

Ren: An Ancient Virtue Practiced in a Modern World

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I fundamentally believe that it is important to show love and kindness to others. From very early on in my life, I've learned that showing kindness usually fosters positive relationships with others and brings great pleasure to myself. I noticed that when I was shown kindness, my day and overall mood were improved and so I always wanted to return that feeling to others. Also, I was raised by a mother who showed amazing love and sacrifice towards me, so her actions cemented the importance of loving others. Though I always knew that love and kindness were virtues, I never knew that there was a formal name that married the two practices together; its name is Ren.

The concept of Ren derives from Confucianism—which was founded around 500 B.C.E—and is defined by benevolence and love (“Religion Library: Confucianism”). To practice Ren as a virtue is a very high calling because humanness, charity, altruism and compassion are also weaved into the fabric of its definition. In Confucianism, Ren could be simply translated as “perfect virtue” because it incorporates so many smaller virtues into one large concept. Confucius believed that an ideal government was one of Ren, because it would take the needs of its citizens into account and deter crime (“The Confucian Concept of Ren Philosophy Essay”).

I chose to reflect on Ren because I make a conscious effort to practice Ren daily. As a Christian, the virtue of love (and benevolence) is one of the most important aspects of my morality. In fact, Jesus Christ himself commands that second to loving God, “[t]hou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these” (King James Bible, Mark 12.31). It's not very easy to always love your neighbor as yourself, but it's extremely important to adhere to as a follower of Christ. Jesus Christ commands Christians to love their neighbors because there is absolutely no evil that can come from acting with love and kindness. The Bible characterizes love as “patient [and] kind. It does not envy it does not boast,

it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” (New International Bible, 1 Cor. 13.4-8). There’s a lot to be gained from living a life of Ren. For the Christian, love, or Ren, is more than just a fuzzy feeling or a nice thing to do, it is a duty.

My personal practice of Ren is showing kindness to strangers and friends. I always try to make someone’s day a little bit easier or pleasant whether it’s holding the door open for the person entering behind me, giving my seat up for the pregnant or elderly or just giving someone a smile. I always try to demonstrate to my friends and family how much I love them with hugs and kisses and gestures of appreciation. Ren has also led me to have a deep care for anyone who is on the frays of society. In middle school, there were two young men in particular I remember practicing Ren towards. One was a boy named Asha who was mentally and physically challenged. He used to sit in his wheelchair in the furthest left-hand corner of the school cafeteria, right by the lunch line. Students would line up every day to get lunch and never look at him or acknowledge him. He would never make eye contact with anyone. It was as if he hoped to just blend in with the green walls behind him. I chose not to be another kid who ignored him. Every day I would smile and wave at him. I learned his name and I would ask him about his day. After I got my lunch, I would say goodbye to him and tell him I looked forward to seeing him again. Through kindness, he came alive. Asha was actually quite an expressive person with a lot to say, he just needed someone to care. Once he was shown kindness, his confidence started to grow and he started to make friends.

During the same lunch period, there was another boy named Derrick. He had very severe eczema and he would sit alone and play cards with himself. I would sit near him with my friends

and noticed him all by himself. I soon learned his name and spent my lunch breaks talking to him. He was shy, but when I showed him kindness, he opened right up. Not too long after I met Derrick, he changed schools and I didn't see him for quite some time. About five years later, I ran into him in a local park. I remembered him; I never thought he'd remember me but he did. When he saw me, he gave me the biggest hug and introduced me to the friends he was with. He told me that he would never forget the girl during lunch who was so nice to him. To this day, I still run into Derrick sometimes on my way to school or work and we always catch up. I consider him a friend and he considers me one too. Showing Ren to others is deeply rewarding. It's a blessing to the recipient because they experience love and kindness which is always amazing to receive. It's a blessing to the giver because it feels good to give love and it positively impacts people. Ren is an important virtue because kindness and love lead to the practice of a lot of other virtues. When people are loved, they feel more compelled to give love to others.

I struggle with practicing Ren all the time. It's not easy because Ren is a state of showing love, kindness and care for everyone. Sometimes it's scary to practice Ren. New York City has a high quantity of homeless people. There are many times I buy homeless people meals, or smile and chat with them because I feel they deserve kindness. However, it's scary sometimes because you never know if the person is mentally unstable or dangerous. Thankfully, I've never been in a dangerous scenario due to the kindness I've shown a homeless person. Ren is also hard to practice with people you know, because people can hurt your feelings. I have had friends in the past who I've showed kindness to that completely burned me. I had a best friend once who would verbally accost me on her various social media platforms whenever she was mad at me. Naturally, we drifted apart but I still made it a point to treat her with kindness whenever I saw her or interacted with her. That's because I realized that "[R]en makes humanity the first

priority... the priority of humanity is toward improving the self's human character, as opposed to improving, say, the self's meals, lodging, financial or physical security, or prestige... [T]his concern to improve the self's moral character is prior to any goal of improving the character of others" (Rudebusch, 462). Therefore, I practice Ren not because it's easy, but simply because it's right.

It is very obvious that Ren is a quality greatly missing from this largely self-centered society. Love and benevolence have been digitized into Facebook and Instagram likes and Twitter follows. People have their faces in their phones instead of engaging with those around them. The lack of Ren is seen in governments across the world. American government is always seeking to cut funding for programs that help those in need like food stamps and welfare. Leaders like Bashar al-Assad of Syria are bombing and attacking their own people. Surely Confucius would turn in his grave. Ren is important to be practiced because humans "want to be loved, and in being loved, to be valued, and in being valued, to be regarded as special" (Velleman, 366). I chose to actively practice the virtue of Ren not only because my God commands it, but also because it helps to make the world I live in a better place. If I want to live in a world where Ren goes around, it has to start with me.

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