

2.10 (Part 2) Discourse and performance

Recall the problem raised by the doctrine of rectifying names: how do we know that we are correctly interpreting the **discourse dao** rightly and so **performing** it correctly in each new situation? How do we know that we are adhering to the **禮 lǐ (ritual)** (and social conventions in general) in the proper manner? In the previous lecture, we identified the Confucian concept of 仁 **rén** as a possible solution to the problem: the idea was that we could rely on our 仁 **rén**, our intuition, to guide us on how to apply the discourse dao in each new situation.

Problem with the appeal to 仁 rén

The problem with this solution becomes apparent once we pose the simple question:

Which is more fundamental, 仁 rén or 禮 lǐ (ritual)?

Confucius himself seems to waver over which is more important. In Analects 3:3, Confucius clearly suggests 仁 **rén** is more important. He writes,

人而不仁，如禮何？人而不仁，如樂何？

Humans who did not use 仁 rén, what would become of 禮 lǐ (ritual)?

Humans who did not use 仁 rén, what would become of music?

- Suppose, then, we go ahead and take 仁 **rén** as fundamental.

Then we can say that 仁 **rén** will give us a **guiding intuition** for each different situation, solving the problem of bridging the gap between discourse dao and performance dao. But if 仁 **rén** gives us a guiding intuition for each situation, then why do we need 禮 lǐ (ritual) at all? Why not simply follow our moral intuitions to guide behavior?

And indeed, that's the direction one wing of Confucianism takes (e.g., Mencius, Wang Yangming).

"I can just follow my heart's intuition, my 仁 **rén**, no need to look at the classics at all. I don't need any authority, my heart will tell me what is the right thing to do."

- What's the alternative? Suppose we instead take 禮 lǐ (ritual) as fundamental.

That is the direction the other wing of Confucianism takes: retaining 禮 lǐ (ritual) as essential.

"No, your intuition, your 仁 **rén**, must be built by years of practice and learning 禮 lǐ (ritual) in the right way. Practice it with the right teacher in the right way and learn all the lessons correctly. Otherwise you're going to have a bad intuitive sense."

But if we go this way, then we're stuck with same old problems: How do we know that 禮 lǐ (ritual) has been transmitted to us correctly? What if our teachers disagree? How did *they* learn the lessons correctly?...

We'll leave Confucius here, but this **problem of rectifying names** is going to come up again in various forms throughout the rest of the course, raising issues for the other classical Chinese philosophers as well.