

**Comments on Jeu-Jenq Yuann’s
“An Interpretation of Confucian *Ren*
(仁 humanness) Through A Case Study
of the Divergent Attitudes
in the Preventative Measures
of Covid-19 Pandemic in China and the US”**

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I enjoyed Professor Yuann’s paper and learned a lot from it. The part I found the most fascinating was his discussion of the concept of Ren and its importance for Confucian anthropology and ethics. Commenting on the influence of both nature and culture on individuals and societies, Yuann suggests that “the individualistic spirit running through the West belongs to their cultural parts, whereas the communitarian spirit exhibited clearly in the case of China proves that human beings by nature need community” (p. 4).¹ To support this claim, he brings in the Confucian philosophy of human nature,

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¹ The quotations and page numbers cited in this paragraph refer to an earlier draft of Professor Yuann’s paper rather than the published version contained in this issue.

centered on the idea of Ren. According to Yuann, “Ren, literally meaning humaneness, is the core idea of the Confucian philosophy” (p. 5). On this view, the human person is seen “not merely as an individual isolated without links to the others, but more as a social being whose identity is derived from his interaction within the community” (p. 6). The kind of sociality at issue here is stronger than mere membership in a community, and it also involves personal relations, for “Ren literally implies the relationship between two persons” (p. 7). Yuann explains that on the Confucian approach, Ren is the “core of ethics” and the supreme principle of morality; and “we are obliged to practice Ren in all circumstances towards all people” (p. 7). Intriguingly, he suggests that “the best equivalent word to the Westerners in understanding Ren is ‘love’ despite the truth it talks more about the natural love of our species rather than that existing in the Christian tradition” (p. 6).

I’m sympathetic to some of the major aspects of the Confucian philosophy that Yuann describes. I too favor an account of human nature and ethics that’s less individualistic and more communal, focuses on sociality and relationships, and makes love the supreme moral value. Since I find the Confucian approach appealing, I want to ask a few brief questions about the view Yuann is recommending for the sake of understanding it better.

First, I’d like to hear more about the Confucian conception of human nature. Ren is supposed to be natural to human beings in some sense. But it’s not clear to me exactly how this is meant to be understood. Is it “natural” in the sense that we have natural instincts, inclinations, or desires for relationship and community (something like “fellow-feeling”), similar to the way we instinctively pursue food when we’re hungry or self-preservation when we’re

in danger? Or is it "natural" in the sense that human beings have natural social capacities, and this part of our nature is fulfilled through relationship and community? Is it a biological conception of human nature or a metaphysical one? With respect to the idea of what's "natural," is it a descriptive notion (what we're like) or an evaluative one (what's good for us)? Or is it a combination of all these things?

Second, I'm interested to hear more about the Confucian account of love and how it relates to the Christian one. To make the question clearer and more specific, we can take Thomas Aquinas's account of love as a representative example. For Aquinas, love (considered as a virtue) is willing the good of the other and union with the other (*Summa theologiae* II-II.27.2, I-II.26.4, II-II.25.3). Love involves both beneficence toward the beloved and a personal relation to the beloved. On Aquinas's ethics—and Christian ethics more generally—love is the heart of morality and is the supreme virtue and obligation; and we are required to be loving toward everyone at all times. Now, Yuann only mentions the Christian tradition in order to contrast it with the Confucian tradition, and the similarities he notes are between Chinese thinkers and Aristotle. But I think the view he's proposing might be closer to that of some Christian philosophers, like Aquinas, than it is to Aristotle's. So, I'd like to ask Yuann if he can say more about the Confucian understanding of love and how it compares to the Christian one.

