

UNITED WISDOM

Ren and li: humanity and the form of an action

Freedom and Action

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Epigraph

> *“Man’s duty towards his neighbour.”*

Herbert Allen Giles, Religions of Ancient China, Chapter II. A fragment of the author’s historical exposition, rather than a quotation from Confucius. In the surrounding sentence Giles orders duties by priority; his broad definition of Confucianism is not accepted here without qualification. Source.

What this article is about

At a small meeting of neighbours, Anton thanks Vera for helping with their shared library. He says all the customary words but immediately moves to the next item. Vera wanted to explain that she can no longer sort books every week. She is thanked precisely when she needs room to refuse. Nobody in our hypothetical scene has to be malicious. Yet an outwardly respectful gesture can make an actual conversation harder. How can we distinguish a form that helps a relationship from one that closes it down?

The Confucian terms ren and li help make this question more precise. Humanity is not reduced here to a pleasant feeling, nor form to a set of attractive gestures. We will read selected passages of historical exposition and transmitted teaching, preserving the difference between them, then explore our own contemporary scene. This does not resolve the dispute about human nature, examine anyone’s authentic goodness or transfer an old hierarchy into present life. We are interested in what an action allows another person to do and say beyond observing the accepted order.

I. Two terms and three different levels of reading

Ren is commonly translated with words for humanity; li is associated with ritual, propriety and appropriate form. Translation does not exhaust their meanings. In the selected Analects passages in Lionel Giles’s collection, inward attitude, performing a rite and a lived experience of loss appear alongside one another. This is transmitted teaching in a historical translation, rather than Confucius’s own written record. A hypothetical contemporary conversation does not establish how everyone in the ancient tradition understood these terms. It provides only a limited subject for comparison.

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In Herbert Allen Giles’s 1906 book, moral action comes to the foreground, but his assessment of religion depends on his own historical assumptions. He discusses Chinese tradition through comparisons with Christianity and sharply judges neighbouring teachings. A brief fragment of his authorial voice therefore does not become a neutral definition of the entire tradition. We distinguish received teaching, subsequent exposition and our own conclusion. If these levels are mixed together, our convenient contemporary advice begins to look like an ancient instruction.

Anton does not need to know these terms to notice the difficulty. He can ask what his gesture actually did. Did it thank someone for completed work? Invite a conversation about further participation? Declare the matter closed? A single sentence sometimes performs several functions. Distinguishing them matters more than awarding himself the honourable title of a person who respects others. Here the substance of respect is considered through another person’s available opportunity to answer, rather than the speaker’s confidence in his good intention.

Nor does Vera acquire a duty immediately to reveal her entire inner life. She can name one limit, ask for separate time or leave the conversation there. Investigating form does not require a person’s complete transparency. It is enough to establish which question is actually being discussed and whose actions can be promised. If Anton speaks for the whole group, its agreement needs to be known separately. A kind tone confers no authority over another person’s time or over those who are absent.

II. Form makes an attitude discernible

Without form, attention may remain only a personal conviction. Anton is certain that he values Vera, yet she encounters an unchanged timetable and further requests. His inward gratitude is not available to her as an established condition of participation. Discernible actions are needed: naming the subject, making room for an answer and avoiding promises on her behalf. In this sense, form need not hinder humanity; it lets humanity acquire an address. But an action’s meaning is not established by a correct expression alone: what happens afterwards matters.

One can politely ask whether someone can help and continue speaking as though agreement has already been obtained. One can allow time for an answer yet put someone before the whole group, where refusal becomes a public explanation of personal circumstances. These organise the same request in different ways. They show that politeness and an available freedom to answer do not automatically coincide. Our conclusion concerns the hypothetical scene; it does not diagnose its participants. The cause of a particular silence cannot be established from its outward appearance.

A useful form makes an important distinction clear beforehand. Thanks for past work do not mean a request for next month. An invitation to meet is not a promise of ongoing help. Naming a limit does not necessarily express dislike. Separating these matters does not destroy warmth in conversation. It reduces the meanings that have to be guessed. Yet neither precise words nor a pause guarantees agreement. Another person can keep their own decision even when a request is expressed attentively.

Form also has a practical side. Vera can know who receives the books, where to leave them and whom to contact if she does not come. This information allows action without continual personal guessing. But a book handover procedure does not answer for the whole relationship. It can be clear while leaving disappointment unresolved. It is therefore reasonable to acknowledge separately what was arranged and what remains unknown. Not every successful arrangement has to become evidence of mutual closeness or complete moral maturity.

Uncertainty does not always need a new detailed rulebook. Sometimes one clarification of the subject is enough, whereas a long list of rules makes simple help inaccessible. One can ask which uncertainty actually obstructs action instead of requiring everything to be explained beforehand. A brief gesture suffices for participants who know the custom well; a newcomer may not understand what agreement is being assumed of them. The form’s appropriateness then also depends on how accessible its meaning is. Attending to this difference need not declare the whole old habit wrong or the newcomer insufficiently well brought up.

III. Feeling does not replace action

A person can sincerely regret that someone is struggling and still leave them with their entire previous workload. This does not yet establish that the feeling is false. Between experience and change lie questions of capability, knowledge and willingness to act. If Anton acknowledges Vera’s difficulty, the next step may consist in ending a new promise made for her rather than offering stronger thanks. That is small beside an overall judgement of character, but its content can be established without reading another person’s thoughts.

Sometimes the help needed is unknown. Vera wanted to reduce how often she participates, whereas Anton offers to buy new boxes. The boxes might be useful but answer a different question. In our analysis, humanity therefore includes attention to the difference between a proposed solution and a stated difficulty. Every mistaken offer need not be treated as indifference. One can notice the mismatch, clarify the subject and acknowledge that one lacks the resources for the required change. Honest limitation is preferable to a promise whose substance nobody can fulfil.

The reverse risk is to recognise action alone and demand an immediate result from every kind feeling. A person may be occupied by a substantial obligation or lack the necessary means.

Refusing further help then does not establish an absence of humanity. Our question is not reduced to counting services supplied. What matters is avoiding claims of unlimited participation and avoiding treating another's need as permission to dispose of someone else's resources. Moral seriousness does not require everyone to accept whatever amount is proposed.

This distinction also protects the recipient. They do not have to consider help suitable solely because the helper felt sincerely. They can appreciate an intention and disagree with a particular way of helping. They might not know the intention at all but see the action clearly. Talking about ren and li is useful here as a question about the correspondence between attention and form, rather than a means of proving which person is better. A historical term should not become a final word after which objection is impossible.

Care can also appear in the absence of a new request. Anton need not keep inviting Vera to discuss her limit if it is already known and no further question is needed. Repeated attentive clarification sometimes quietly returns a task of justifying refusal again. The distinction is visible in the subject: have circumstances changed, or did the previous answer simply fail to satisfy the questioner? Not every continuation deepens a relationship. Allowing a known answer to stand also concerns the form of an action and the limit of one's own action.

IV. Ritual correctness does not establish humanity

In the Analects passages read, questions about an attitude to rites and about mourning prevent outward performance from being treated as sufficient. Simplicity is compared with excessive ornament, and experiencing loss with ceremonial precision. This is not a general prohibition on complex rites. A narrower question matters in our contemporary scene: what substance does a form express, and what can it not prove? A smile and an observed procedure do not reliably establish either inward goodness or an absence of tension in a participant.

After the meeting, Anton can notice only what is visible: Vera did not get time to explain her limit. That is enough to correct the conversation's organisation. He need not prove that the gratitude was completely empty or require Vera to judge its sincerity. If discussion begins by condemning the whole person, the specific question readily disappears. The possibility of correcting one action does not depend on a final judgement of character. Acknowledging limited knowledge also does not require accepting the old arrangement until motives have been established.

Form itself requires assessment too. Publicly thanking a helper may express recognition, yet publicity can be uncomfortable for a particular person. We cannot conclude that, because a custom is considered respectful, declining it expresses ingratitude. Another setting can be offered, or the ceremony omitted. Changing a form today is our decision here, rather than a

reconstruction of ancient permission. Participants can discuss current conditions without having to prove that a historical teacher already approved their choice.

This does not mean that every preferred form is automatically worthy. A demand to hear no objections can also be called a personal convenience. We therefore retain the difference between limiting one's own participation and demanding control over everyone else's responses. Vera can decline a further shift; that does not determine everyone else's opinion of the library for them. Anton can propose a different arrangement; that does not create the group's agreement. Every form has an addressee, a subject and a limit to authority.

V. Shared order and the possibility of objection

The historical Confucian framework included distinctions of role and hierarchy. Calling it a ready-made design for an equal contemporary meeting would be inaccurate. Our own question begins where we decide which forms of participation are acceptable now. Respect for the historical subject lets us preserve this difference. We can learn to attend to action without accepting the whole social order of the past. We can also criticise pressure today without presenting that criticism as an ancient author's literal statement.

As meeting leader, Anton can announce the subject and keep track of time. His role does not yet entitle him to call Vera's decision disrespectful. Distinguishing a question from the way it is considered is particularly important. The group may need a clear timetable, but that need does not produce anyone's endless agreement. If there are too few participants, the actual outcome may be a reduced shared library. That is unpleasant, but more honest than a schedule built on promises that have yet to be obtained.

Order becomes more substantive when it allows its own error to be clarified. For example, Anton announced Vera's help for next month because he confused a previous arrangement with a new one. He can correct the announcement before its addressees. That does not require making Vera publicly prove that participation is impossible. What matters is returning to known content: which words were actually said and by whom. Correction does not guarantee that disappointment immediately disappears; it simply ends repetition of an inaccurate promise.

Where there is serious pressure, threats or dependency, an ordinary shared discussion may be unsuitable. The article does not suggest testing a coercive participant's humanity through one more concession. Actual safety and suitable support in the circumstances matter more. Historical respect for a role establishes no right to violence. Significant obligations and legal consequences are clarified separately; our example does not replace that work. A brief philosophical trial cannot serve as permission to leave actual harm unattended.

VI. Repeating form and revising it

A repeated form can remove the need to explain small actions from scratch each time. Participants know where to leave a book, how to report a delay and what counts as a completed handover. This convenience does not require strong feelings towards each participant. It provides an accessible way to cooperate. But a habit can outlast the conditions for which it arose. If fewer helpers remain, the old shift system no longer corresponds to actual resources. Repetition itself does not make the promises more achievable.

Revision starts with a question about function. What was the form meant to provide: safe books, known access times or freedom from constant shifts? Which goals remain, and which are no longer fulfilled? This discussion is more precise than an argument about who is insufficiently devoted to the shared project. It does not turn someone into an impersonal resource. Instead, it allows a limit to be named before a customary action starts being taken for granted as a service owed. Not every lost function must be restored at any cost.

One can preserve an outwardly similar form and change its conditions. Thanks remain, but a request for further participation is considered separately. Or the form can change entirely: books might temporarily be lent by prior arrangement instead of through regular shifts. Neither is presented as the sole philosophically correct answer. The choice depends on actual capabilities and participants' agreement. Historical attention to appropriateness is useful as a question, rather than a licence for a leader to declare their convenient approach compulsory for everyone else.

Who gets the work of revision matters too. If Vera reports exhaustion and immediately receives a duty to design a new schedule for everyone, her refusal has been converted into another task. Sometimes she is willing to help solve it; sometimes she is not. This needs to be established separately. The right to raise a question does not automatically impose a duty to fix the entire system alone. Shared order may involve shared tasks, but distributing those tasks also requires known agreement, rather than a moral assumption on another's behalf.

The revised arrangement should be described to those affected without disclosing Vera's personal circumstances on her behalf. The group may only need to know that shifts are less frequent and help at the previous level has not been obtained. Why someone limited their involvement is not always a shared subject. This is our contemporary boundary for handling information, rather than an assertion about ancient practice. It allows a timetable to be corrected without turning another's explanation into a public story. A precise form of communication here supports both action and a limit to one's own knowledge.

VII. Sincerity without a demand to disclose

In Giles's historical exposition, sincerity appears alongside religious ideas and divination. We do not use it as a promise of foreseeing events or recognising hidden truth. A contemporary conversation needs only a narrower demand: not declaring something agreed when it is not, and not presenting what is known as unknown. This is our editorial boundary. It provides no access to another's inner state and cannot establish someone's sincerity through a single successful response at a meeting.

Anton can honestly say that he hoped for the old amount of help and has not thought of another solution. Vera can state only that she is no longer ready to promise that amount. She need not submit evidence for every reason. Incomplete information is not always deception; sometimes it is an acceptable limit to disclosure. What matters more is avoiding filling the unknown with a convenient moral story. A missing explanation gives no grounds to assert that refusal stems from contempt for people or rejection of every responsibility.

A personal boundary nevertheless does not erase a particular undertaking already accepted. If Vera took books home for storage, an available way of transferring them needs to be clarified separately. That need not mean returning to weekly shifts. Separating the subjects helps avoid two extremes: demanding the whole previous involvement because one task is unfinished, or declaring every task gone after a wish changes. The article does not establish participants' obligations; it proposes more precisely naming what actually requires factual clarification.

After the conversation, it may remain unknown how the relationship has changed. This uncertainty need not urgently be filled with another ritual of mutual reassurance. One can know only that a new timetable has not been promised, books will be handed over separately and another conversation will happen if needed. This modest outcome is no less real for appearing less ceremonial. Form becomes substantive when it can accommodate limited knowledge. It stops requiring a beautiful ending that is not yet present in the participants' actual relationship.

If Vera preferred a separate conversation, two incompatible promises need not exist. A personal setting can be retained while the necessary outcome is communicated to the group to an agreed extent. Separate time allows a free answer, rather than secretly allocating duties for absent people. Thus the privacy of an explanation differs from a shared task being known. Humanity does not mean that everyone must know everything; substantive form does not mean that nothing important can be communicated. Our example needs only a distinction among the decision obtained, its addressees and the reasons that remain personal.

VIII. Comparison without an overall verdict on traditions

The sources we read do not themselves speak with one voice. Received teaching explores the moral substance of a rite; an early twentieth-century historian offers his own broad assessment of Chinese teachings. Questions can be compared while preserving differences of genre and time. Giles's authorial generalisation is not evidence that the whole of Confucian life was exclusively secular. His opposition to neighbouring traditions likewise gives no right to declare them unsuitable for ordinary life. We take a limited subject, rather than a ready-made cultural hierarchy.

The neighbouring topic of human nature asks a different question: what is given to a person, and how does moral development arise? Here we do not need to resolve the Mencius–Xunzi dispute through one action of Anton's. Whatever theory is chosen, an accessible meeting question remains: could another person name a limit, and did the promise change? This application does not abolish the philosophical disagreement. It simply need not use it to explain every refusal or finally judge someone known incompletely.

One can also see a connection with karma-yoga in distinguishing action from desired recognition, but the grounds are not identical. In our Confucian reading, attention concerns the substance of relationships and form; in the selected religious karma-yoga framework, liberation is an essential goal. Thanks for help concern both discussions, yet a shared example does not create one doctrine. The contemporary comparison remains our question, rather than historical evidence of influence or proof that every wise tradition agrees.

The connections table at the end therefore is not a set of authorities for one decision. It shows which questions touch and where comparison ends. A reader can choose their own subject of inquiry and decline the proposed analogy. The right to disagree matters in relation to this article as well. If a text about humanity demands one correct feeling or an inevitable shared conversation from its reader, it repeats our scene's difficulty: respectful form starts directing another person's participation.

IX. A small correction instead of a moral title

After the meeting, Anton can take one limited action: clarify that the thanks concerned past help and that Vera's future participation has not been agreed. This does not establish his virtue or oblige Vera immediately to feel relieved. But the known content changes. The group no longer relies on a promise that did not exist. A small correction has value of its own without a demand to reward it with recognition. It may or may not be noticed; the result is not reduced to other people's pleasant reaction.

Vera likewise need not determine whether the entire meeting expressed humanity. She can assess one subject: is her participation clearer, is any task unfinished, and is she willing to discuss something new? Some questions need time; others can be left without a final answer. The trial does not prescribe continued contact for the sake of a complete story. In danger or coercion it has no priority over protection. Philosophical interest does not create a duty to remain where refusal is punished.

Distinguishing ren and li sustains a double attention. Form helps an attitude become manifest; an attitude raises a question about form's substance. Removing either side impoverishes action. Inward feeling alone can remain inaccessible, while outward correctness alone can hide an unresolved subject. But joining two terms does not provide a ready criterion for every case. We still need to know actual conditions, recognise the limits of our knowledge and avoid making historical language permission to promise on someone else's behalf.

The neighbours' meeting may end with a reduced schedule and a lack of unanimity. That ending is allowed. A more substantive form need not produce a smooth shared picture. Sometimes it first makes visible that resources are limited, opinions differ and further participation has not been obtained. Humanity in our limited application begins with taking this reality seriously. It does not replace it with words of thanks. Form remains necessary precisely because people have to act alongside one another while retaining different decisions.

What this means in practice

If quiet reflection fits, choose one small repeated gesture: thanks, a request or ending a meeting. What should it express? Which subsequent action is considered agreed? Can a limit be named without publicly explaining an entire life? This is a voluntary editorial trial, rather than a tested method or examination of a moral state. It can be done mentally, skipped or left aside; there is no need to show a record to anyone else.

Separate what is known from what is assumed. Who actually agreed, to which subject and under what conditions? What do you merely hope to receive? If a promise made for someone else is discovered, it can be corrected where it was communicated. Do not demand thanks for the correction or declare the relationship restored. A known outcome may be smaller: an inaccurate expectation is no longer repeated while an important question remains open.

Choose only a feasible action of your own. You can clarify the subject of the next request, offer separate time to answer or reconsider the size of a shared task. Significant obligations and consequences are clarified separately. Under threats, coercion or risk, a further shared trial is not prescribed: safety and suitable support matter more. Language about ritual does not oblige acceptance of humiliation, and language about humanity does not make someone's resources infinite.

After the trial, note facts and uncertainty. Did a promise change, did a handover become clearer, and did you receive an answer? Do not explain an absent answer for someone else. Agreement, closeness, a good feeling and continued participation are not guaranteed. A precise limit to your own new promise can be enough. Ren and li help raise a question about action here; they neither certify your character nor give a final verdict on another's.

Key quotation

> *"A practical system for everyday use."*

Herbert Allen Giles, Religions of Ancient China, opening of Chapter III. A short fragment of his authorial description of Confucianism. This is the voice of a historian writing in 1906. In adjoining sentences he assesses Taoism and compares Chinese ethics with Christianity; we do not accept these broad assessments as an overall conclusion. Source.

Connections between traditions

Line	Shared question and limit of comparison
Ren ↔ li	Attitude and the form of an action are considered together. Translating two terms does not exhaust their historical meanings.
Analects ↔ Giles 1906	Ordinary moral life matters to the reading. Received teaching is not a subsequent author's judgement of the entire tradition.
Confucian form ↔ a contemporary meeting	Respect needs discernible action. Contemporary agreement is not attributed to an ancient hierarchy.
Ren and li ↔ the dispute about nature	Moral work remains significant. One action does not resolve the Mencius–Xunzi disagreement.
The form of thanks ↔ karma-yoga	What was done can be distinguished from desired recognition. Religious liberation is not identical with the Confucian substance of relationships.

Primary sources

1. Herbert Allen Giles. Religions of Ancient China. First edition, Constable, London, 1906; Project Gutenberg transcription no.2330 includes a note about the 1918 printing. The selected ending of I on rites, sincerity and divination, the whole of II and the opening of III were read. Both quotations belong to the historian's own exposition; embedded canonical words are not quoted. His cultural and religious hierarchies are not accepted as contemporary norms. International permission for every operation has not been established.

2. Confucius. The Sayings of Confucius, translated by Lionel Giles. Historical 1910 collection, Individual Virtue: selected teachings about humanity, rites and mourning, with notes. The indicated contexts were read; the whole collection is not claimed as read. The Analects is used in bounded paraphrase, without a new direct quotation or an assumption that another translation creates another budget for the same work.

Tags

ren, li, humanity, Confucius, Analects, Confucianism, Chinese philosophy, ritual, form of action, respect, sincerity, gratitude, agreement, refusal, role, hierarchy, order, custom, repetition, appropriateness, revision, promise, action, attention, limited knowledge, correction, responsibility, resources, voluntary participation, historical reading, Herbert Giles, Lionel Giles

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