

2.10 (Part 1) Discourse and performance

The **rectification of names** issue reveals that there is a **gap** between...

discourse dao

guidance-containing words

Like a poem, a play, a symphony.

Descriptions of 禮 **lǐ** (rituals) and social conventions.

You learn from reading, watching others.

... and...

performance dao

our behavioral interpretation of guiding words

Like the reading of a poem, the performance of a play.

The carrying out of 禮 **lǐ** (rituals) and social conventions.

You apply your knowledge in new circumstances.

But if you don't read the discourse dao rightly (if names aren't rectified), then you'll get the performance wrong (normative guidance fails).

What's the solution?



The Confucian classic 中庸 (Doctrine of the Mean) contains the famous line: 仁者人也 which means:

Those who are 仁 **rén** are human (人 **rén**).

仁 **rén** is often translated as “compassion”, “kindness”, “goodness”, or sometimes “**humanity**” (which preserves the association with being human and being concerned with others). But 仁 **rén** is also an **intuitive capacity** to catch on, to learn language and to continue to produce that language correctly. This capacity is fairly obscure in Confucius. He treats it quite often as a goal, but never defines it. His disciples even complain that he spoke so little about it, and when they ask him, he often just walks away and somebody else tries to come up with an answer for them.

We can think of 仁 **rén** as a way to bridge the gap between **discourse dao** and **performance dao**. First let's view the gap in terms of **two puzzles** that arise regarding the use of 禮 **lǐ** (ritual) as guidance. These are:

1. We have a whole structure of **guidance** that depends on the **transmission** of 禮 **lǐ** (ritual) from teacher to student. But how do we know that our teacher's teachers correctly transmitted it to them? How do we know there was no **distortion** of 禮 **lǐ** (ritual) in the entire course of transmission?
2. Even if we could trace the 禮 **lǐ** (ritual) transmission all the way back to the **sages**, no one transmitted to the 禮 **lǐ** (ritual) sage kings. How did they get morality without transmission?

The answer that 仁 **rén** can provides to each of these questions is:

1. We know that there was no distortion because our teachers, being human beings with 仁 **rén**, had an **intuitive capacity** to catch on and correctly learn and transmit the 禮 **lǐ** (ritual) to us.
2. The sages, being human beings, also had 仁 **rén**, an **intuitive capacity** to know what is right, and their invention of 禮 **lǐ** (ritual) simply expressed the behavior their 仁 **rén** guided them to.

So 仁 **rén** offers an answer to these key problems in a ritual morality. We can have confidence that we will correctly interpret the **discourse dao** and bridge the gap to the **performance dao**, because we have 仁 **rén**, the intuitive capacity to correctly catch on to (or re-invent) the proper use of language and ritual.