It is generally agreed that ren (仁) is the most important concept in Confucian studies and the understanding of this concept affects greatly the development of Confucian thought. The aim of this academic exercise is therefore to examine the contribution of the concept of ren in the study of Confucian thought.

The word ren is not found in the oracle bones and is mentioned only occasionally in pre-Confucian texts. Originally it was written 人, meaning man. There are several instances of such usage in the classics and in all these cases, ren denotes the particular virtue of kindness. It was, however, Confucius who made ren really significant and it became the central theme of his conversations. Instead of perpetuating the ancient understanding of ren, he transformed it into "humanity" connoting the general meaning of moral life at its best.

However, what is this general virtue in concrete terms? Confucius offered neither a precise definition nor a comprehensive description. In his replies to the pupils' enquiries of ren, he provided varying opinions which included filial piety, wisdom, propriety, courage, loyalty, diligence, truthfulness, love and all other virtues. As a result, many theories and criticisms of the concept of ren have been developed throughout the ages. Some of these are:

1) declaring "仁 (humanity) as 人 (man)" as an echo of the ancient usage of 人 for 仁

2) defining ren as "people living together" (相人倫) based on the structure of the word

3) regarding ren as affection and love

4) interpreting it as consciousness or unity with the universe which embraces the idea of vital force and the dynamic element behind life

5) treating ren as a metaphysical reality and distinguishes it from love which is regarded as function
6) viewing it as a tactic to restore *li* (礼) which is favourable to the aristocrats

and 7) regarding *ren* as a device inducing social classification

A critical analysis of these theories shows that *ren* in Confucius' teaching means virtue in the most embracing sense. This virtue 仁 is inherent in every man and is both ethical and metaphysical. When it functions it generates all virtues but it is not merely the sum total of all virtues. *Ren* is the generative force that makes virtues real, social and dynamic, and this is a continuous process. Such a concept gives eternal life to Confucian thought and provides continuity of civilisation.

Confucius' teaching of *ren* (humanity) as interpreted above thus lays a strong foundation for future development of Confucian studies.