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Becoming human(e): Confucius’ Way to 仁 and the Imitation of Christ in Yi Byeok’s Essence of Sacred Doctrine (聖教要旨; Seonggyo yoji)

As it is well known, 仁 (ren2) or ‘Humanity’ is composed of the combination of two characters, namely that of human being (人, ren2) and that of two (二, er4); hence it is expressive of the relationship between human beings. ‘Benevolence’ is a valid translation too, but ‘Humanity’ carries the ‘human’ element that strikes the Chinese audience just the way it does for a Westerner, immediately relating man with humanity. Humanity is not primarily a matter of inner conscience or internal virtue but is first and foremost a social virtue, hence the link between humanity and what we can translate as ‘empathy or ‘reciprocity’, 恕 (shu4) in Analects 15.24 about the ‘one rule’ that one can use and practice one’s whole life, and that is about not doing to others what you wouldn’t want them to do to you. The willingness to put oneself in the position of another to try and understand the world as another sees it is a closely related feature of reciprocity, and this is why Wing-tsit Chan, for example, translates the word as ‘altruism’. Analects 4.15 is headed in the same direction with the all-pervading unity and single thread of Confucius’ teaching as explained by Master Zeng: 夫子之道，忠恕而已矣。 “The Master’s way is all about being ‘principled’ (or ‘sincere’) and ‘benevolent’ (or ‘fair’)”. (忠恕; zhong1shu4).

Confucius, to be sure, did not make up or coin the word 仁, but he gave it a key position within his philosophy: before him, it was just one virtue among many; in Confucius’ thought, it became the very marker of virtue itself. Now, there’s nothing like a ‘systematic’ philosophy in Confucius; and, to be fair, the very idea of systematic philosophy is so perfectly alien to Confucius and even to the Classical Chinese language that one cannot even forge an apt way of conveying the idea of what a modern Westerner has in mind when it comes to ‘systematic philosophy’. And that is not because modern-day Westerners are smarter than the Chinese of old, but because we see things differently to begin with. As a result, one has to keep in mind that Confucius himself would rather think of himself as a political advisor, a pedagogue, a teacher, and a counselor who tries to address situations and events in context rather in the abstract. Confucius is quite the opposite of an idealist; he is a practical thinker keen to learn from
acts and facts. And Confucian learning is not of the bookish kind, but is more about learning how to become a better human being.

As for making progress towards this goal, Confucius believed that the concept of humanity was paramount to a proper understanding of what it requires for one to become a ‘nobleman’ or an ‘excellent person,’ a 君子 (jun1zi3) in the proper sense of the term. It is a well-established fact that the aristocratic title as Confucius understands it is used to refer to a moral aristocracy which he intends to re-establish, whereas the mere social aristocracy of one’s blood and lineage is perceived as a corruption of a more ancient and nobler use of the term.

Interestingly, the insistence on 仁 in Confucius’ teaching became somewhat of a label, and a convenient word to convey the Master’s philosophy in a nutshell. That’s why we read in the Lüshi Chunqiu (呂氏春秋), that is, in Mr. Lü’s Annals, that “Confucius valued benevolence” (孔子貴仁). This statement captures Confucius’ specificity as a teacher: he’s the one who made 仁 the highest principle of one’s moral life. Now, Confucius takes into account the various circumstances and interlocutors he faces; and that’s why, when asked about humanity, he offers various definitions, none of which he intends to be the proper abstract meaning of the word. A word of caution is nonetheless necessary here: I’m not at all advocating that Confucius’ stance on ethics favors the situational side. Indeed, I’m inclined to believe that the opposite is the case. It seems that there exists with Confucius a very strong ‘system’, but one that always remains implicit; Confucius may not be interested in disclosing the system, because that’s not the way he works, but the very tenets of his stance are firmly established and do not change according to circumstances. It is their output, as it were, that reveals how effectively and efficiently they are capable of answering every possible circumstance. This, for a Westerner, is reminiscent of the way Marcus Aurelius expresses his ideas in his εἰς ἑαυτόν, his personal diary: nothing systematic is apparent, yet the tenets are strong and there is an underlying framework accounting for the coherence and consistency of his fragmentary reflections on various issues.¹

Back to the Master. What I said about not being into displaying a full-fledged system points to the fact that Confucius takes into account what the people he talks to need and what allows for their moral progress, since different persons do not have the same penetration of mind or understanding or social status, etc. This, however, does not mean that one cannot hope to find a fuller definition of what exactly is intended by humanity. At the very end of Analects 6.30, we read the following:

¹ This has been strongly evidenced by Hadot (2001-1992).
Zi Gong asked: “Suppose there were a ruler who benefited the people far and wide and was capable of bringing salvation to the multitude, what would you think of him? Might he be called humane?” The Master said, “Why only humane? He would undoubtedly be a sage. Even Yao and Shun would have had to strive to achieve this. Now the ren man, wishing himself to be established, sees that others are established, and, wishing himself to be successful, sees that others are successful. To be able to take one’s own feelings as a guide may be called the art of ren.”

Note here that Confucius distinguishes the man who displays humanity from the sage. Because he contrasts the wise man or the sage on the one hand and the ren man on the other, the way he describes the latter must account for what is distinctive and what lies at the core of the virtue of humanity. Humanity is about establishing oneself and others, and about ensuring one’s success and that of the others. ‘Being successful’ is 達 (da2): this means to reach and attain one’s goal. As for ‘establishing’, the Chinese is 立 (li4). The Master uses the same word 立 quite a number of times in the Analects (26 times in 21 sayings), and most notably in his spiritual autobiography in 2.4: “At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right.” 立 is how he sees himself at thirty: an ‘established’ man, that is, a man who has reached a certain level of achievement that can be considered stable and firm. Then again, being established implies knowledge or ritual propriety (禮, li3), for “he who knows not ritual propriety doesn’t have what it requires to be established.” (不知禮, 無以立也; Analects 20.3 – this is part of the last saying in the Analects)

One is immediately confronted with the connection here: humanity is about behaving properly as a member of society; it is first and foremost a social virtue. Hence it is necessarily grounded in ritual propriety, which includes social habits and behaviors. One needs to understand how to deal properly with others in order to excel as a social being.

There is more: humanity is about being established and successful, and at the same time it is also about seeing that others too are established and successful. This reminds us of the idea of reciprocity highlighted earlier. Humanity is thus about acknowledging one’s value and position, and also the other’s value and position. This is the meaning of one of the most famous definitions

² Quotations from the Analects are typically taken from A. Charles Muller’s rendering.
of 仁 in the *Analects* 12.22: when asked about humanity, Confucius answers very succinctly: 愛人, “To love people”.

The omnipresence of the concept of 仁 in Confucius’ *Analects* indicates that this word encapsulates the gist of his ethical stance. The fact that it covers a wide range of applications allows for an in-depth discussion about the hierarchy of values according to the Master. This in turn would allow for some fruitful comparison with Cicero, and all he has to say about (apparently) conflicting values, especially in his treatise *De officiis*, that is: *On Duties*.

I do want to point out the fact that if it is rather obvious that one should act according to virtue, though there might be some difficulty in case of a perceived conflict between virtues: for example, should I be true to my promise or should I break my promise if I believe it may harm the one who should otherwise benefit from my being true to my word? More precisely, in the case of Confucius, we’ve said a few words about ritual propriety being at the heart of the virtue of humanity. One may thus ask about which virtue, in case of a conflict, shall take precedence over which other virtue: in extreme cases, should the sense of propriety override humanity, or should humanity do away with rites? There is more: is such a question even worth asking? Once again, this is echoed in Cicero’s treatment of apparently conflicting virtues, and the apparent conflict between *honestum* and *utile*. Back to Confucius: does his understanding of humanity in direct relation with ritual propriety account for the rigidity of etiquette implementation or not? Conversely, is it even reasonable to imagine that there can be a case when etiquette and propriety can be downplayed in favor of humanity without at the same time doing away with what makes man really humane?

As we saw earlier, 仁 stands at the heart of virtuous conduct in Confucius; and although it seems to be first and foremost about ritual— in the sense that 禮 pervades one’s behavior towards others and toward the self— it is also inclusive of every other virtue, or so it seems. One clear example is *Analects* 17.5:

子張問仁於孔子。孔子曰。能行五者於天下、為仁矣。請問之。曰。恭、寬、信、敏、惠。恭則不侮、寛則得衆、信則人任焉、敏則有功、惠則足以使人。

Zi Zhang asked Confucius about fundamental human goodness. Confucius said, “If you can practice these five things with all the people, you can be called a fundamentally good person”. Zi Zhang asked what they were. Confucius said, “Courtesy, generosity, honesty, persistence, and kindness. If you are courteous, you will not be disrespected; if you are generous, you will gain everything. If you are honest, people will rely on you. If you are persistent you will get results. If you are kind, you can employ people”.

Or see the more concise saying in *Analects* 13.19:

樊遲問仁。子曰。居處恭、執事敬、與人忠。雖之夷狄、不可棄也。
Fan Chi asked about *ren*. Confucius said, “Be naturally courteous, be respectful in working for superiors and be sincere to people. Even the barbarian tribes cannot do without this”.

Again, this allows for a fruitful comparison with the Stoic stance favored by Cicero regarding the possession of one virtue as constituting the possession of them all. The idea is that virtue is an all-encompassing and inclusive word, and he who can be labeled as a virtuous man really possesses *all* virtues; whereas the lack of just one virtue (if such a thing were possible) would really mean that one isn’t virtuous at all. This is a strong stance, to be sure, yet it’s not quite as paradoxical as it seems at first: how could I be described as a virtuous person if I lacked one or more virtues? Such a person may be very courageous, for example, but also greedy; or one may be just and honest, yet definitely lack temperance – this implies some air of phoniness, doesn’t it?

That is why Confucius is willing to admit his own defects and failures: because the ideal of humanity is immense indeed, and even one who makes tremendous progress towards the ideal at the same time gains a better appreciation for his own shortcomings. Hence his humble acknowledgment or, even better, confession, in *Analects* 7.34:

子曰。若聖與仁、則吾豈敢 抑為之不厭、誨人不倦、則可謂云爾已矣。公西華曰。正唯弟子不能學也。

The Master said: “I dare not claim to be a sage or a *ren* man. But I strive for these without being disappointed, and I teach without becoming weary. This is what can be said of me”. Gongxi Hua said, “It is exactly these qualities that cannot be learned by the disciples”.

In the saying preceding the one just quoted, Confucius avows that he himself might be a learned man, and yet he “cannot manifest the behavior of the 君子”. Now, as a teacher and a pedagogue, Confucius is certainly aware that one who posits too high an ideal runs the risk of discouraging his addressees and turning them away from the demanding challenge of become a virtuous person. That is why he wants either to console or to encourage his listeners by saying the following (*Analects* 14.6/7):

子曰、君子而不仁者有矣夫、未有小人而仁者也。

The Master said: “There are some cases where a noble man may not be a perfectly humane man, but there are no cases where an inferior man is a perfectly humane man”.

This advice is both sound and sensitive: it reminds one that the goal of one’s efforts towards becoming a virtuous person remains far distant (so that no one is tempted to be content where he is), but at the same time that moral progress is
real and should be accounted for. Similar strategies of persuasion are to be found in Seneca who, as a Stoic philosopher, will adamantly stick to the idea that one is either basically virtuous or vicious (just as a line is either straight or isn’t, even though the curve might be very slight) and at the same time he will observe that even though a sick person does not qualify as a healthy person, one really does feel better when his sickness is slowly fading away.

Let us turn back to the relationship between 仁 and 禮, humanity and propriety or etiquette. It is well-known that the rites are about everything in one’s life, from courtly ceremonies and the observance of religious customs to the more minute details of sitting properly, dressing, and walking around.³ The relationship between this fully-fledged etiquette and humanity is obvious: it is precisely the integration and display of social habits that distinguishes a civilized human being from a beast or from a beastlike barbarian. The romantic myth of the noble savage and the whole Rousseauist dream is utter nonsense, to be sure: the very ability to live with other human beings and interact with them properly is what makes us both human and humane. Ritual propriety represents the dikes we must form against the tidal waves of our otherwise excessive feelings and unregulated emotions.

Although dikes are necessary, they may very well become burdensome, absurdly coercive, even pointless. Confucianism has its own tradition of self-righteousness and narrow-mindedness. The whole challenge is to keep the rules and abide by them, and yet to avoid ideological rigidity. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus made a similar point against the Pharisees: He himself wouldn’t do away with the Law—this is the famous iota unum teaching—and yet he condemned the self-righteous Pharisees who did not keep in mind that “the Sabbath was made for man; and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Confucius’ own stance shows that he is very aware of both the dangers of downplaying the rites and of focusing on the outer demands of ritual. Hence the idea that morality is first and foremost about the transformation of the inner person. This is one of the meanings of the much-commented upon saying in Analects 2.7:

子游問孝。子曰。今之孝者。是謂能養。至於犬馬。皆能有養。不敬。何以別乎。

Zi You asked about the meaning of filial piety. Confucius said, “Nowadays filial piety means being able to feed your parents. But everyone does this for even horses and dogs. Without respect, what’s the difference?”

³ This is why ritual propriety is somewhat similar to the Jewish Law, according to the insightful remark by Lin Yutang in his 1937 book on The Importance of Living.
The idea to be highlighted here is that humanity is certainly meaningless without a very strong sense of ritual propriety. *Analects* 12.1 provides a fine example:

顏淵問仁。子曰。克己復禮、為仁。一日克己復禮、天下歸仁焉。為仁由己、而由人乎哉。顏淵曰。請問其目。子曰。非禮勿視、非禮勿聽、非禮勿言、非禮勿動。顏淵曰。同雖不敏、請事斯語矣。

Yan Yuan asked about the meaning of *humaneness*. The Master said, “To completely overcome selfishness and keep to propriety is *humaneness*. If for a full day you can overcome selfishness and keep to propriety, everyone in the world will return to *humaneness*. Does *humaneness* come from oneself, or from others?” Yan Yuan asked: “May I ask in further detail how this is to be brought about?” Confucius said, “Do not watch what is improper; do not listen to what is improper; do not speak improperly and do not act improperly”. Yan Yuan said, “Although I am not so perspicacious, I will apply myself to this teaching”.

Conversely, outer and strictly formal display of propriety is devoid of meaning without a proper appreciation of others and a deep sense of humanity, as can be grasped from *Analects* 3.3:

子曰。人而不仁、如禮何。人而不仁、如樂何

The Master said: “If a man has no *ren* what can his propriety be like? If a man has no *ren* what can his music be like?”.

Humanity corrects the danger of mere outer formality; and propriety is the dike against unrestrained emotions conflicting with the social nature of human beings.

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One and the same word thus allows for different aspects of one and the same virtue, and hence the different interpretations of what it means to be a man of *仁* and the efforts this requires. We can illustrate this by having a look at a Korean-Christian way of dealing with the issue of humanity.

Yi Byeok (이벽; 李檗; 1754 – 1785/6) was a Joseon scholar who played a major role in the establishment of the very first Catholic Community in Korea.⁴ He was born in the township of Naemyon in Gyeonggi-do, in the northwest of Seoul. He was from a military official’s family, but he himself wouldn’t join the army; that,
supposedly, is where he got his nickname from, since 檀 means ‘cork-tree,’ a tree that is known for its thick and hard wood: the man was stubborn indeed.

His family belonged to the Southerners’ (Nam-in) faction, which at that time was not in power. Hence, its members were most likely to be excluded from official employment, and they were, as a consequence, pursuing their studies in a freer way than those who studied to secure high-ranking positions of power within the State apparatus. Since he was not interested in a military career, and since hopes for a government position were scarce, Yi Byeok could focus on the Classics for his own moral and intellectual progress, which he did.

One of Yi’s ancestors had been traveling to China with Crown Prince Sohyeon (소현세자, 1612–1645) in the mid-seventeenth century, and had been in contact with the Jesuit Fathers at the Imperial Court in Beijing. The Crown Prince brought back the teachings of the Catholic Church to Korea, but displeased his father King Injo (r. 1623–49) by doing so, and was poisoned not long after his return in 1645.

In 1777 (or 1779), a group of Nam-in scholars joined together close to Gwangju (in Gyeonggi-do, a suburb in the South-East part of present-day Seoul – not the better-known city of Gwangju in Jeollanam-do) to study the Classics and several books of European lore, including books on Catholicism. According to reports, in 1783 Yi Byeok urged one of his friends, Yi Seung-hun (이승훈, 1756–1801), to accompany Byeok’s father to the court in Beijing to retrieve more information on Catholicism. Yi Seung-hun did so and was baptized under the name of Peter; he was later to be put to death and die a martyr in 1801 when the Joseon authorities wiped out the young Catholic community of Korea. When Yi Byeok received books on Catholicism from his friend after the embassy to China, he studied them and converted to the faith. Just a few months later, Yi Byeok was the one who showed Jong Yak-yong Dasan a book that introduced him to the Christian faith. In the same year, Yi Byeok received the sacrament of baptism (and it is not known whether Dasan too was baptized at that time or not) and the name of John the Baptist, because of the part he’d played in the first rooting of the faith in Korea. Some say that the minister of justice Yi Ga-hwan, tried to convince Yi Byeok to jettison the new faith, but was himself converted by Yi, and eventually died a martyr himself in 1801.

In 1785, the small Catholic community moved to the hill in Seoul where Myeongdong Cathedral now stands. The government became suspicious; the house where the Christians gathered was closed and its owner put to death. As for the yangban associated with the practice of Catholicism, they were strongly advised to keep a low profile and to refrain from gathering and practicing their faith in the open. It is not clear what happened to Yi Byeok; either he was put under heavy pressure by his family (his own father apparently threatened to
commit suicide) and had to give up his faith, then became inconsolable and died the next year from illness; or he stood firm and died shortly afterwards. His tomb was later uncovered at his birthplace in 1979, and his remains have since then been transferred with that of the other founding fathers of Christianity in Korea to the Catholic shrine in Cheon-jin-am, the Buddhist complex where the first converts of Korea began gathering close to Gwangju, Gyeonggi-do.

Yi Byeok didn’t live a long life as a Christian, so he couldn’t write much. Interestingly, although much of the writings of early Korean converts has been lost, a collection of their writings came to light in 1970. The volume is known as the Mancheon collection, 蔓川遺稿 (만천유고), and it offers a collection of poetry and prose compositions from Yi Seung-hun and Yi Byeok, among others. Yi Byeok is presented—whether this is trustworthy is disputed—as the author of two of the texts from this collection: a short Hymn of Adoration of the Lord of Heaven (天主恭敬歌, tian1zhu3 gong1jing4 ge1) and a treatise on the Essence of Sacred Doctrine (聖敎要旨, shang4jiao4 yao4zhi3), both written in Classical Chinese.⁵ The first text is a short poem (thirty-five verses) written in 1779, when Yi Byeok still had a somewhat shallow knowledge of the Christian teaching; the whole poem revolves around the idea of God being the Lord who deserves to be adored, the foundation of human life and of the whole world. As for the second work, it is a longer piece of poetry intermingled with prose commentary, but it is difficult to establish precisely the date at which it was penned. The treatise is about the teaching of the Bible (the Old Testament part is rather short compared to the part devoted to the Nest Testament); then Yi Byeok proceeds with a summary of Christian teaching influenced by the Chinese Classics (mostly the Zhong-kyong and the Daxue) and the direct contemplation of nature. The focus is less on God as Creator than on Jesus Christ the Redeemer.

It is noteworthy that Jesus’ depiction matches the traits of the accomplished man according to Confucius. More precisely, Jesus Christ according to Yi Byeok perfectly embodies the Confucian ideal of humanity. Obviously, there is not just one interpretation of what humanity means to a Confucius, let alone to a Confucian scholar. It is well-known too that Silhak ‘practical studies’ scholars thought it necessary to go back to a more genuine interpretation of Confucius, beyond the metaphysics of Neo-Confucianism. As for Dasan, to take just one example, he criticized the Confucian orthodoxy that had become prevalent in Joseon Korea, and wanted to recover a more authentic approach to humanity according to its original meaning in the teaching of Confucius himself.

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⁵ See Sangbae Ri (1979). The author provides a French translation of Yi Byeok’s works.
Confucius uses the word humanity more than a hundred times in his *Analects*, in sixty of his sayings. We have been reminded in the first part of this paper about the fact that the meaning of humanity is flexible, as Confucius doesn’t provide an abstract answer to a theoretical question, but is very keen on taking various circumstances into account, so that his answer is always appropriate to such circumstances. Whereas the Neo-Confucian scholars tend to betray a strong tendency towards abstraction, Confucius always refers his understanding of humanity to a context; that is: to the relationship(s) between real-life individuals.

Yi Byeok himself was struck by the downfall of man as it is accounted for in the Christian doctrine of sin. Interestingly, the aspect of sin which is paramount to Yi is the murder of Abel by his brother Cain in Genesis 4. In his eyes, the killing of his brother by Cain was the most salient aspect of sin’s advent, which resulted in the destruction upon mankind with the Flood (see Genesis 6–9). Yet the flaw remained, and everything that is miserable and sad in the state of human affairs is explained by original sin. One just man could reverse the tide, though; this was readily understandable for a mind schooled in the Chinese Classics, where the sage-kings Yao and Shun were extraordinary individuals who brought about a decisive change in the lives of men from their time onward. Noah was a prime example of a man whose actions helped restore the condition of mankind; but everything was eventually brought to completion through the Lord Jesus Christ.

The whole first part of the *Essence of Sacred Doctrine* is thus about Jesus as the very embodiment of humanity, as it appears from his teaching and from his actions. The Incarnation occurred for the world’s sake; and the second Person of the Holy Trinity chose to take flesh from the ‘five elements’ to bring back humanity to its previous state from before the Fall. Jesus is shown as going to the Temple, being received amongst scholars, and then reading and explaining the holy books. All this would have been familiar to a Confucian scholar: learning the holy books and entering a public life was normal. As a private man, Jesus was most pious, and that again is something that speaks for itself (from a Confucian point of view): Jesus is obedient to his parents in the first place; then he shows his humanity by accomplishing his social duties and resisting the temptations of the devil. Yi Byeok answers an objection to the Christian faith here: the critics had said that one becomes Christian out of self-interest, namely to avoid Hell and to go to Heaven. Of course, that has an educational purpose, so to say, but one does not practice virtue as a Christian *simply* because he wants to avoid Hell and go to Heaven (although he wishes that too, obviously); but virtue is practiced for its own sake. Now, everything in Jesus’ life is an expression of humanity, and of humanity in the sense of love. The perfection of humanity is
tightly linked to the idea of sincerity, a key concept in the *Zhongyong* and in Jesus’ life as Yi Byeok understands it.

This is no original finding of Yi Byeok, of course, for Matteo Ricci had already observed that humanity properly understood has to do with sincerity. Yi nonetheless insists on viewing Christ through the lens of sincerity, for this concept involves the idea of a sacrifice and signals a divine realm. Confucius himself did not dare to style himself a man of utter sincerity, as is clear from *Analects* 7.33/34:

子曰。若聖與仁、則吾豈敢 抑為之不厭、誨人不倦、則可謂云爾已矣。

The Master said: “I dare not claim to be a sage or a *ren* man. But I strive for these without being disappointed, and I teach without becoming weary. This is what can be said of me”.

The Master, once again, is prone to uncover his own shortcomings, and even those of the sage kings of a distant past, as we saw in *Analects* 6.28 earlier. Now, the Christians in Korea understood that Confucius rightly said this, since it was Jesus Christ alone whose humanity was perfect, and hence his sincerity too was complete. Then again, one understands why this key concept appears time and again in Yi Byeok’s *Essence of Sacred Doctrine*: sincerity is the very accomplishment of humanity realized as love in the life of Jesus; it is the essence of the social virtues and the main characteristic of the Christian way. Sincerity as the accomplishment of humanity is Christ himself as a teacher, as an example through his deeds and his sacrifice, with all of this leading Christians to praise the Lord on High.

Jesus thus embodies the way of the sage and the wise man: he knows perfectly well the principles of faith and conduct; he then perfects himself (so to say) by his piety towards his parents and through trials and hardships such as the temptations by the devil; because his heart is ‘honest and sincere’, he is victorious in every ordeal. He then proceeds to establish peace around him by his meekness and good deeds, which he performs out of humanity-as-love. He shows the way to Heaven by performing heavenly deeds, the many miracles which account for the authority and power he possesses. Most perfect in the end is his sacrifice out of love for the salvation of all mankind. The way of man, brought to completion by Jesus, is thus equal to the way of Heaven; as for man, it is incumbent upon him to achieve sincerity, which consists of union with Christ through the practice of virtue.

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Philippe Thiébault, in the same spirit, considers that the Confucian notion of humanity makes one think of the Christian *agapê*. Not that the two are simply equivalent to each other, but there is some kind of similarity that allows for bridging the two concepts together. Confucius, to be sure, was an admirer of the ancient wisdom that is echoed in the *易經*. In the *Book of Changes* and its ten ‘wings’ the concept of humanity comes back ten times in eight passages (including three in the core text of the *易經*); in the fifth and sixth wings known as *The Great Treatise*, we read the following:

There is a strength in the universe, and it accounts for what is known as the Way (道, *dao*); that Way brings about the goodness (善, *shan*) that appears in the nature (性, *xing*) of things. Those who are endowed with the virtue of humanity see the Way and call it humanity (仁者見之謂之仁), and those who possess wisdom call it wisdom (知者見之謂之知). This positive account of the fundamental nature of things and their goodness allows for a better understanding of Men-

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6 Philippe Thiébault, who died in 2012, was one of the most prominent French-speaking promoters of Korean culture and philosophy; he authored several (important for all their shortcomings) books, among which is *La pensée coréenne. Aux sources de l’esprit-cœur*, Paris: Autres Temps, 2006.
cius’ famous idea that nature is good, and explains the centrality of humanity in Confucius’ own approach to virtue.

It is noteworthy that the two key concepts about human perception and understanding in this passage of the Book of Changes are used with a very similar frequency by Confucius: 110 occurrences in 60 passages for humanity (the Analects have about 500 passages in total); 118 occurrences in 73 passages for ‘knowledge’ (知, zhī). Now, in both the 中庸 and the 大學, the very essence of the Way is expressed in terms of sincerity (誠, chéng). This teaches us a few things: there is a mysterious force at work in the universe, which is fundamentally good, and man gains access to it through a kind of knowledge that is about being sincere and displaying the virtue of humanity, which in turns entails a relationship with other human beings. Hence this most admirable saying in Analects 4.1:

里仁為美。擇不處仁，焉得知？

It is virtuous manners which constitute the excellence of a neighborhood. If a man in selecting a residence, does not fix on one where such things prevail, how can he be wise?

A translation closer to the original encapsulates it better: “As for a neighborhood, it is its 仁 that makes it beautiful. If you choose to live in a place that lacks 仁, how can you grow in wisdom?” Through the social immersion that fosters one’s own virtue of humanity, one gains a deeper understanding—or better: one delves more deeply into the Way of all things. Mencius (7B16), as a matter of fact, says exactly that in a profound and enlightening way: 仁者, 人也。合而言之，道也。“Humanity is man; as for their combination, it is the Way.” (Another tentative translation would be: “The Way is about being united with benevolence and speaking in a benevolent way.”) Notice here the striking affirmation that goes even further than the Master’s saying about ‘humanity’ being equated to ‘loving men’: here Mencius says that humanity is what man truly is. This is not to say that we’ve accomplished anything virtuous before we even knew about it. We all know about Mencius’ doctrine of the sprouts of virtue being in need of caretaking to ensure their development; yet his metaphysical insight is considerable nonetheless, and it goes back to the extract from the Great Treatise quoted earlier. Becoming human is all about becoming humane, and vice versa.

8 Tr. Muller (1990).