argue that since *yi* is always context-dependent, it cannot be subject to some external norms. People of *yi* must be able to make creative judgments in response to changing situations (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 95). They think *yi* is natural raw stuff (*zhi* 質). They take passage 15.8 as evidence that supports their interpretation, where Confucius says, “The *junzi* takes rightness as his substance, puts it into practice by means of ritual. . . . Now that is a *junzi*!” Thus, Hall and Ames conclude that “*yi* is the ‘raw stuff’ (*zhi* 質) out of which the exemplary person fashions himself” (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 90).⁹ However, this is a very puzzling statement. Chong Kim-Chong has argued that understanding *yi* as a natural substance is contradictory and mysterious (Chong 1998, pp. 79–80). If *yi* is something like a principle that guides people’s decisions in different contexts, it cannot be a natural inclination. Otherwise, it amounts to saying that humans have a natural ability to know what is appropriate in certain contexts. Furthermore, this does not cohere with Confucius’ belief that humans must undergo hard work to become morally accomplished.

I agree with Chong’s diagnosis. Besides, I think passage 15.8 does not support Hall and Ames’ understanding. Passage 15.8 describes how a noble person (*junzi*) behaves. They take *yi* as their substance. In them, *yi* and *zhi* are one and the same. As accomplished people, they have transformed their natural substance into *yi*. Here, *yi* is not a natural substance. Rather, *yi* is the direction and goal of the transformation of *zhi*. The final status of the transformation of *zhi* 質 is *zhi* 直 (uprightness). Thus, in passage 12.20, Confucius says that an accomplished person is “upright (*zhi* 直) in his native substance and fond of *yi*” (質直而好義). *Yi* cannot be bestowed by nature. Its source must be elsewhere by which a transformation of *zhi* 質 is possible.

Hagop Sarkissian offers another explanation of the source of *yi*. He thinks the source of *yi* is *shu* 恕. *Shu* is a kind of “analogical reasoning” which asserts that “we should not treat others in ways that we ourselves would object [to] if the tables were turned” (Sarkissian 2014, p. 112).¹⁰ But *shu* or analogical reasoning (能近取譬) is exactly the method of *ren*. In 6.30, Confucius says, “Being able to take what is near at hand as an analogy could perhaps be called the method of *ren*.” Thus, *shu* stems from *ren*. If *shu* is the source of *yi*, then *yi* is also from *ren*. Following this logic, if *yi* is the principle or trait that guides people to decide what is right or *li* in specific circumstances, then it is *ren* that establishes *li* because *yi* is from *ren*. Hence, the way to get rid of the inflexibility of *li* is through *ren*. If *li* is the instrument for attaining *ren*, *li* will be incurably inflexible because of the lack of *yi*.

If observing *li* is the instrument to attain *ren*, the third contradiction is between Confucius’ view of Guan Zhong as *ren* and his reluctance to think of himself and his disciples as *ren*. When asked whether Zilu, Zhonggong, Ran Qiu, Zihua, Yan Hui, and all other disciples or even Confucius himself are *ren*, Confucius denied that they are *ren* (5.5, 5.8, 6.7, 7.34), though Yan Hui and Zhonggong are known for being virtuous (11.3). Yan Hui is probably Confucius’ most valued disciple. However, Confucius only admits that Yan Hui did not stray from *ren* for three months rather than thinking of him as being *ren*. Confucius himself is also famous for knowing *li* (3.15). But he denies that he himself is *ren* (7.34). In contrast, Confucius does not think Guan Zhong understands and observes *li* (3.22): “If Guan understands *li*, who does not understand it?” Nevertheless, Confucius thinks Guan Zhong is *ren* (14.17). If Confucius holds that *li* is the way to attain *ren*, it is hard to understand why he thinks Guan Zhong is *ren* while thinking that he and his disciples are not *ren*.

The fourth contradiction caused by accepting the instrumentalist thesis is between *li* as an instrument to attain *ren* and Confucius’ reproach of Zai Wo. Two stories about Zai Wo in the *Analects* oppose the instrumentalist view of *li*. In passage 17.21, Zai Wo asked Confucius whether it was possible to replace the ritual of a three-year mourning period with a one-year mourning period. Confucius questioned him whether he felt comfortable with the replacement. Zai Wo answered affirmatively. Confucius replied, “if you feel comfortable, you could do it.” Here, Confucius did not require Zai Wo to observe the *li* of a three-year mourning period to be *ren*. If Confucius really holds that *li* has an instrumental value in attaining *ren*, he should require Zai Wo, one of his disciples, to observe *li* to attain *ren*. But he did not do so. In another case where Zai Wo slept during the daytime, Confucius was dissatisfied, but he chose to do nothing and said, “Rotten wood cannot be carved, and a wall of dung cannot be plastered. As for Zai Wo, what would be the use of reprimanding him?” (5.10). This case suggests that if a person lacks the internal quality to be *ren*, he cannot be made *ren*.

via external means. This implies that Confucius does not think a person can be made *ren* through *li*. Otherwise, he should require Zai Wo to observe *li* instead of doing nothing.

There are two potential objections to my explanation. The first one goes like this: Zai Wo is dubious about the three-year mourning rites, and Confucius condemns him as not-*ren*. This demonstrates that Confucius thinks *li* is necessary for one to be *ren*. Because of Zai Wo's doubts about the relevance of *li*, Confucius thinks he is not *ren*. Thus, this example supports the instrumentalist thesis.¹¹

The problem with this explanation is that if observing *li* can help a person attain *ren*, why did Confucius choose to do nothing? Why didn't Confucius ask Zai Wo to observe the rites? This is a puzzle that instrumentalists need to explain. But adopting liberal definitionalism can help us to avoid this puzzle. Liberal definitionalism thinks *li* is the externalization of *ren*. Thus, requiring a person to observe *li* is meaningless if she is not on the way to attaining *ren*. So, Confucius did nothing in Zai Wo's case. The reason why he commented that Zai Wo is not *ren* is that Zai Wo's doubt about the rites reflects that he is on his way to being *ren*.

The second objection to my reading of Zai Wo's story is that Confucius wanted Zai Wo to observe *li* to become *ren*, but Confucius chose the second-best way because he considered Zai Wo's practical situation. Frederick Choo holds this view (Choo 2019, p. 110). Ideally, Zai Wo should observe *li*. But Zai Wo could not attain that level at that time. Thus, Confucius suggested the second-best way for Zai Wo: "if you are comfortable, then you can do it." The point here is that this reading is compatible with the thinking that *li* can help people attain *ren*.

However, I do not agree. First, Choo's reading suggests that there are ways other than *li* to help people attain *ren*. In some senses, these other ways are privileged over *li* because these ways cater to the character traits of different people. Thus, it cannot save the view that *li* can help people attain *ren*. Second, Choo may counter by arguing that it is at least possible that some people can be made *ren* by observing *li* in some ideal situations. However, it is unclear what these ideal situations are and who those suitable people are. Throughout the *Analects*, Confucius never told his disciples to follow *li* to become *ren*.¹² Instead, Confucius always gave specific suggestions and teachings suitable to his disciples when asked about *ren*. So, this assumption that a person can become *ren* by *li* is not well supported by the *Analects*. Third, Choo's reading of 17.21 holds that Confucius was giving sincere suggestions to Zai Wo when Confucius said, "if you are comfortable, you could do it." I do not think he gave sincere suggestions to help Zai Wo attain *ren*. Reading the passage, we can feel Confucius' great disappointment, helplessness, and exasperation toward Zai Wo. Even after Zai Wo departed, Confucius continued complaining about Zai Wo. In passage 5.10, Confucius compared Zai Wo to rotten wood and a wall of

dirty earth. We can witness Confucius' huge disappointment at Zai Wo here. This is not a moral advisor's correct attitude if Confucius gives sincere advice to Zai Wo. Otherwise, he should not feel so upset and exasperated after Zai Wo's departure.

The preceding are four contradictions we must face if we were to endorse the instrumentalist thesis. To be clear, I do not deny that *li* has any instrumental value *tout court*. I am just denying that *li* has an instrumental value for attaining *ren*. There are many passages in the *Analects* where Confucius discusses the importance of practicing *li* and explains its instrumental value.¹³ But there is little evidence that he directly relates the instrumental value of *li* to the purpose of attaining *ren* in these passages. In 3.19, 4.13, 11.1, 13.3–4, and 14.41, he talks about the significance of *li* for better governance. In 8.2, 12.15, and 15.33, he thinks *li* is important for avoiding some undesired outcomes. In 8.8, 16.13, and 20.3, he repeatedly emphasizes the importance of *li* for taking up one's social roles, that is, "*li*" 立. None of these passages relates the value of *li* to the purpose of attaining *ren*. Rather, the instrumental value of *li* lies in its utilitarian value in helping us attain harmonious social outcomes. That is why Confucius said that "when it comes to the practice of *li*, it is harmonious ease (*he* 和) that is to be valued" (1.12). The instrumental value of *li* is its function of bringing about harmony rather than *ren*.

IV. Explaining "Ke ji Fu Li Wei Ren" 克己復禮為仁

Why do so many scholars subscribe to instrumentalism? Generally, they believe that the phrase "*ke ji fu li wei ren*" 克己復禮為仁 in *Analects* 12.1 supports the instrumentalist thesis:

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，而由人乎哉？”

Yan Hui asked about *ren*. The Master said, "*ke ji fu li wei ren*. If for one day you managed to *ke ji fu li*, in this way you could lead the entire world back to *ren*. The key to achieving *ren* lies within yourself—how could it come from others?"

Karyn Lai argues that this passage poses a challenge to Tu Wei-ming's view because no matter how we understand the passage, it implies that *ren* is characterized in terms of *li* (Lai 2014, pp. 86–87) and "affirms the primacy of *li* in the early stage of *ren* cultivation" (Lai 2006, p. 71). According to Hagop Sarkissian, this passage demonstrates that "*li* are the first thing one ought to consider when trying to exemplify the highest standards of human excellence" (Sarkissian 2014, p. 110). Similarly, Chenyang Li believes that "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" (Li 2007, p. 315). *Analects* 12.1 is so influential that almost all supporters of the instrumentalist thesis cite it as solid textual evidence. In the following, I argue that it is not.

Supporters of the instrumentalist thesis render "*ke ji fu li wei ren*" to mean "one should overcome oneself or one's desires in order to return to *li*, which then causes one to become *ren*." They think that the core of "*ke ji fu li wei ren*" is "*fu li*" (return to *li*). The aim of "*ke ji*" is to return to *li*. At the same time, this interpretation states that the cause of *ren* is also *li*. I think this rendering is wrong in three places. First, "*ke*" 克 does not mean "overcome." Translating *ke* as "overcome" implies that one should submit oneself to *li*. But this is wrong. Second, returning to rituals is not the aim of *ke ji* 克己. Rather, *ke ji* is the cause of returning to *li*, and returning to *li* is the natural result of *ke ji*. Third, *wei* 為 should not be understood as "cause." The relation between *ke ji fu li* and *ren* is not causal. It is an equivalence relation. In the following, I will argue for these three points.

First, "*ke*" should not be translated as "overcome." Since at least the Han dynasty, there have been two different explanations of *ke ji*. One interprets *ke ji* as overcoming one's desires. The other explains it as cultivating oneself. The overcoming interpretation basically holds that "*ke*" 克 means "defeat" (勝) or "overcome," and "*ji*" 己 means "desires," while the cultivation explanation basically holds that "*ke*" means "restrain" or "enable" and "*ji*" means "oneself." Table 1 shows a list of renderings of different scholars, which is summarized based on Zhao 1976 and Kieschnick 1992.

I think the cultivation explanation makes more sense. The first reason why the overcoming explanation is not right is that we should not extend the meaning of *ji* to render it as desires or biases. Throughout the *Analects*, *ji* 己 appears more than thirty times. Confucius talks about "behaving oneself" (*xing ji* 行己) (5.16, 13.20), "purifying oneself" (*jie ji* 潔己) (7.29), "cultivating oneself" (*xiu ji* 修己) (14.42), "making oneself reverent" (*gong ji* 恭己) (15.5), "thinking oneself as cruel" (*li ji* 厲己) (19.10), and "thinking oneself as insolent" (*bang ji* 謗己) (19.10). All the occurrences of *ji* 己 here refer to the self rather than one's desires or biases. Thus, rendering *ji* as desires in the passage is not appropriate. Second, if *ji* 己 means oneself, *ke* 克 cannot be rendered as overcome or defeat. Otherwise, it is contradictory to Confucius' words in the same passage 12.1 that "the key to achieving *ren* lies within yourself" (為仁由己). If oneself is to be overcome, how is it possible that Confucius went on saying that you should achieve *ren* by yourself?¹⁴ So, "*ke ji*" is better understood as cultivating oneself. "*Ke ji*" does not mean the elimination of subjective will. Translating "*ke*" into "overcome" ignores the importance of one's subjective intention.

Second, what is "*fu li*" 復禮? In contrast to "*ke ji*," "*fu li*" is less contentious. "*Fu*" is generally understood as "return," and "*li*" refers to rituals. Understanding "*fu*" as "return" corresponds to "go back" (*gui* 歸) in

Table 1. List of different explanations of “ke ji”

	Commentators	ke 克	ji 己	ke ji 克己
Overcoming explanation	Yang Xiong 揚雄	overcome 勝	selfishness 私	overcome selfishness
	Liu Xuan 劉炫	overcome 勝	Desire 欲	overcome desires
	Cheng Yi 程頤, Zhu Xi 朱熹	overcome 勝	selfish desires 私欲	overcome desires
	Dai Zhen 戴震	overcome 勝	bias 偏	overcome bias
	Xu Fuguan 徐復觀	overcome 勝	desires 欲	overcome desires
Cultivation explanation	Ma Rong 馬融	restrain or control 約	self 身	self-cultivation or self-control
	Xing Bing 邢昺	be able to restrain 能約	self 身	be able to restrain oneself
	Kong Anguo 孔安國	able 能	self 身	able of oneself (to return to rituals)
	Fan Ning 范寧	blame 責	self 身	blame oneself (for losing propriety)
	Jiang Sheng 江聲	hold responsible 肩	self 身	hold oneself responsible (for returning rituals)

the same passage. Confucius appears to hold that the original state of the world is perfect, and our efforts are aimed at returning the world to that ideal state. Understanding “*fu*” as returning is consistent with Confucius’ reverence for and aspiration to practicing the ways of the former kings (1.12).

If *ke ji* means cultivating oneself, and *fu li* means returning to rituals, what is the relation between *ke ji* and *fu li*? Supporters of the instrumentalist thesis think that *li* is a means to attain *ren*. Thus, they render “*ke ji fu li*” as “make oneself to return to rituals.” This rendering emphasizes the importance of *li* for *ren*. It insists that self-cultivation serves “return to rituals” (*fu li*), that is, self-cultivation for the purpose of returning to rituals. I think this is not plausible. Self-cultivation is the most important for becoming *ren*, and returning to rituals is just the result of self-cultivation. The return to rituals is not the aim of self-cultivation; rather, it is the natural result and expression of self-cultivation. This is why after the phrase “*ke ji fu li*,” Confucius adds “The key to achieving *ren* lies within yourself—how could it come from others?” If, as instrumentalists suggest, *li* is a means to *ren*, how would it count to say that “the key to achieving *ren* lies within yourself” since *li* is an external constraint? We should note as well that in passage 17.6, Confucius also talks about “*wei ren*”—“someone could *wei ren* who is able, everywhere in the world, to put five virtues into practice[:] . . . reverence, magnanimity, trustworthiness, diligence, and kindness.” Here Confucius does not mention *li* at all when explaining “*wei ren*.” This also supports my view that *li* is not so necessary for *wei ren* and that cultivating one’s virtues is more important.

In the *Analects*, Confucius talks extensively about self-cultivation. The aim of self-cultivation is to become *ren*. In the next section, I shall have more to say about Confucius’ view of self-cultivation. For now, I think the instrumental explanation of “*ke ji fu li*” ignores the importance of self-cultivation in “*ke ji fu li*.” Self-cultivation (*ke ji*) takes precedence over “*fu li*,” and that is why Confucius said “self-cultivation and return to rituals” (*ke ji fu li*) rather than “return to rituals and cultivate yourself” (*fu li ke ji*). Therefore, the better rendering of “*ke ji fu li*” is “cultivate yourself and then return to *li*.”

Third, what is “*wei ren*” 為仁? “*Wei ren*” is also contentious. Kwong-loi Shun and Edward Slingerland understand “*wei*” as “constitute” (Shun 1993, p. 465; Slingerland 2003, p. 125). Chenyang Li understands “*wei*” as “*ze*” 則 or “*shi*,” which means “result in or cause, or enable a person to be” (Li 2007, p. 135). Shun and Slingerland’s rendering takes “*wei*” as a constitutive relation, while Li’s rendering makes “*wei*” a kind of causal relation. A constitutive relation between *m* and *n* in “*m* constitutes *n*” only tells us that *m* is a necessary part of *n*. A causal relation between *m* and *n* in “*m* causes *n*” indicates that *m* is a sufficient condition for *n*. I argue that there is a third understanding, namely, to understand “*wei*” as “*is*” (是) in the sense of

equivalence. An equivalence relation makes m equals n , in which m and n are necessary and sufficient conditions for each other. According to this understanding, “*ke ji fu li*” equals “*ren*.” It is an equivalence relation.

Here are two reasons we should think of “*wei*” here as an equivalence relation. First, Confucius uses “*wei ren*” in the equivalence sense in several passages that have the same propositional structure as *Analects* 12.1. In 14.1, Yuan Xian asked Confucius, “to refrain from competitiveness, boastfulness, envy, and greed—can this *wei ren*?” Here “*wei ren*” is properly rendered as “count as *ren*” or “equal *ren*.” In 17.6, Confucius said, “Someone could be *wei ren* who is able, everywhere in the world, to put five virtues into practice.” These two passages resemble the structure of “*ke ji fu li wei ren*” in the sense that they all explain the relation between certain virtues and *ren*. Thus, it is proper to understand “*wei ren*” in 12.1 as “equals *ren*.”

Second, it is not Confucius who historically first spoke of “*ke ji fu li*” 克己復禮. There is recorded evidence from the *Zuozhuan* 左传 showing that “*ke ji fu li*” is an ancient phrase. The *Zuozhuan* (Duke Zhao, twelfth year 昭公十二年) records a conversation between King Ling of Chu and Zi Ge. During the conversation, Zi Ge kept persuading King Ling not to ask for *Ding* 鼎 from the Emperor of Zhou. But King Ling could not restrain himself (“不能自克”), and chose not to follow Zi Ge’s advice. Finally, he got into trouble. Confucius commented: “There is an old saying, ‘restrain yourself and return to rituals’. That is *ren* (*ke ji fu li, ren ye* 克己復禮, 仁也). This is really well said. If King Ling of Chu could do so, how could he be insulted at Qian Xi?”¹⁵ Here, Confucius said explicitly that “*ke ji fu li*” is “*ren*.” Confucius thinks that the cause of King Ling’s tragic ending is that King Ling could not restrain himself, which made him stray from *li*. Had King Ling restrained himself, he would have avoided trouble. Obviously, Confucius thinks that the most important thing here is self-cultivation, that is, restraining oneself, and returning to *li* is only the result of self-cultivation. This again echoes the cultivation interpretation of “*ke ji*.”

Thus, the instrumentalist thesis is wrong by understanding “*wei ren*” as “cause *ren*” or “result in *ren*.” “*Wei*” should be understood as “equivalence.” Thus, it is not cultivating yourself and returning to rituals that results in *ren*. Cultivating yourself and then returning to rituals is exactly *ren*. Hence, *li* does not take precedence over *ren*.

One possible objection to my argument against the instrumentalist thesis is that if observing *li* is not the instrument for attaining *ren*, it would be difficult to understand the following conversation between Confucius and Yan Hui in passage 12.1, where Yan Hui asked about the specifics of “*ke ji fu li wei ren*.” Confucius answered, “Do not look unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not listen unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not speak unless it is in accordance with *li*; do not move unless it is in accordance with *li*” (非禮勿視, 非禮勿聽, 非禮勿言, 非禮勿動). The objection goes like this: “if

observing *li* is not the instrument to attain *ren*, how should we understand the four specific instructions for people to behave in accordance with *li*?"

I think one of the misconceptions in this understanding lies in seeing the four specifics as the specific ways to be *ren*, whereas the correct understanding should see these four specifics as the specific state of *ren*; that is, when a person is *ren*, what she does is in accordance with *li*. It does not mean that we should always behave according to *li*, which understands *ren* as being defined by *li*. Otherwise, the four specifics would be very restrictive and infeasible because *li* cannot stipulate every aspect of human activity. I have discussed the inflexibility of *li* above and argued that the reasonable way to overcome the inflexibility problem of *li* is by emphasizing the priority of *ren*.

The phrase "*ke ji fu li wei ren*" is not a guiding principle on how to become *ren*, but rather a statement about the content of the concept of *ren*. The state of *ren* is *ke ji fu li*. As I have pointed out before, the phrase "*ke ji fu li wei ren*" is an old saying. In 12.1, Confucius is repeating an old saying when he says, "*ke ji fu li wei ren*." The sentence that follows goes like this: "If for one day you managed to restrain yourself and return to *li*, in this way you could lead the entire world back to *ren*." This is an explanation of what the ancient saying means. The sentence is not a guide to how to become *ren*, because what it means is that once someone has self-cultivated herself and then returned to *li*, the world will develop in the direction of *ren*, not that once a person has attained self-cultivation and then returned to *li* will she become *ren*. Therefore, we should not interpret the phrase as a method to guide individuals to become *ren*. Hence, the four specifics are not guiding principles but rather the specific states of *ren*.

To sum up, "*ke ji fu li wei ren*" is better translated as: "Cultivate yourself and then return to rituals. That is *ren*." It does not support the instrumentalist thesis because, first, self-cultivation is more important than returning to *li*, and second, returning to rituals is not the cause of *ren*. A cultivated person is *ren*. Returning to rituals is just a natural result of self-cultivation. Then what is self-cultivation? What is the way to becoming *ren*? I will address this question next.

V. *The Means of Self-cultivation to Become Ren*

If *li* is not the instrument to attain *ren*, then what is the way to become *ren*? The *Analects* often discusses how to become *ren*, but nothing relates to the observance of *li*. There are at least four steps to becoming *ren*.

First, we need to have a desire to become *ren*. Confucius says, "Is *ren* really so far away? If I simply desire *ren*, I will find that it is already here" (7.30). We can see here that Confucius does not require people to overcome desire. On the contrary, we need to cultivate our desire to attain *ren*. However, even having a desire for *ren* is so rare that Confucius complains,

“I have yet to meet a person who truly loved *ren* or hated a lack of *ren*” (4.6). A person needs to cultivate herself and develop a desire to become *ren*.

Second, we need to study, to learn. Confucius thinks that it is not enough just to have a desire for *ren* because “loving *ren* without balancing it with a love for learning will result in the vice of foolishness” (17.9). Then what should we learn? In the *Analects*, Confucius maintains that we should study classical texts (*wen* 文) such as *shi* 诗, *li* 禮, *yi* 易, and *yue* 樂 (6.27, 7.3, 16.13), and some important arts like charioteering and archery (9.2). Although Confucius talks about learning *li*, what he refers to is the book of *li*. He does not tell us that we should observe *li* in order to be *ren*. Instead, he holds that we can learn the book of *li* to cultivate ourselves just as we can use the book of *shi* to cultivate ourselves.

Third, we need to reflect and think. Confucius warns us of the danger of learning without thinking. “If you learn without thinking about what you have learned, you will be lost” (2.15). What is thinking? Thinking is when your teacher tells you one corner of a problem so that you can infer the other three corners (7.8). In other words, thinking occurs if we can use what is near at hand as an analogy to infer more knowledge (*neng jin qu pi* 能近取譬) (6.30). Confucius maintains that this is so important that he says it is the method of *ren* (*ren zhi fang* 仁之方) (6.30). One crucial result of applying this principle is that we have “understanding” (*shu* 恕), that is, “do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire” (己所不欲, 勿施於人) (15.24). When we know what we do not like, according to the principle of using what is near hand as an analogy, we should be able to infer what others do not like. This is also what Confucius calls the method of *ren* (*ren zhi fang* 仁之方).

Fourth, we need to hold on to *ren* and guard it when necessary: “The gentleman does not go against *ren* even for the amount of time required to finish a meal. Even in times of urgency or distress, he necessarily accords with it” (4.5). In some cases, we should sacrifice ourselves for *ren* (15.9).

There are also other supplementary ways to help us become *ren*, such as living in the neighborhood of a *ren* person (4.1) or making friends with *ren* people (1.8, 12.24, 15.10). These methods can assist us in cultivating ourselves.

Among the various ways to become *ren* mentioned above, none of them relates to the observance of *li*. If Confucius thinks observing *li* is the way to become *ren*, how should we reconcile it with these ways of becoming *ren* just mentioned?

VI. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued why the instrumentalist explanation of *li* to attain *ren* does not work and why liberal definitionalism makes more sense

in the context of the *Analects*. The main reason is that the instrumentalist thesis contradicts other teachings in the *Analects* and is not supported by solid textual evidence. In contrast, liberal definitionism is more reasonable based on a more accurate understanding of *the Analects*.

The core theses of liberal definitionism are as follows. First, observing *li* does not have an instrumental value to helping people attain *ren*. Second, *li* is defined in terms of *ren*. Third, *li* is just one of the externalizations of *ren* in the social context. In different contexts, the externalization of *ren* can be different. Other activities, such as the arts or leisure, can also be the externalization of *ren* (7.1, 11.26). We may break *li* if the externalization condition of *ren* cannot be met. For example, if a person is too poor, it is permissible for her not to obey certain rules of *li*. Or, as Schwartz argues, the externalization of *ren* can take the form of certain dispositions, such as an inner serenity, or equanimity, which do not have an obvious relation to actions (Schwartz 1985, p. 80). Thus, *li* is not the only and necessary externalization of *ren*.

Notes

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- 1 – The discussion of this relation can be carried out in two dimensions, one ontological and one methodological. The ontological *ren-li* relation is not necessarily the same as the methodological *ren-li* relation. Here, I talk about this relation in both dimensions. Ontologically *ren* is primary, and methodologically *ren* does not necessarily require *li* to obtain it. I think the relation between the two is consistent at the ontological and methodological levels. My thanks to one anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.
- 2 – See Kwong-loi Shun 1993 and Chenyang Li 2007.
- 3 – By “priority” here I mean “ontological priority.” There are two kinds of priority, one ontological and one epistemological. *P* is ontologically prior to *q* if *p* can exist without the existence of *q* but not vice versa. *P* is epistemologically prior to *q* if we can know *p* without knowing *q* but not vice versa.
- 4 – Many scholars appear to be sympathetic to strong instrumentalism though they do not explicitly say whether *li* is prior to *ren*. Fung Yiu-ming thinks good performance that conforms to *li* is a necessary condition for having *ren* though it is not a sufficient condition (Fung

2014, p. 104). Philip Ivanhoe implies such strong instrumentalism when he holds that becoming *ren* includes “broadening one’s knowledge” besides “subjugating one’s nature to the rites” (Ivanhoe 1990, p. 477).

- 5 – “*Jen*” is the Wade-Giles romanization of “*ren*” 仁.
- 6 – Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 is probably a predecessor of this view. In *An Exposition of Benevolence* (仁學), Tan thinks that the existence of *li* depends on *ren* (Tan 1984, p. 98). Being *ren* naturally results in having *li*. And the standard of judging whether someone conforms to *li* is to see whether she is *ren* or not (Tan 1984, p. 76).
- 7 – The translations and text numberings of passages in the *Analects* in this article are from Slingerland 2003. I replace all “Goodness” in his translation with *ren*.
- 8 – Some readers may not agree that Confucius wants to use *li* to bring people into uniformity because Confucius respects the individuality of each person. Confucius said that noble people harmonize but do not seek sameness (“和而不同”) (13.23). He allows and respects individual character. Everybody has her own character, and thus different ways to cultivate themselves. They harmonize with each other but do not seek sameness. The function of *li* is to bring about a harmonious order among people rather than sameness. However, it places some constraints on how people behave (see Li 2006). And these constraints are universally applicable to all parties no matter their character. In this sense, I think, Confucius uses *li* to “uniformize” people. Confucius uses *li* to uniformize people harmoniously. And if *li* is appropriate to be understood in this way, it cannot be an instrument to become *ren* because Confucius thinks that different people have different ways to become *ren*. (Thanks to one anonymous reviewer for pointing this out).
- 9 – Elsewhere, Hall and Ames seem to argue that *yi* originates in the realized self (Hall and Ames 1987, p. 94). They also seem to think that the origin of *yi* is a self-disposition to harmonize humanness, action, and situations (but I must admit that I am not sure that I understand this correctly). Even if this is correct, I think it is a very vague interpretation. Where is the desire and ability to dispose oneself from?
- 10 – Philip Ivanhoe also holds that *shu* can help people avoid becoming blind (Ivanhoe 1990, p. 128).
- 11 – Thanks to one anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.
- 12 – Some readers may not agree, because in 12.1 Confucius seems to be telling his student Yan Hui to observe *li* to achieve *ren*, where Confucius says “overcoming yourself and returning to *li* is *ren*.” I will refute this view in the next section.

- 13 – *Analects* 3.17, 3.19, 4.13, 6.27, 8.2, 8.8, 11.1, 12.15; 13.3–4, 14.41, 15.33, 16.13, 20.3.
- 14 – According to Zhao Jibin 1976, this view is generally held by scholars of the Qing dynasty, such as Jiao Xun 焦循, Mao Qiling 毛奇齡, Ruan Yuan 阮元, and Ling Tingkan 凌廷堪.
- 15 – Zuo 2012, pp. 1763–1764.

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