Ren (jen) 仁 (humanity, human heartedness). The Confucian conception of ren was suggested by Confucius in the Lun-Yü and has occupied the central position in Confucian philosophy. It means the defining virtue of jun-zi (morally superior persons), the most fundamental virtue among others, and the ultimate commitment in Confucius' thought. The term 'ren' has been translated into English in various ways: benevolence, man to manness, perfect virtue, humanity, etc. However, Confucius himself did not intend to give one single formulated definition of ren but gave various characterizations sensitive to situations and contexts. Generally, but roughly speaking, ren as the fundamental virtue is a kind of fundamental moral sensibility which consists in appreciation and reverence for the fundamental human value; one’s ren virtue would manifest itself as interpersonal love and care when treating others. In the Confucian tradition, ren as interpersonal love and care, on the one hand, is love for all humans. On the other hand, it is love with distinction or graded love (ai-you-cha-deng 愛有差等) in view of relations of kinship with oneself, in contrast to universal love/care for each (jian-ai 兼愛) as advocated by Mohism.

To fully achieve ren virtue, one needs to make serious efforts to cultivate one’s moral character. Confucius suggests some characteristic ways to carry out moral self cultivation: “To master oneself and return to li are [joint ways to achieve] ren” (12:1); “A person of ren, wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent. To be able to judge others by what is near to ourselves may be called the method of realizing ren” (6:28). Once one has captured the spirit of ren, one would be able to find out what one should do in a given situation. Because each concrete situation is distinctive from another, one needs to customize one's characterization of ren to certain concrete situations. If Confucius did not make any attempt to give one formulated definition of ren, it is not because he did not have a coherent and systematic understanding of ren but because the complete meaning of ren is itself beyond one single formulated definition and because of its fundamental character.