

How Care is the Central Notion for Virtue

Chenyang Li and Zhu Xi on the Relationship Between Care and Comprehensive Virtue

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I. Introduction

Chenyang Li's *Reshaping Confucianism* is a distillation of the many admirable qualities that have come to define his life's work. It is in turns thoughtful and inspiring, and represents a sincere and heartfelt attempt to both capture the living essence of Confucianism and provide a viable ethical and political framework for the present day. Among the many important sides of his particular *shape* or variant of Confucianism, one that stands out has to do with the ethical significance or importance of care. His claim that care is a central feature or value of Confucian virtue also represents a running thread or theme that dates back to some of his earliest and most influential writings. Li first defended a care-centered reading of Confucian virtue in his 1994 paper, "The Confucian Concept of *Jen* [*Ren*] and the Feminist Ethics of Care" (Li 1994). On my reading of the work that he has published since then, he has continued to revise and refine his views in response to critics of that original paper, and now the second chapter of his most recent book, titled "Care-Centered Virtue," represents the most compelling and carefully formulated version of his view.¹ Li presents his account as a way of explaining the somewhat slippery semantics of the Confucian term *ren* 仁, variously translated as "benevolence," "humanity," "humaneness," or "Goodness."

The basic problem that he addresses is this: in the texts that have come to comprise the Confucian canon, *ren* is often used to refer to a virtue or state of good character, but as a characterological term, it seems to have both specific and broad senses. The specific sense of *ren* takes it as the virtue of caring or – as Li puts it – "tender concern" for others (Li 2024: 62). This is the sort of virtue that we display when acting out of compassion for the suffering of others, or in nurturing or protecting loved ones. The broader sense is somewhat more difficult to characterize, but most interpreters agree with Li that at the very least, *ren* in the broad sense refers to a *comprehensive* virtue. As a comprehensive virtue, it "encompasses other specific virtues" (Li 2024: 61). For example, if Lanfen is *ren* in the broad or comprehensive sense, it follows that she must also be courageous, ritually proper, righteous, wise, and so on. Or maybe it follows that she will have or instantiate each of these other, specific virtues in the right circumstances and to the right degree. But the most interesting part of this story is that for the Kongzi (Confucius) of the *Analects*, at least, the specific and broad senses of *ren* are linked. Although *ren* in the broad sense means or refers to comprehensive virtue, Kongzi nevertheless thinks that comprehensive virtue has *ren* in the sense of care or tender concern at its center. In Li's second chapter, he goes to some lengths to explain how *ren* as the virtue of good caring is at the center of *ren* as comprehensive virtue.

A little reflection on the problem shows why this issue is both difficult and yet important. First, it seems to suggest that other specific virtues like courage and ritual propriety have some meaningful relationship to virtuous caring, and it is not entirely obvious what that relationship

¹ Li 2024: 53-74. For a summary of notable criticisms and Li's responses, see Li 2022. As an aside, I can't help but admire philosophers who are so willing to accept criticism and revise their positions as Li is.

should be (does courage draw on caring motives?). But there's a second challenge that I find even more formidable: comprehensive virtue depends on caring, to be sure, but it depends on other virtues too – for example, one cannot be comprehensively virtuous without also being courageous or ritually proper. In virtue of what, exactly, is care *more* central than these other virtues? Finally, Confucian philosophers will often point to ways in which various specific virtues must necessarily be co-instantiated, at least in specific cases – for example, the highest forms of benevolence (virtuous caring) necessarily show the sort of respect that is embodied or expressed by ritual propriety. Sharing food generously with one's guests but doing so in ways that are disrespectful or rude can for that very reason be less-than-ideal caring. Given that instantiating many specific virtues seems to require that one also instantiate many other specific virtues, we can rightly wonder whether it makes sense to single out just one of them – virtuous caring – as being more central than the others.

I am inclined to agree with Li that – at least according to an important line of thought about *ren* in historical Confucianism – comprehensive virtue is in some important sense care-centered. In order to spell out this claim more clearly and rigorously, I would like to build on Li's argument by incorporating comments on this very issue from Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130-1200), the 12th-century “Neo-Confucian” or “Song Confucian” philosopher who came to define Confucian orthodoxy for several centuries. By the time Zhu Xi lived and wrote, the quandary about *ren*'s specific and broad senses was well established and an object of considerable speculation and debate. Zhu offers some interesting metaphors to capture the specific sense in which care is more fundamental or central for comprehensive virtue than are the other specific virtues like righteousness or ritual propriety. In this article, I will offer an analysis of Zhu Xi's solution that helps to fill out Li's argument for taking comprehensive Confucian virtue to be care-centered, one that is both faithful to later Confucian philosophers like Zhu Xi and plausible in its own right.

In the next two sections (sections II and III), I will restate and raise some questions about Li's case for treating comprehensive virtue as care-centered. Although I share Li's view in broad contours, I will suggest that more argument is needed to make the view coherent and plausible. I propose that we can use Zhu Xi's insights to fill in some of the lacunae in his arguments, thereby providing us with a rich and multi-dimensional notion of care-centeredness. The two following sections will build on Li's way of breaking down the analysis of care-centeredness, which he groups together under two general claims: that comprehensive virtue is “rooted in care” (roughly, it has a certain historical connection to the notion of *ren* as virtuous caring) and that it is “anchored in care” (roughly, it is grounded in virtuous caring).

II. Rooted in care

Let me start by establishing some presuppositions and parameters for this study. There are various ways of “specifying virtues” or distinguishing between specific virtues. Sometimes, we distinguish between them by characteristic *domains of action* – for example, charity is a virtue concerned with giving or withholding resources to people in need, honesty is sometimes characterized as a virtue concerned with speaking truthfully and keeping promises, and so on. More often, in the Confucian tradition, virtues are distinguished by characteristic *sources of motivation*. For example, Mengzi describes benevolence as the virtue motivated by care, compassion, or kindness, and he describes righteousness (*yi* 義) as the virtue motivated by a sense of shame or a reluctance to debase oneself (Van Norden 2007: 247-70). Each way of specifying virtues has implications for the other. For example, since compassion is the ethically salient motive in giving and withholding resources from those in need, charity will often be

motivated by compassion, even if we see the domain of action as the primary determinant. Nevertheless, however we may want specify the virtues, we can distinguish between *specific* and *comprehensive* ethical virtue by saying that the comprehensive virtue term can be correctly ascribed no matter what domains of ethical action or motives (etc.) it pertains to. So, for example, when the *Analects* uses *ren* to describe someone who takes good care of family members, the vulnerable, or has concern for the well-being of their subjects, the fact these behaviors are characteristically motivated by care is good evidence that they are talking about *ren* in the narrow sense. When the text uses *ren* to refer to a virtue that we should strive to instantiate in cases that don't in any obvious way call for care, compassion, or protecting and promoting the interests of people in need, that is a reasonably good indication that it is being used as a term for comprehensive virtue. For example, Li points to *Analects* 14.4, where Kongzi says that a person of *ren* will invariably be courageous but a courageous person will not necessarily be *ren* (Li 2024: 66). Since this passage doesn't appear to describe characteristic traits or behaviors normally associated with caring or benevolence, this suggests that Kongzi has in mind *ren* as a comprehensive virtue. Furthermore, we can follow Li in adding that the comprehensive virtue must be capable of harmonizing the other virtues (Li 2024: 61). In that case, when the *Analects* suggests that *ren* is the virtue which positions us to strike the right balance between specific virtues or harmoniously blend certain moral values or demands that would otherwise compete with care, that too would be good evidence that it is invoking *ren* in the sense of comprehensive virtue.

On Li's plausible historical account, the early inspiration for the Confucian idea that comprehensive virtue is care-centered comes from the *Analects*. In that foundational text, Kongzi both seems to be aware of the two senses of *ren* (broad and narrow) and also to see important connections between care and comprehensive virtue. For my part, I think many (Neo-)Confucians of the Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing are also good sources, insofar as they were committed to the idea that *ren* in the sense of comprehensive virtue had important connections to care and explicitly theorized about those connections. My focus will be on Zhu Xi, but I should note that many other later Confucians were interested in roughly the same problem and sought out frameworks to explain the relations care and comprehensive virtue, including the Cheng brothers (Song dynasty) and Dai Zhen (Qing dynasty).² However, some of the impetus for their theorizing about the relations came from a desire to read the *Analects* and the *Mengzi* (*Mencius*) as having consistent theories of virtue. Because these later Confucians believed that Kongzi and Mengzi were on the same page about virtue theory, they wanted to read *ren* in the narrow sense (presupposed regularly by Mengzi and sometimes by Kongzi) as having a special connection to *ren* as a comprehensive virtue (as presupposed by Kongzi). For my part, I think there is little compelling evidence that Mengzi – like Kongzi in the *Analects* – also saw *ren* as a comprehensive virtue.³ So my focus will be on Kongzi in the *Analects* and on the parts of Zhu Xi's works that reflect or build on Kongzi's view.

Li proposes that *ren* as comprehensive virtue is “care-centered” in two senses, which he describes in terms of “rooting” and “anchoring.”

² For representative discussions by the Cheng brothers, see *Henan Chengshi yishu* 河南程氏遺書 2A.12 (*juan* 第二上, section/paragraph 12), 2A.28, 2A.109, 2A.129, 15.90, and 15.173 in Cheng and Cheng (1981). For Dai Zhen's account, see *Mengzi ziyi shuzheng* 孟子字義疏證, section 36, in Dai (2009). For English translations, see Cheng and Cheng (forthcoming) and Dai (1990).

³ Some of Mengzi's remarks about *ren* that leave this question open, but in those passages where he does indicate an answer, he usually depicts *ren* as one virtue alongside others, with its own characteristic and distinctive sources or domains. For example, see *Mengzi* 2A6, 4A27, and 6A6.

Confucian *ren* in its broad sense as a comprehensive virtue is rooted in care and anchored on care. By “rooted” I mean that *ren* as a comprehensive virtue historically grew out of *ren* as a specific virtue of care; by “anchored” I mean that various dimensions of *ren* as a comprehensive virtue are still grounded on *ren* as a specific virtue of care. (Li 2024: 62)

Li elaborates on what he means by the first of these two ways of centering virtue on care – “rooting” – later in the chapter: “This [caring] aspect of *ren* is inherited by Kongzi in his transformation of the concept from a specific virtue to a comprehensive virtue” (Li 2024: 66). Let us look at rooting first, and then turn to anchoring.

I think Li would agree that rooting points to a feature of comprehensive Confucian virtue that is historically important but – taken on its own – has somewhat ambiguous implications for the care-centeredness of comprehensive virtue as such. Sometimes a new historical iteration can retain important elements of the older historical iteration, and sometimes not. Christianity quite arguably grew out of Judaism and retained important features of Judaism (e.g., both are centered on belief in a single creator-God). In contrast, popular libertarianism in 21st-century America arguably grew out of the European Enlightenment, but the European Enlightenment was just an important historical force that shaped it along the way, and it is not obvious that popular libertarianism retains significant features from its Enlightenment roots. Many present-day libertarians are quite religious and skeptical about the natural sciences and the capacity of intellectuals to solve social problems. Similarly, the fact that one concept grows out of another does not necessarily make the former central to the latter in a meaningful sense.

Perhaps, however, there are ways of making the particular historical connection that Li has in mind stronger and more meaningful. For example, maybe *ren* in the comprehensive sense is connected to *ren* in the narrow sense as something like a natural outgrowth of the very same underlying dispositions and capacities of judgment. If that is the case, it is more likely that the later historical iteration will retain important features of the earlier one. I take this to be roughly how Michael Slote argues that public-minded and political virtues such as justice and tolerance are actually care-based and not based on entirely different sorts of value or character traits. As Slote sees it, political virtues are just more refined and sophisticated virtues of caring, not virtues that draw on different emotions or capacities of moral judgment altogether (Slote 2007: 67-103). Slote’s move is controversial, and it would take us far afield to discuss and assess its advantages and disadvantages here, but I mention it as one possible way of clarifying or strengthening the argument that comprehensive virtue is care-centered by being rooted in care.

III. Anchored on care

Li’s second way of putting care at the center of Confucian virtue is “anchoring.” Here are his remarks on this relation: “by ‘anchored,’ I mean that various dimensions of *ren* as a comprehensive virtue are still grounded on *ren* as a specific virtue of care” (Li 2024: 62). He also elaborates as follows: “[A]fter Kongzi’s transformation [of *ren* into a comprehensive virtue], care remains at the core of the broad concept, providing a foundational sense for the concept, to the extent that we can say *ren* as a comprehensive virtue is anchored on care” (Li 2024: 66). On Li’s account, then, anchoring *ren* as comprehensive virtue in care both “grounds” and “provides a foundational sense for” the concept of *ren* in care. Maybe I’ve been ruined by too many years of overly precise analytic philosophy, but I find it a bit difficult to wrap my mind around anchoring so described, and yet anchoring does seem like a promising way of

explaining the care-centeredness of virtue, and it seems importantly different from taking care as an historical root or origin. Let us look more closely at the details.

Li says that care “provides a foundational sense for” the concept of *ren* as comprehensive virtue. Perhaps the basic idea here is something like this: in order to get a sense of what virtue *is*, and to have even minimally good judgment in determining whether a virtue can rightly be ascribed to particular people or characteristics, one must know the basic aims or characteristic functions that virtues as a whole are supposed to serve. If we don’t at least know that, we will just be emptily waving our hands at concepts too lacking in content to count as minimally intelligible or meaningful, and we won’t even know how to begin determining whether this friend’s behavior or that historical person’s great sacrifice counts as virtuous in the well-rounded sense or not. Just as someone must have a sense of what music is in order to be able to distinguish music from other things that are pleasant to listen to, so too must one have some understanding of caring (for others) in order to be able to distinguish virtues from other admirable traits or excellences. Similarly, by specifying that care provides a foundational sense for *ren*, we have at least some idea of what distinguishes comprehensive virtue from other ways of life or clusters of character traits.⁴

This way of spelling out the care-centeredness of *ren* (as “providing a foundational sense”) has a counterpart in the later Confucian tradition. Beginning at the very least with the Cheng brothers in the 11th century (Cheng Hao 程顥, 1032-1085 and Cheng Yi 程頤, 1033-1107), it became something of a commonplace among Neo-Confucians to say that *ren* in the narrow sense of care is closely associated with the inclination to live, grow, and reproduce – that is, it is closely associated with the “life impulse” (*shengyi* 生意), which in various ways informs all of the other virtues. The Cheng brothers suggest that we can get a feel for *ren* by recalling the feelings that we have in the springtime, when the world is renewing and plants and animals are sprouting up or being born (and perhaps when love is in the air).⁵ On my interpretation of the later Confucians (Neo-Confucians), many take the Chinese character that refers to life, growth, and reproduction (*sheng* 生) as a shorthand for the well-being or flourishing of living things.⁶ So some sense of what it is to be concerned for the well-being or flourishing of living things is necessary to have a minimal grasp of comprehensive virtue.

So far, we have been thinking about care as providing a solution to a certain epistemic problem – namely, the problem of establishing a sense of what counts as comprehensive virtue, which presumably is necessary to identify examples or approximations of comprehensive virtue and begin working to instantiate it in our own lives. But Li says more about anchoring. He says that the sense of care should be “foundational,” and that care “remains at the core of” the comprehensive concept of virtue (Li 2024: 66). What do these things mean? Let me suggest one way of spelling out the idea that care is “core” (or “central”) which comes largely from Zhu Xi. Zhu proposes that in key respects, the way that *ren* in the narrow sense (as caring for life, the life impulse) is fundamental for other virtues is analogous to the way that the season for the spring is fundamental for other seasons. Here is his explanation:

⁴ In his discussion of competing interpretations of *ren*, Li worries that some are so reluctant to generalize or theorize about *ren* that they end up sound vacuous or even nihilistic, and give us too little guidance as to what specific traits or ways of life would actually count as *ren* ones (Li 2024: 54-60).

⁵ For example, see *Henan Chengshi yishu* 2A.109, 3.3, 3.96, 6.68 in Cheng and Cheng (1981 and forthcoming).

⁶ The *sheng*-based conception of flourishing has some resonances with Li’s own conception, I think. See especially chapter 7, “Virtuous Life and Longevity” (Li 2024: 157-71).

「仁」字須兼義禮智看，方看得出。仁者，仁之本體；禮者，仁之節文；義者，仁之斷制；知者，仁之分別。猶春夏秋冬雖不同，而同出於春：春則生意之生也，夏則生意之長也，秋則生意之成，冬則生意之藏也。

This character *ren* can only be fully understood by looking at it in conjunction with righteousness (*yi* 義), ritual propriety (*li* 禮), and wisdom (*zhi* 智). *Ren* is the fundamental essence or substance of *ren*. Ritual propriety is the regulation and adornment of *ren*. Righteousness is the decisive judgment and institutional structuring of *ren*. Wisdom is *ren*'s discernment of distinctive parts and differences. It's similar to how the spring, summer, autumn, and winter are all different seasons and yet issue from the spring: the spring is the birth of life impulses [*shengyi*], the summer is the growth of life impulses, the autumn is the completion of life impulses, and winter is the storing away of life impulses.⁷

This passage is suggestive of a number of interesting conceptual and psychological relations between *ren* as care and comprehensive virtue. For now, let us just focus on the primary analogy, which says that *ren* is foundational for the other virtues and roughly the way that the spring is foundational for the other seasons. At minimum, Zhu seems to be suggesting that the spring, as the source of life and life impulses, provides the larger aims and purposes which the other seasons subservise. By “larger aims and purposes” I do not mean their *direct* aims and purposes. For example, imagine a philanthropic organization whose primary aim is to provide medicines to people who cannot afford them, and imagine an accountant who is primarily responsible for the organization's payroll. The direct aims and purposes of the accountant will be things like projecting salary-related expenses, balancing books, and issuing paychecks, not providing medicines to people in need. But in some important sense, the larger aims and purposes of the philanthropy define the accountant's position and role, such that she is an accountant *in a philanthropic organization* and not some other sort of accountant (e.g., an accountant working for profit-seeking tax firm). Similarly, ritual propriety specifies certain role-specific ways of regulating and adorning deference to others, and yet it subserves the larger aims set out by virtuous caring (*ren* in the narrow sense as caring about the preservation, growth, and reproduction of living things). Even if the direct aims of the ritually proper person are to show respect or deference, it counts as a virtue insofar as it harmonizes with a larger whole, the purpose of which is to care for life. In a different passage, Zhu says that *ren* encompasses the other cardinal virtues much as the chief celestial minister in the palace (*tianguan zhongzai* 天官冢宰) encompasses the six traditional ministries. The chief celestial minister is just one minister among others, but he also “coordinates and unifies” (*tong* 統) all of the other principal officers and their ministries.⁸

Another way of unpacking the notion that comprehensive virtue is care-centered is to say that other virtues depend on virtuous caring in order to have ethical value. Without good caring, perhaps ritual proper and righteous behavior wouldn't be worthy of the names “ritual propriety” or “righteousness,” because they wouldn't have or express any ethical value. We see hints of this view already in the passage just provided, insofar as it implies that the activities associated with each season (growing life impulses in the summer, storing them away in the winter, etc.) depend upon the birth of life impulses in the spring to be worth the while. However,

⁷ *Zhuzi yulei* 朱子語類 5.75, in Zhu (1986). In this paper, I will cite the *Zhuzi yulei* by *juan* number and then the section/paragraph number within the relevant *juan*. So, for example, “5.75” indicates that the passage appears in the 75th paragraph of *juan* 5.

⁸ *Zhuzi yulei* 95.12.

there are many ways in which one virtue can depend upon others in order to have ethical value. Moreover, mere dependency of the other virtues of good caring doesn't suffice to make care the *central* virtue, because it might be the case that good caring also depends on the other virtues, so that the dependency relations run both ways (and no one of them is more central). For these reasons among others, I think it behooves us to be more specific about the kind of dependencies that Zhu Xi has in mind. In what follows, I will identify two sorts of dependency that strike me as particularly important. The first I will call "total" (as opposed to "partial") dependency, and the second I will call "motivational" dependency.

As I read Zhu, when he suggests that other cardinal virtues depend on *ren* in the narrow sense (*ren* as good or virtuous caring), he means to say that the other virtues would have *no ethical value at all* without care for life. This is to be contrasted with another sort of dependency relation, according to which the other virtues can have *some* value on their own, but can only have *full* or *complete* value insofar as they integrate the right sort of care. To see the difference, think of the value of "fair distribution": when there is some reward to be distributed (say, tasty foods among children who have just done their chores), there is some value in distributing it fairly – for example, according to some combination of merit and need and some norm of equal standing. But the ethical value of fair distribution depends on the reward itself being of some value. If a parent were just distributing something worthless like moldy scraps of paper, there is arguably no value in doing it fairly, and no sense at all in calling it "fair." This can be contrasted with the ways that care depends on other norms for its value. Arguably, acting out of compassion to help a person in need must take account of considerations of justice, ritual propriety, and wisdom in order to be a full or complete virtue. It would be odd to say that someone who gives to the needy is showing complete benevolence if she gives far too much to just one person, or doesn't do it with courtesy and respect. And yet, it is at least intuitive that the person who cares in ways that aren't regulated by justice or ritual propriety is still doing something of *some* ethical value. The interdependency of care and the other virtues is asymmetrical in these respects. And the asymmetry points to an important way in which comprehensive virtue is care-centered: care is necessary for the other specific virtues to have any value at all, but the reverse isn't true. When looking at it from the reverse direction, the other virtues are necessary to instantiate *full* or *complete* virtue, but caring by itself still has some ethical value.

There is not decisive evidence for my asymmetrical reading of the dependency relations in Zhu Xi, but there is some evidence. Most notably, there is evidence that Zhu Xi thinks the dependency of the other specific virtues on the virtue of care is total: the other (non-caring) virtues would have no ethical value at all – they wouldn't *be* virtues – without care. Here is Zhu:

如春夏秋冬，須看他四時界限，又卻看春如何包得三時。四時之氣，溫涼寒熱，涼與寒既不能生物，夏氣又熱，亦非生物之時。惟春氣溫厚，乃見天地生物之心。若春無生物之意，後面三時都無了。此仁所以包得義禮智也。

It is like the four seasons. One must see the divisions between the four seasons but also see how the spring encompasses the other three seasons. The *qi* of the four seasons varies from warm, to cool, to hot, to cold. When the *qi* is cool or cold then life is not produced. When the *qi* is hot in the summer, this too is not a time for producing life. The *qi* is warm and rich only in the spring, and only then can one witness the life-producing heart-mind of Heaven and Earth. ... If

the spring did not have the impulse to produce living things then the subsequent three seasons would not exist. This is the sense in which *ren* can encompass righteousness, ritual propriety, and wisdom.⁹

As I read this passage, Zhu is suggesting that the dependency of the other virtues (the virtues other than good caring) is total. Just as the other seasons (or the characteristic functions of the other seasons) wouldn't exist without the spring (and its characteristic function), so too the other virtues wouldn't exist without virtuous caring. Arguably, Zhu Xi is suggesting that the latter three virtues would have no ethical value at all if there were not some sort of impulse or intention to promote *sheng* (life, growth, and reproduction). For example, ritual propriety would have no value if it were just regulation and beautification of some other impulse – say, the impulse to establish clear social hierarchies or dominate other people, or the impulse to achieve nirvana and leave the living world behind. In any case, however we choose to spell out the claim in detail, the passage establishes one half of the asymmetry that I am tempted to find in care-centered Confucian ethics (that righteousness, ritual propriety, and wisdom would have no value at all without *ren* as virtuous care). I have not found a place where Zhu explicitly articulates the other half (the view that care can have some ethical value even without righteousness, ritual propriety, or wisdom). I do think that this is the most charitable way of reading Zhu (and also his best-known student, CHEN Chun 陳淳 1159-1223). Unfortunately, I do not have the space to substantiate this claim here.¹⁰

As I read Li, he is particularly interested in another way in which the other specific virtues are dependent on care, which we can characterize in broad terms as motivational dependency. For example, in *Analects* 4.3 Kongzi says that one must be *ren* in order to be truly capable of being fond of others or despising others. Li reads this as suggesting that “people who do not care” [about the well-being or interests of others] will not “bother to feel affinity and admiration toward good people nor disdain and contempt toward bad people” (Li 2024: 65). In explaining why the virtue of courage requires care, Li says, “[I]f one sufficiently cares about someone or something, she will summon enough courage to act on his or its behalf” (Li 2024: 66). That is, without the right kind of care, one will simply lack the motivation to be courageous or do courageous things.

Zhu Xi also suggests that the other three virtues are motivationally dependent on the virtue of care in the total sense, but he spells out this claim in a somewhat different way:

仁，便是箇溫和底意思；義，便是慘烈剛斷底意思；禮，便是宣著發揮底意思；智，便是箇收斂無痕跡底意思。性中有此四者，聖門卻只以求仁為急者，緣仁卻是四者之先。若常存得溫厚底意思在這裏，到宣著發揮時，便自然會宣著發揮；到剛斷時，便自然會剛斷；到收斂時，便自然會收斂。若將別箇做主，便都對副不著了。此仁之所以包四者也。」

Ren has the sense of warmth and gentleness. Righteousness has the sense of sternness and decisiveness. Ritual propriety has the sense of public display. Wisdom has the sense of exercising restraint without any outward signs. All four of these are in our nature, but the sages only regard the pursuit of *ren* as most urgent, for *ren* is the first among the four. If we constantly maintain the sense of warmth and gentleness within, then when it comes time to make a public

⁹ *Zhuzi yulei* 18.107; translation slightly modified from Angle and Tiwald 2017: 167.

¹⁰ For some discussion of Chen's complex view of the unity of the virtues, see Angle and Tiwald (2017: 164-66).

display [of ritual propriety] we can naturally display it publicly, when it comes time to be decisive we will naturally be decisive, and when it comes time to exercise restraint then we will naturally exercise restraint. If you put the other [virtuous feelings] in charge then they will no longer be able to work successfully with their counterparts. This is how *ren* encompasses all four.¹¹

Here, Zhu seems to set forth an account of motivational dependency similar to Li's, but with a twist. While Li's framework suggests that we just wouldn't have the motivation to be ritually proper or righteous without virtuous care, Zhu implies that we wouldn't *naturally* (*ziran*) take an interest in being ritually proper or righteous without virtuous care being "in charge." This leaves the door open to the possibility that we could motivate ourselves to be righteous or ritually proper without good caring being in charge, but that it would be forced and artificial, which points to other notable worries about cultivating good character traits. For example, it might be that forcing righteous or ritually proper behavior makes it insincere and less virtuous for that reason, or that forcing virtuous behaviors would cause those virtues to atrophy for lack of satisfaction or fulfillment.¹² Moreover, Zhu's comments suggest that the feeling of warmth and gentleness that comes with good caring plays some role in regulating or moderating the feelings that motivate righteousness, ritual propriety, and wisdom.

A final advantage of Zhu Xi's analysis addresses a worry that stalks many attempts to characterize the importance of care or caring attitudes for ethical values more broadly. The worry is this: "care" and its close equivalents (such as "*ai* 愛" in the classical Chinese sense), can be highly ambiguous terms, potentially covering everything from love of family to one's interest in making money (consider the statement, "He cares about the economic downturn in Lithuania because he has oil refineries there"). We could potentially construe "care" so permissively that it starts to look trivial and uninteresting that all virtues are care-centered. For example, we might read the phrase "care for Lanfen" as having just enough concern for Lanfen's welfare that one pays attention and has some mild urge or wistful thought that she be well. But when interpreted so minimally, it doesn't seem to say much of significance that all virtues are anchored on care. After all, most theories of the virtues presuppose that there is at least some motivation to pay attention to an ethically salient interest, and some motivation to defend or promote that interest when it's reasonable to do so. If we construe care too thinly, the thesis that all virtues are care-centered could turn out to be trivially true or true merely by the definition of virtue itself. After all, it's quite possible that *every* virtue is motivated by some ethically salient concern or other.¹³

Read charitably, both Li and Zhu want to rule out some of the thinnest or most trivial ways of construing "care." For example, I take both of them to see *ren* in the narrow sense as being an attitude toward living things, and one that takes their interests to have non-instrumental value. To count as care for Lithuanians in the relevantly ethical way, it can't just be in virtue of the fact that Lithuanian well-being brings about some other good (such as personal enrichment or the prosperity of one's cherished oil refineries) that one cares for them. Even with this caveat, however, a lesser version of the worry may still haunt the thesis that all virtues are care-centered. Imagine someone who is deeply concerned about the welfare of Lithuanian workers and sees their well-being as having some final or non-instrumental value, but whose care arose not by normal mechanisms (empathy, personal acquaintance with them

¹¹ *Zhuzi yulei* 5.77.

¹² For example, see *Mengzi* 2A2 and 4B19.

¹³ My thanks to Daniel A. Bell for pressing this useful and important objection.

or with people like them) but instead out of a commitment to an abstract ideology. Or, for a slightly different version of the worry, imagine someone who cares greatly about performing traditional rituals in ways that gratify or bring joy to others, but only insofar as their gratification and joy are consistent with the goals of the traditional rituals – any interests or personal goods that fall outside of the scope of those rituals are no matter to her. Depending on the details, a very wide range of theories or conceptions of virtue could turn out to be “care-centered” in the relevant sense, such as Marxist, Aristotelian, and rigidly traditionalist or ritualistic conceptions.

At the risk of taking an ill-advised turn toward literary analysis, I will say that Zhu Xi’s more evocative and poetic language offers valuable resources here, as he seems to have in mind a kind of care that has a relatively specific origin and “feel.” As we have seen, he follows the Cheng brothers in associating the relevant sort of care with the sense of spring, which can be captured in the moods and affections that many of us know when thinking about things like springtime love or joy at seeing others in springtime love, the reemergence of greenery, and very young animals (Cheng Hao suggests that we can capture this sense by observing baby chicks).¹⁴ Li himself describes the relevant sort of care as “the tender aspect of human feelings” and “tender loving concern for others,” and this description strikes me as resonant with the care that I associate with the sense of spring (Li 2024: 54; see also 55 and 61-62). Perhaps the sort of care that Zhu takes be central is best captured by tender feelings for particular living and vulnerable things, not the care for others that comes from admiring their strength or heroism, nor from commitments to abstract ideals. In other work, I have argued that basing ethical values on the goods closely associated with the Chinese character *sheng* 生 (“life”) will tend to put the greatest weight on interests in things like preservation, growth, and reproduction, and will downplay interests based on things like autonomy or respecting people’s choices (Tiwald 2010). Insofar as we are motivated by care for people’s *sheng*, it is their lives and development that we care about in the first instance, not their wills or autonomy as such. In short, when Zhu proposes that care should be central, he doesn’t mean care in so thin a sense as the initial worry suggested, and a little reflection on the core phenomena helps to show how care-centeredness could have more specificity, significance, and even profundity than many assume.

IV. Conclusion

We began with questions about the care-centeredness of comprehensive virtue: what does it mean for one of the specific virtues to be more central for comprehensive virtue than others? How can we account for the unique position of virtuous caring when so many of the specific virtues seem to require or depend on one another in various ways? The Confucian tradition is rich in theoretical resources with which to answer these questions, pointing to some answers which I have only begun to sketch here. One of the more promising proposals is that certain specific virtues (such as righteousness, ritual propriety, and wisdom) are asymmetrically dependent on virtuous caring. That is, the other specific virtues require virtuous caring to have any ethical value at all (they are totally dependent on virtuous caring); in contrast, virtuous caring requires the other specific virtues to realize fully or instantiate care of higher grades of benevolence, but can have some ethical value without the others (virtuous caring is just partially dependent on them). We have also seen a subtler way of spelling out Li’s claims about the motivational dependence of other virtues on care. On a view suggested by Zhu Xi, it is not

¹⁴ See *Henan Chengshi yishu* 3.3 in Cheng and Cheng (1981 and forthcoming) and Tiwald and Van Norden (2014: 148). For Zhu Xi’s comments on the sense of *ren* discovered by observing baby chicks, see *Zhuzi yulei* 95.12, 96.84, and 97.30-32.

so much that other virtues require care in order to have any motivation at all, but rather that they require care in order to be naturally or spontaneously motivated, which in turn has implications for the sincerity, strength, and durability of those virtues. Both of these suggestions strike me as worth developing in their own right and as being in the spirit of Li's larger project to reshape Confucianism. Finally, I want to close with the observation that there is a kind of poetry in Zhu Xi's metaphors that hints at even more eye-opening ways of understanding the centrality of care. The warm, gentle, life-impulsive feelings of love and compassion that many of us associate with the spring could inspire and modulate the other virtues in ways that have yet to be adequately understood by thinkers today.¹⁵

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