



## Kant and Confucius: On moral decision-making

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### Abstract

The aim of this paper is to determine the patterns of moral decision-making in Kantian and Confucian thought and to assess the necessary preconditions of moral behavior for Kant and Confucius respectively. This paper focuses on comparing the way Kant is structuring constitutive elements of moral decision-making, such as will, reason, or moral autonomy to the way Confucius is structuring the relationship between elements such as duty, commands of *Tian*, or social relations.

**Key words:** Confucius, Kant, moral decision-making, moral philosophy, inclinations, comparative philosophy, Chinese philosophy

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### INTRODUCTION

This article is a result of a Polish-German workshop on freedom, authority, and shaping democracy in German and Polish civil societies. The aim of the workshops was to prompt reflection upon democratic forms and practices in order to deepen the understanding of the cultural differences between German and Polish democratic processes, but perhaps even more importantly, to highlight universally applicable issues related to the democratic framework.

The first starting point of this paper is the theoretical part of the workshops, which included analyzing Kant's influence on the development of the democratic framework within the German context. Apart from the theoretical content, the workshops consisted of an experimental, practical part, based on the "Betzavta/Miteinander" method of democratic education built upon experiencing the democratic process through interactions with other participants. This two-fold approach not only proved to be innovative but also served as an inspiration for the second starting point of this paper.

For such combination of theoretical studies with practice entrenched in social interaction closely corresponds to the Confucian method expressed in the very first paragraph of the *Analects*: "to learn and then have occasion to practice what you have learned—is this not satisfying? To have friends arrive from afar—is this not a joy?" (*Analects* 2003, 1.1) Here, the principal elements of Confucian approach are clearly laid out: one should not only attempt to intellectually grasp knowledge but also apprehend it practically; not only study on one's own but do so in a social context.

The Confucian framework serves also as another point of departure. The close relationship between ethics and politics, between proper functioning of a political system and the moral make-up of people constituting it, is a vital component of Confucian doctrine.

The main goal of this paper is thus to present the Kantian and Confucian moral decision-making process. The first part explores the question of justifiability of such a comparison. The second and third part aims at reconstructing the moral decision-making framework respectively in Kant's and Confucius's accounts. Finally, the last part attempts to view these frameworks side to side and draw conclusions as to possible interpretations of both Kant's and Confucius's philosophies.

## 1. KANT AND CONFUCIUS

What does Kant have in common with Confucius to even justify uttering the names of these two thinkers in one sentence? Nietzsche infamously called Kant the "Chinaman of Königsberg" (1966, §210), however, he probably meant it as an insult and definitely did not study Chinese philosophy extensively enough to form well-informed judgments in this matter (Ching, 1978, p.167). What is more, Kant himself referred to Confucius and Confucianism in highly unfavorable terms. In his lectures on *Physical Geography*, he states that: "Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient... Their teacher Confucius teaches in his writings nothing outside a moral doctrine designed for the princes...and offers examples of former Chinese princes...But a

concept of virtue and morality never entered the heads of the Chinese” (Ching, 1978, p.169). Even though from the current standpoint of knowledge on Confucius and Confucianism this statement sounds quite ridiculous, it was not at odds with the general European attitude shared in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century.

However, it has not always been this way: China was introduced to the European public through the favorable eyes of the Jesuits, who were very positive about incorporating Confucius into the philosophical pantheon and making his teaching a starting point for introducing Christianity to China. They presented Confucius as the “philosopher of the Chinese” in a work published in 1678 entitled *Confucius sinarum philosophus, sive, Scientia sinensis latine exposita (Confucius, Philosopher of the Chinese or, Chinese Knowledge Explained in Latin)*. However, following anti-Jesuit sentiments and the eventual papal suppression of the Society of Jesus in 1773, China lost its main advocate. As a result, Kant, whose initial remarks on China were at least without prejudice, abandoned Jesuit sources. According to Adrian Hsia, Chinese literary scholar and specialist on German and English literature, among others Kant consulted the following books: *Die heutige Historie oder der gegenwärtige Staat von allen Nationen*, compiled by Captain Salmon (the German translation was published in Altona in 1732), *Die Allgemeine Historie der Reisen oder Sammlung aller Reisebeschreibungen*, published in 21 volumes in Leipzig between 1747 and 1774; *Bibliothek der neuesten Reisebeschreibungen*, published in Frankfurt and Leipzig in 1780. All these works represented a very different approach to describing China: instead of the enthusiasm of the Jesuits, they presented the overly-negative accounts of travelers and merchants. As a result, “Kant now perceived the Chinese as total strangers to the concept of virtue, and the whole nation, including Confucius, was incapable of lifting itself to nobility and duty. In other words, categorical imperatives could never be developed in that country” (Hsia, 2001, p.22).

In his widely discussed (suffices to say, the discussion reached internet platforms such as Reddit and others, which are not necessarily associated with arcane topics such as Chinese philosophy) essay provocatively entitled *Western Philosophy is Racist*, a professor of philosophy and a specialist on Chinese philosophy Brian W. Van Norden states:

Kant is easily one of the four or five most influential philosophers in the Western tradition. He asserted that the Chinese, Indians, Africans and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas are congenitally incapable of philosophy. And contemporary Western philosophers take it for granted that there is no Chinese, Indian, African or Native American philosophy. If this is a coincidence, it is a stunning one. (Van Norden, *Western Philosophy is Racist*, 2017)

Van Norden goes as far as to outrightly point at Kant as the source of the parochial and indeed racist approach of Western philosophers toward all non-Western philosophical traditions. It is

not without a grain of salt that such a thesis should be accepted. Although a considerable number of scholars (see: Bernasconi 2001, Eze 2001, Mills 2005) agree with Van Norden in pointing out Kant's racist comments and casting a shadow on the supposed universalism of his moral theory, it is possible to look at Kant's views differently. If we follow Pauline Kleingeld's account, it could be argued that during the 1790s Kant "gave up the hierarchical view of the races in the context of his own political theory and theory of right. The time when he changed his views on race falls within the period during which his political theory and philosophy of right underwent significant transformations" (Kleingeld 2007, p.592). Kleingeld claims that Kant changed his views on race in the light of his own writings, which can be particularly clearly seen in the *Toward Perpetual Peace* and in the "description of the mental properties which he attributes to non-whites, and (...) in the harsh criticism of the injustice perpetrated by the European colonial powers" (Kleingeld 2007, p.592).

It exceeds the scope of this paper to discuss fully whether Van Norden is correct or not, but it is crucial to mention two things. Firstly, whether Kant, the disastrous Opium Wars and their destructive aftermath, or any other reason are to blame, it is a fact that Chinese philosophy has been largely overlooked and kept out of the usual history of philosophy curriculum. Indeed, what most of the students in the Western hemisphere learn as "philosophy" should rather be labeled "Western philosophy." Secondly, a doubt may arise: if so many prominent thinkers criticized Chinese philosophy for not being "philosophical" enough (e.g. Young Kun Kim, 1978, pp.173-180; Roetz, 2005, pp.49-65), then perhaps there is a grain of truth to it? The question whether Chinese philosophy, as well as other non-Western philosophies, should at all be labeled "philosophies" is certainly one worth asking because it forces us to rethink what we understand as "philosophy."

Carine Defoort in her article *Is There Such a Thing as Chinese Philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate* describes four possible approaches towards and justifications for the question of existence of Chinese philosophy:

- 1) Chinese philosophy does not exist because the Chinese way of reflecting on things does not fulfill the requirements for philosophical reflection as understood in the West
- 2) Chinese philosophy does exist. If analyzed using Western categories, it will eventually reveal the same structures and tendencies that we find in Western philosophy.
- 3) It is possible that something called "Chinese philosophy" exists. However, the scope and content of the term "philosophy" itself has to be reevaluated and rethought. Encountering a different tradition is a chance to reformulate the way philosophy is understood.

- 4) Chinese thought is not a philosophy and for its own benefit should not be called so. Philosophy is a strictly Western phenomenon and as such imposing it on Chinese thought would be detrimental and reductive to the Chinese way of reflecting on things. (Defoort, 2001)

In other words, these four approaches could be grouped along two axes – descriptive and emotive:

One could defend or reject "Chinese philosophy" while valuing philosophy understood in a certain way; one could criticize the prevailing definition of philosophy via the defense of Chinese philosophy as providing a better alternative (or expanded) understanding of the discipline; or one could reject "Chinese philosophy" because one believes that traditional Chinese thought would be better off not being associated with that discipline, thereby questioning the value of philosophy. (Sor-hoon Tan, 2016, p.6)

Kant definitely belongs to the first group – he rejected Chinese philosophy as not adhering to a certain understanding of philosophy in general. However, it is crucial to point out that his dismissal of Chinese philosophy was based on false premises. Although Van Norden is highly critical of Kant's role in stigmatizing Chinese philosophy, he himself proposes to use a hermeneutic of faith. According to him:

Those who use a hermeneutic of faith read text in the hope of discovering truth, goodness, and beauty. They are open to the possibility that other people, including people in very different times and cultures, might know more about these things than we do, or at least they might have views that can enrich our own in some way. (Van Norden, *Taking Back Philosophy*, 2017, p.139)

Therefore, although Kant himself had an unfavorable opinion on Chinese philosophy and Confucius, we can still proceed with a meaningful comparison between these two thinkers, providing we accept two assumptions: first, since Kant's opinion was formed based on sources that were not credible, we are to dismiss it as misinformed. Studying Confucian texts, we can, without doubt, reject the claim that Confucius was a stranger to the concept of virtue, nobility, and duty. If anything, it is the opposite – he was much preoccupied with concepts at least within a similar scope of meaning. As to whether categorical imperative could have been developed within the Confucian thought – we have to give it a more detailed look. Second, in order to conduct a meaningful comparison between Kant and Confucius, it is necessary to assume that there is something that can be called "Chinese philosophy", be it in the second or third meaning listed by Defoort.

Finally, every time this paper mentions Confucius, it actually refers to a certain construct. We know that Confucius existed and with some degree of certainty, we can reconstruct his

personal history. However, like Socrates, Confucius did not leave any written sources of his doctrines. Everything we have was written by his disciples or disciples' disciples. In the case of Socrates, what we have to do is to distinguish between Plato presenting Socrates' views and Plato presenting his own views. In case of Confucius, what we have to do is to navigate between generations of disciples presenting what has been passed down as Confucius's sayings but at the same time advancing their own agenda (such as making their particular strain of Confucianism look more prominent or more "true" to the Confucian spirit). Therefore, every time a phrase "Confucius said..." appears in this paper, it actually means: "what we find in canonical Confucian writings and what based on literary and historical analysis can be reasonably attributed to Confucius..."

The main sources used in this paper for reconstructing Confucius's views in respect to moral decision-making are firstly the *Analects (Lunyu)*, and secondly, the *Classic of Family Reverence* (also known as the *Book of Filial Piety, Xiaojing*). As for Kant's views with respect to moral decision-making, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* will serve as the main source.

## 2. MORAL DECISION-MAKING ACCORDING TO KANT

What does the process of making a moral decision look like according to Kant? The pillar of moral decision-making is the relation between will and reason. We utilize reason to direct our will in order to achieve certain goals and to satisfy our needs. However, in this respect reason seems to be highly ineffective. Therefore,

since reason is nevertheless given to us as a practical faculty, that is, as one that is to influence the *will*; then, where nature has everywhere else gone to work purposively in distributing its capacities, the true vocation of reason must be to produce a will that is good, not perhaps *as a means* to other purposes, but *good in itself* for which reason was absolutely necessary. (Kant 1988, 4:396)

As a result, by fulfilling the true purpose of reason, which is establishing good will, we achieve a state of happiness and contentment, even if we fail to successfully pursue other goals commonly associated with happiness. Being concerned with one's happiness is not to be overlooked, because it is indeed an important component of duty. If we are unhappy and unsatisfied, "under pressure from many anxieties and amid unsatisfied needs," we can easily surrender to "a great temptation to transgression of duty" (Kant 1988, 4:399).

But what is duty? To begin with, the concept of duty "contains that of a good will though under certain subjective limitations and hindrances, which, however, far from concealing it and

making it unrecognizable, rather bring it out by contrast and make it shine forth all the more brightly” (Kant 1988, 4:397).

There are three propositions describing the nature of duty. Firstly, we have to determine whether an action seemingly in conformity with duty is done “from duty or from a self-seeking purpose” (Kant 1988, 4:397). The second proposition refers to the fact that the moral value of an action is determined by a maxim according to which this action is conducted and not by its intended outcome. A maxim is “the subjective principle of volition” (Kant 1988, p.14). According to Kant:

an action from duty has its moral worth not in the purpose to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon, and therefore does not depend upon the realization of the object of the action but merely upon the principle of volition in accordance with which the action is done without regard for any object of the faculty of desire. (Kant 1988, 4:400)

The content of the third proposition is: “duty is the necessity of an action from respect for law”(Kant 1988, 4:400). Kant distinguishes between inclination and respect – we can have an inclination towards a particular effect of an action, but respect is only due to what “I cognize immediately as a law for me,” which signifies “consciousness of the subordination of my will to a law without the mediation of other influences on my sense” (Kant 1988, p.14). Respect restricts our egoism and self-love.

To summarize it, an action from duty is to eliminate all inclinations that influence will and to remove all objects of the will. As a result, the will is left without anything that “could determine it except objectively the law and subjectively pure respect for this practical law (Kant 1988 4:400-401).

Going back to the relation between will and reason, it could be said that whether the outcome of an action is going to be moral or not, is determined by the mutual interactions between will, reason and subjective conditions (incentives).

The way reason can affect will is twofold. It can either infallibly determine will, or determine it not adequately. The consequence of the infallible determination of the will is its functioning as a “capacity to choose only that which reason independently of inclination cognizes as practically necessary, that is, as good” (Kant 1988, 4:412). The consequence of not adequate determination is giving way to subjective conditions – incentives – influencing will by the means of feelings. It results in will not being in conformity with reason and not being thoroughly good. This opens the way for disobedience (towards the commands of reason) and subjectively contingent actions (Kant 1988, 4:413).

The result of an action conducted by will infallibly determined by reason is consistent with an imperative. Imperatives are formulas of command of reason: a “representation of an objective principle, insofar as it is necessitating for a will” (Kant 1988, 4:413). All imperatives can be divided into two types: hypothetical or categorical. The former “represent the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wills (or that it is at least possible for one to will).” The latter represents “an action as objectively necessary of itself, without reference to another end” (Kant 1988, 4:414). Hypothetical imperatives can be further divided into technical (belonging to art) and pragmatic (belonging to welfare) (Kant 1988, 4:417). Although there are infinite numbers of hypothetical imperatives, there is only one categorical imperative, however, it has threefold formulation:

- 1) “act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature” (Kant 1988, 4:421).
- 2) “So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means.” (Kant 1988, 4:429)
- 3) A condition of will’s harmony with universal practical reason, “the idea of the will of every rational being as a will giving universal law”. (Kant 1988, 4:431)

All these complex deliberations can be concluded in a surprisingly simple recommendation:

Inexperienced in the course of the world, incapable of being prepared for whatever might come to pass in it, I ask myself only: can you also will that your maxim become a universal law? If not, then it is to be repudiated, and that not because of a disadvantage to you or even to others forthcoming from it but because it cannot fit as a principle into a possible giving of universal law, for which lawgiving reason, however, forces from me immediate respect. (...) I at least understand this much: that it is an estimation of a worth that far outweighs any worth of what is recommended by inclination, and that the necessity of my action from pure respect for the practical law is what constitutes duty, to which every other motive must give way because it is the condition of a will good in itself, the worth of which surpasses all else. (Kant 1988, 4:403)

Although incentives could be a powerful driving force for doing what is objectively good, they cannot be trusted as reliable. First, their results are merely contingent and in two different situations can lead to two completely different results. Secondly, according to Kant, their power is only of perfunctory nature. What has the power to truly compel rational beings to act in a particular way is duty:

For, the pure thought of duty and in general of the moral law, mixed with no foreign addition of empirical inducements, has by way of reason alone (...) an influence on the human heart so much more powerful than all other incentives, which may be summoned from the empirical field, that

reason, in the consciousness of its dignity, despises the latter and can gradually become their master; (Kant 1988, 4:410-411)

Furthermore, because of their wavering nature, they can actually act as an interfering factor to the dictates of reason. If we were to ground duty in some tendencies, desires or other incentives, we would never arrive “at duty but instead at the necessity of an action from a certain interest. This might be one's own or another's interest. But then the imperative had to turn out always conditional and could not be fit for a moral command”(Kant 1988, 4:433). Kant calls this “the principle of the autonomy of the will.”

### 3. MORAL DECISION-MAKING ACCORDING TO CONFUCIUS

To reconstruct the process of making a moral decision according to Confucius, we should start from paragraph 2.4 from the *Analects*:

The Master said: When I was fifteen I set my heart on learning. At thirty I took my stand. At forty I was without confusion. At fifty I knew the command of *Tian*. At sixty I heard it with a compliant ear. At seventy I follow the desires of my heart and do not overstep the bounds.

Before we proceed any further, we must first clarify the obscure looking term “*Tian*.” Conventionally, it has been translated as “Heaven.” However, “its conventional English rendering (...) cannot but conjure up misleading associations” (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.85). As a result, our “understanding of *Tian* is painfully vague,” but it is so “precisely because it is vague within the Chinese tradition itself” (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.85). Although *tian* does not speak in any direct way (*Analects* 17.19), it:

communicates effectively although not always clearly through human-generated oracles, through perturbations in the climate, and through alterations in the natural conditions that contextualize the human world. *Tian* participates in a discourse with the most worthy persons in the human community. It is assumed that a failure of order in the human world will be reflected in ominous happenings in the natural environment. (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.86)

Thus, in paragraph 2.4 we see Confucius presenting himself as someone, who understands the commands of *Tian*, hears them with a compliant ear, and “who unfailingly devotes himself to a continual process of learning” (Olberding 2013, p.10). However, it is not just learning for the sake of learning, since as Confucius says in 2.15: “If you study but don't reflect you'll be lost. If you reflect but don't study you'll get into trouble.” The goal of Confucian education is to set a person on a course of becoming a *junzi* – which means a consummate,

ideally ethical and capable person, who practically embodies a set of virtues, with *ren* (benevolence/consummate conduct, humanness) as its pinnacle. It is an unceasing effort of becoming a benevolent, consummate person. As a result “at all times you are to do what it is appropriate for you to do (...) in the roles and activities that locate you in family and community, and that indeed come to constitute you as a person” (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.27).

In fact, it is within the family setting that we set on the course of becoming a consummate person capable of following the desires of their heart without overstepping the bounds: “The *junzi* [exemplary person] works on the root – once the root is planted, the *dao* [way] is born. Filiality [*xiao*] and respect for elders [*ti*], are these not the roots of *ren*[exemplary conduct]?” (Analects 1.2). Originally, the Chinese character *xiao* was “a highly stylized picture of a gray-haired old person and a young child” (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.1). Usually, the term is translated as “filial piety,” “filiality” but according to Roger T. Ames and Henry Rosemont Jr., although “to the extent that the pious are deferential, the term is not altogether misleading (...). But it is to *people* living and dead in *this* world that Confucians defer, not to religious figures, usually associated with the Abrahamic traditions, who inhabit another, transcendent world. Moreover, ‘piety’ often carries a sense of the ‘sanctimonious’ that is absent from the Chinese *xiao* (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.1). Therefore, they choose to render *xiao* as “family responsibility,” “family deference,” “family feeling,” or most of all – “family reverence.”

Let us go back for a moment to Kant. One of the most striking initial differences between Kant’s and Confucius’s stances is their approach to a moral example. According to Kant, one could not “give worse advice to morality than by wanting to derive it from examples. For, every example of it represented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality, as to whether it is also worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model” (Kant 1988, 4:d408).

On the one hand, it would seem that this puts the whole *Analects* in a bad light. In the end, the *Analects* are comprised of numerous descriptions of proper behavior that are meant to serve as an example to be followed. Leading by an example is a recurring Confucian trope, most clearly formulated in paragraph 2.1: “The Master said: When one rules by means of virtue (*de*) it is like the North Star – it dwells in its place and the other stars pay reverence to it.” An exemplary person should simply act in a certain way, and others will be compelled to follow their example the same way stars revolve around the North Star.

On the other hand, however, the numerous exemplifications evoked in the *Analects* are by no means to resemble biblical parables. Neither are these examples to be treated as guidelines for direct emulation nor is morality to be derived from them. They are ex-post examples – showing

how the implementations of the same superior rule can differ depending on the context.

Let us return to the issue of family reverence (*xiao*) and consider the following case: a son is aware that his father committed a theft – he stole a sheep (see: *Analects* 13.18). When the authorities ask the son whether he knows who is behind the theft, the son faces a dilemma: should he fulfill his duty towards the ruler, denounce his father and follow the law, but break the rules of family reverence (*xiao*)? Or should he break the law but protect his father? This is a good moment to ask the Kantian question: “can you also will that your maxim became a universal law?” Seemingly, it is not much of a moot point – there seems to be no obstacle to willing that filiality becomes a universal law. Of course, based on the definition from *Analects* 1.11 – “One who does not alter his late father’s *dao* for three years may be called filial” – some could argue that the concept of filiality entails moral heteronomy. As it will be shown later, “observing father’s *dao*” does not mean absolute allegiance or suspending one’s autonomy. There is, however, a more serious problem. Therefore in this particular case, the universalization formula would take the form: “can you will that lying to protect your family members become a universal law?” It seems that if Kant was faced with such a dilemma, his answer would be straightforward: the only decision from duty is to denounce one’s father, because lying “does harm to humanity in general, inasmuch as it vitiates the very source of the right” (Kant 1993, 426). Although family dedication predisposes us to protect our beloved and hide their misdemeanors, no rational being would wish for lying and hiding the truth to become a universal law.

However, is this situation indeed as unequivocal as it seems to be? The first issue we encounter is the formulation of the opposition between duty and inclination: duty is here understood as telling the truth to the authorities, whereas family inclination leads us to conceal it. In Confucius's world, this situation could be described the other way around: it is a duty to act in accordance with family reverence, even though we might have tendencies inclining us towards a different action. Therefore, although the son may be frightened of the consequences of not giving away his father to the authorities, or perhaps his personal character predisposes him to tell the truth because he strongly condemns theft, his duty is to be a good and devoted son. The reason he acts this way is not because of certain feelings or tendencies, but indeed because of a superior and absolute duty stemming from his basic human relationship – a relationship, which underpins the whole structure and functioning of society.

Apart from the relation between husband and wife, older and younger brother, ruler and subject, and between friends, the relation between father and son is one of the five fundamental human relationships. They are a warp and weft of the social fabric and the basis of the proper functioning of the world. In paragraph 12.11 of the *Analects* Confucius was asked about

governance. His answer was: “Let the ruler be ruler, ministers ministers, fathers fathers, sons sons.” Apparently, what is needed for effectively governing a state is for everybody to act accordingly to their social role and properly situate themselves within the five relations.

Another example of how all-encompassing the indications of the family reverence are is the principle of observing the three-year period of mourning after the death of one’s father. During this period, a good son should abstain from extravagant dishes, temporarily resign from the official posts he is holding and refrain from living in luxurious conditions. Let us look closer at paragraph 17.21:

Zai Wo asked about the three year mourning period. “A full year is already a long time. If a *junzi* [exemplary person] were not to participate in *li* [rituals] for three years, surely *li* would decay; if he did not participate in music for three years, surely music will collapse. As the grain of the old year is exhausted, the grain of the new year is harvested, the cycle of firewood has gone round – a full year is enough.”

The Master said, “Would you feel comfortable eating rice and wearing brocaded clothes?”

“I would.”

“If you would be comfortable, do it. When the *junzi* is in mourning, fine foods are not sweet to him, music brings no joy, living in luxury brings him no comfort, therefore, he does not indulge in these things. Now, if you would be comfortable, do it.”

Zai Wo went out. The Master said, “Yu is not *ren*. A child has lived for three years before he leaves his mother’s arms. The three year mourning period is common to mourning throughout the world (*tianxia*). Did not Yu receive three years love from his parents?”

Certainly, the objections raised by Zai Wo (in the last section referred to as “Yu”) are very reasonable: even one year is long enough for a mourning period, especially if we consider how disorganized would a state be if every now and then an important minister or other official were to withdraw from the public life. Over such a long period, even taking care of one’s family and fulfilling one’s role as the head of the family would be jeopardized. Despite these reasonable objections, Confucius remains adamant in his stance. In paragraph 14.40 he gives an example of Gaozong, who was a king from the Shang dynasty (c.1600 BCE – c.1046 BCE). According to Confucius, following his father’s death, in order to observe the three year mourning period, Gaozong left all the matters of his kingdom in the hands of the prime minister.

Zizhang said, “The Documents say, ‘During Gaozong’s period of mourning for his father, for three years he dwelt in his mourning hut and did not speak.’ What does this mean?” The Master said, “This did not necessarily apply only to Gaozong. All the ancients were thus. When the ruler died, the officers of state gathered themselves and for three years took their orders from the prime minister.”

Ultimately, to participate in fundamental human relationships simply means to be a human being. Indeed, it is not possible to talk about a human being outside the social realm.

When Confucius encounters two Daoist hermits, they say to his disciple: “The world is inundated now. Who can change it? Would you not be better off joining those who have fled from the world altogether?” However, Confucius vehemently rejects such possibility and exclaims: “I cannot flock together with the birds and beasts!” (Analects 18.6). To leave the social realm and to abandon the rituals constituting this realm would mean to relinquish one’s humanity and for Confucius it is unthinkable. When Confucius makes his strong claim about the three year mourning period being wide-spread not only among the revered ancients he takes as a moral example but also throughout the world known to him, it is clearly an overstatement. Even if we assume that all the ancients were indeed following this custom, Confucius’s contemporaries definitely did not adhere to it to the extent Confucius would be pleased with. However, when he uses the term *tianxia* – “all-under-Heaven,” it is not meant to be descriptive but rather normative: for a human being to truly be a human being, in its fully social and relational sense, it is necessary to meaningfully perform the ritual actions that externally express the cornerstone of what constitutes a human – the five relationships.

However, the duty that arises from one’s own humanity is not to be understood as “absolute allegiance” (Hsü Dau-Lin 1970, p.27). It does in no way indicate thoughtless following orders. To some extent it is the opposite – “loyalty and obedience are subordinate to one’s obligation to do what is appropriate in the larger familial, moral, and indeed spiritual context of assumed personal responsibilities” (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.25). Confucius’s stance on this topic is clearly and explicitly revealed in chapter fifteen of the *Classic of the Family Reverence*.

Master Zeng said, “Parental love (*ai*), reverence and respect (*jing*), seeing to the well-being of one’s parents, and raising one’s name (*ming*) high for posterity—on these topics I have received your instructions. I would presume to ask whether children can be deemed filial simply by obeying every command of their father.”

“What on earth are you saying? What on earth are you saying?” said the Master.

(...) if confronted by reprehensible behavior on his father’s part, a son has no choice but to remonstrate with his father, and if confronted by reprehensible behavior on his ruler’s part, a minister has no choice but to remonstrate with his ruler. Hence, remonstrance is the only response to immorality. How could simply obeying the commands of one’s father be deemed filial?”

A good example of how such obligation works in practice is given in paragraph 18.1 of the *Analects*: “Weizi left him; Jizi became his slave; Bigan remonstrated with him and died. Confucius said, “There were three *ren* men of Yin.” As Robert Eno explains:

The three men named were relatives of the evil last king of the Shang (Yin), Zhou. Weizi, an older half-brother, fled from the capital. Jizi, an uncle, finding his remonstrances useless, feigned madness and became a palace slave. Bigan was disemboweled as a penalty for his advice. (Eno 2012, p.82)

All of these three men are undoubtedly people of *ren* – consummate behavior – even though the means they adopted to “do the right thing” are very different. It seems as if there could not be more dissimilar actions that to either flee from the court, stay but feign madness, or stay and face the cruel punishment. However, all of these three actions meet the exorbitant standards expected from people considered to be consummate (*ren*). It is because these actions were neither aimed at any kind of personal gain nor were they a result of blind obedience. What these actions were aiming at, was a fulfillment of absolute, unwavering duty, a duty to what is right or appropriate (*yi*). Confucius observes that: “The *junzi*’s [consummate person’s] stance towards the world is this: there is nothing he insists on, nothing he refuses, he simply aligns himself beside right (*yi*).” According to Ames and Rosemont, *yi* means:

one’s sense of appropriateness that enables one to act in a proper and fitting manner given the specifics of a situation. (...) *Yi* is the fittingness in relations that over time produces the fiduciary community and the feelings of credibility and mutual trust that emerge to give one a real sense of belonging in that community. (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.90)

As a result, moral decision-making is not about striving for a will unhindered by tendencies or incentives. It is rather about the preemptive regulation of these tendencies and incentives, about “proceeding along one’s path in life disposed toward excellence in one’s habits of conduct” (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.51).

For Confucius, the efforts to shape one’s actions are endless. However, it is not because we have to cleanse our decision-making from interfering factors, but rather it is because the process of aligning all of our impulses, tendencies, feelings or preferences alongside the paths charted by the cluster of Confucian virtues and the duty stemming from them is a life-long, unceasing project. This project commences within the most familiar ground – family – and is guided by the virtue of family reverence (*xiao*).

Under such guidance, it is possible to gradually extend oneself within one’s locality, which “provides the groundwork which makes it possible to enter unfamiliar terrain and treat others with a similar sort of decorum and respect” (Froese 2008, p.263). Dispositions to behave in a particular way emerge “spontaneously out of a cultivated sense of appropriateness within the family and communal relations” (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.46).

Confucian moral decision making could be compared to effortlessly playing an intricate, yet beautiful musical piece. This metaphor is especially fitting due to the role of music in the Confucian thought. Paragraph 3.23 of the *Analects* is especially informative in this respect. In Edward Slingerland's translation, it reads as follows:

What can be known about music is this: when it first begins, it resounds with a confusing variety of notes, but as it unfolds, these notes are reconciled by means of harmony, brought into tension by means of counterpoint, and finally woven together into a seamless whole. It is in this way that music reaches its perfection. (*Analects* 2003, 3.23)

Slingerland further comments that music “serves as a model or metaphor for the process of self-cultivation: starting in confusion, passing through many phases and culminating in a state of *wu-wei* [non-action] perfection” (Slingerland 2003, p.27). To achieve a virtuosic level, one has to start learning at a young age, continuously practice basic musical exercises, gradually widening one's scope of abilities, and only eventually one can achieve a level of effortless musical proficiency. Similarly, it takes a comprehensive vision of a life-long moral education that encompasses every sphere of life to produce someone, who, like Confucius, “can follow the desires of their heart and do not overstep the bounds.”

As a result, all the inner drives rooted in the empirical make-up of the self, are bundled up together and in harmonious unison effortlessly directed towards a truly moral action from duty derived from the notion of one's humanity itself.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, what is it that we gain from comparing the moral decision-making process in Kant and Confucius? There two main goals to achieve here. The most immediate one is to identify differences and possible similarities between different modes of moral decision making. We can see the dividing line: where Kant stresses eliminating the different tendencies influencing and obfuscating will, Confucius emphasizes the need for a preemptive regulation of such tendencies and striving for excellence in such conduct. While for Kant it is crucial to achieve the ability to exceed the limiting factors such as social setting, individual predispositions or innate character, and not allowing them to be the main constituents of our moral life (Höffe 2005, p.186), Confucius insists on perceiving the moral subject not “merely as the rational subject, nor consequently deprive it of all its emotionality” (Lee 2013, p.55).

For Kant, whether an action can be classified as moral or not, is determined by the mutual interactions between three factors: will, reason and various subjective conditions.

The virtue of the last factor lies mostly in its absence: the truly moral action, an action done purely from duty is the result of eliminating the inclinations influencing will. If we were to act from inclinations, it would result in an action guided by a particular interest. In consequence, categorical imperative would fail to represent an objective principle.

The relation between the first two factors relies on reason infallibly determining will in such a way that the latter chooses what is good regardless of one's inclinations. The infallibly determined Kantian will is a necessary condition for choosing what is good. Confucian moral action has its preconditions as well: properly situating oneself within the five relations, actively striving to become a consummate person, and aligning oneself with the commands of *Tian*.

Where Kant seeks the harmony between the will and universal practical reason, Confucius seeks the harmony between duty and heteronomous drives, between commands of *Tian* and personal preferences, and between what is universal and particular. Ames and Rosemont observe that for Kant the "substance of our autonomy, then, is an inner rational faculty uncorrupted by external circumstances that enable us to comply with moral imperatives, an autonomy that is devoid of our particularities as unique persons living in a particular time and place" (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.37).

For Confucius, on the other hand, it is "loving others," connecting with them in a meaningful and patterned fashion that is "a precondition for behaving morally—that is, for being appropriate and meaningful (*yi*) in one's actions" (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.52). The moral value of an action is facilitated by the process of realizing humanness – a life-long effort to become a *jūnzǐ*, a person of *ren*, a consummate person, who embodies a comprehensive set of virtues and who does what is appropriate under all circumstances. There is a strong temporal component to being able to make a truly moral decision – it took Confucius his whole life to obtain the ability to follow "the desires of his heart" without "overstepping the bounds."

Finally, where Kant warns us that although feelings and inclinations can be instrumental in facilitating moral action, we should keep our vigil to avoid false friends, Confucius stresses "the importance of being motivated to meet your responsibilities with the proper attitude" (Ames and Rosemont 2009, p.27). For Confucius, thus, fulfilling one's duty is not enough to constitute a truly moral action – it is also necessary to "feel the right way." This is why, when asked whether taking care of one's parents can be called family reverence (*xiao*), he ardently replied: "even hounds and horses can require care. Without respectful vigilance, what is the difference?" (Analects 2.7).

There is also a second goal to be achieved from comparing Kant and Confucius. By placing these two thinkers face-to-face, they can mutually shed a light on each other. This way,

without reducing one to another, different shades of each respective doctrine can be highlighted. One of the areas where such a comparison can prove fruitful in bringing about a more nuanced approach is the debate deontology vs. virtue ethics. Although there is a considerable amount of scholarship (Van Norden 2007; Yu 2007) arguing to understand Confucius and his thought through the lenses of virtue ethics or using Confucius as an example of a virtuous moral exemplar (Zagzebski 2017), this is only one side of the coin. A very different account of Confucius's thought is presented by Lee Ming-huei, who follows footsteps of Mou Zongsan in interpreting Confucius by means of Kantian philosophy (Lee 2013, p.48) and placing Confucius within the deontological framework. He argues, that "though Confucius and Mencius have a different understanding of the structure of the moral subject from Kant's, this does not prevent both ethics from belonging to deontological ethics" (Lee 2013, p.55). He uses the response to Zai Wo's questions from *Analects* 17.21 as an example of Confucius's deontological views:

Confucius, on the contrary, asks Zaiwo whether or not he feels at ease in his heart, which means that Confucius establishes the meaning of "three-year mourning period" on the basis of the agent's motivation. This is a viewpoint of "*Gesinnungsethik*," and therefore it implies a deontological viewpoint. (Lee 2013, p.50)

A somewhat parallel argument can be made about Kant. The account of Kant that Ames and Rosemont offer, although much milder, could be linked to a long line of critics, such as Hegel or Bernard Williams, who according to Robert B. Louden "stand united in their condemnation of Kant's ethics for precisely this reason: it is charged with 'empty formalism' and 'abstract universality'" (Louden 2010, p.350). In contrary to such views, Louden develops a rich argument for Kantian moral anthropology. According to him, Kant was absolutely aware that "those who are concerned to make morality efficacious in human life need to learn more about the distinctive features of human nature (Louden 2010, p.355). It is indeed that a part of Kant's diagnosis of human nature is the condemnation of affects and passions and an attempt to prevent them from occurring at all. However, there are some tendencies that can help the goals of morality. Susceptibility to politeness is one of them. According to Louden's account of Kant "because of our nature, we are susceptible to influence through politeness and this influence can and should be used in cultivating moral character. (...) Politeness helps morality by cultivating self-restraint." Here is where Kant comes surprisingly close to the Confucian theme of the importance of civility and the description offered in *Analects* 12.1 of what the virtue of *ren* is supposed to mean – *keji fuli* – to restrain oneself and return to the rules of proper behavior (rituals) *li*.

It is not that we are now to perceive Kantian philosophy as some slightly different iteration of virtue ethics and Confucius's thought as mere footnotes to the deontological moral

anthropology. However, perhaps it is possible to acknowledge the elements in Kantian philosophy that Monika Betzler calls “ethics of virtue” (Betzler 2008) – elements that “are not to be assimilated into virtue ethics” but can help us recognize that “virtue is a core element is his [Kant’s] ethics” (Betzler 2008, p.27). Similarly, we do not have to accept Lee Ming-huei’s argument in its sometimes problematic totality, especially the premise that “consequentialism and deontology are jointly exhaustive and mutually exclusive” (Van Norden 2013, p.56), but we can follow his lead in nuancing Confucius’s thought and analyzing it from different standpoints.

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