

## CONFUCIUS AND KANT OR THE ETHICS OF DUTY

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**Abstract:** *It is amazing how two of the greatest thinkers of mankind, who also lived in different times, in distinct societies and cultures, shared similar moral views. Thus, fundamentally, morals is the outcome of a general experience, is the universal, transcendent and irreducible exigency.*

*Starting from such premises, this article stresses the essential identity between Confucius' morals and the Kantian deontological ethics.*

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“The philosopher said: Mankind virtue is more useful to the people than water or fire; I could see people who died as they stepped into the water or the fire; yet, I did not see them dying for stepping into the road of sympathy”.

*Confucius*

“Act only on the maxim you want to be a universal law.”

*Immanuel Kant*

*In the world we live, moral perfection cannot be turned into a concept, as we have interests, desires, temptations, wishes hard to control; to do your own duty and to do the duty towards others is a form of perfection. To be good, to love to act to other's happiness and to your own accomplishment are duty actions with a high moral content. If we were able to respect the moral law or the Kantian categorical imperative, then we would all become saints; we would not need laws or states, as all our actions would be positive, human. In fact, our world is dominated by what we call an anthropic entropy, where he who does his duty becomes discordant or anachronistic. It is not easy to speak about the Kantian morals in a world in which Man has no longer got an inner life, lacking authentic guidance and being incapable of understanding himself.*

1. Fulfilling one's duty means to obey to a law requiring respect for the other, whoever he may be, and whatever the circumstances.

Duty consciousness is a must, an exigency whose value is not the outcome of a feeling. This will require an ever repeated experience of giving up oneself and of rising, of denying personal spontaneity, and logics of personal strivings.

Duty is the core of morality. The moral experience is lived like a fight, like a battle between the voice of reason and the aspirations of sensitiveness. The experience of incertitude, of „what should I do?” makes us think continuously.

There is a need for the absolute in ethics without something to make it compatible with the concrete situations in which it applies, now or here. Thus, the moral experience is one of an unhappy consciousness suffering between to be and to need to be, and perceiving reality like a permanent deception.

The etyhics assumes a deep understanding of things, while the morals involves a judgement on things, asking us to differentiate between what is ideal from what is real.

It is amazing how two of the greatest thinkers of mankind, who also lived in different times, in distinct societies and cultures, shared similar moral views. Thus, fundamentally, morals is the outcome of a general experience, is the universal, transcendent and irreducible exigency.

Starting from such premises, this article stresses the essential identity between Confucius' morals and the Kantian deontological ethics.

Confucius was born in 551 B.C. Living during the time when China went through a period of social and moral regress, Confucius preached the dao (the way of the old), by stressing that the ancient social hierarchies reflected the moral order of the world, also underlying the need of virtue, goodwill and kindness at each level of society.

„Is there any word, asked Tzu-Kung, which could be adopted as a rule for a whole life?“

The master answered: „Is it not KINDNESS that word? Do not harm others with what you do not like“ (Analecte XV, XXI).

There is no doubt that this maxim is expressed in a negative manner in the Analecte, not once but thrice, though a negative sentence does not necessarily lead to a negative meaning. The Chinese people always understood the maxim in a positive way (Hajime Nakamura, „East and West“).

„Kindness is what makes a place beautiful. He who has the chance to choose and does not settle in a place like that, will not be a wise man“.

The ideal REN confucianist could be compared with the maitre bhuddist, with the Christian love, and with the absolute kantian imperative.

In the 18-th century, one of the greatest German classic philosophers, Immanuel Kant, stated, in a definitely more elaborated way, the categorical imperative or the moral law: „treat the individual as a mean, never as a goal“. In his vision, each individual is a goal, due to his rational nature. Kant's absolute imperative is the universal and objective expression of the rational nature. If something is good for an individual, it will be good for everybody. The matters and the moral convictions are developed because they need to be universally valid.

Different from metaphysics, the moral deliberation is based on the pure practical reason or the inner good will, and the structure of Kant's moral philosophy is built on the self correlated concepts, on duty (the recognition of the good), on liberty (at the level of the reason) and on autonomy (self determination).

We are the ones who establish the moral law, expressed in the absolute imperative and unconditionally applied to all the people, because it is an expression of our rational nature.

**2.** In our opinion, isomorphism or the matching between the two ethical conceptions refer to the rationality of the human being.

Confucius, the most famous Chinese philosopher who lived in the 6-th century, and who was called the „philosopher“ in the Chinese writings, stated that „ the most important thing in knowledge is duty.“ „Oh, how great is the saint man's law of duty; it is like an infinite ocean! It makes and holds all the beings, it can touch the skies through its height. Oh, how rich and complex it is!“ (Shao Yung, XXVII). This is the law of reason, it is the leading process which reconciles the deeds with the rational nature“. (Ibid, I). It is mandatory and immutable. „The rule of moral conduct that guides all our actions is so mandatory, as we are never allowed to ignore it, not even for a single moment. If we could do that, it would no longer be an imuable conduct law“(I,2). This rule is sacred and absolute, as „The law of duty is the law of duty itself“ (XIII, 2).

These are arguments entitling that the Kantian ethics based on the concept of duty is not unique in the history of philosophy, and furthermore, that the Kantian vision

started with the Chinese philosopher's texts. The Kantian text witnesses the similitudes, and the modern manner of approach:

„Duty! What a great and sublime word, you do not have anything agreeable in yourself, anything to include insinuation, but claims for obedience, that do not threaten with anything, that might raise a natural aversion of the soul, and might frighten it to activate the will, you only settle a law which penetrates the soul, and yet gains veneration (though not always obedience), despite the will, in front of which all vocations die, yet secretly acting against it; have you a worthy descent or where could we find the place of your noble source which proudly rejects any relations to vocations, the place from which the indispensable condition that only the people themselves could share should come up, like from its own origin?“ (C.R.P).

Duty is our obligation to motivate our exclusive deeds through the moral law. The moral law will require holy obedience to be totally adequate with the moral law. But the Man, as a rational being, who belongs to worlds of sensitivity and intelligibility is only capable of virtue, of accomplishing the moral law out of respect for, between the requirements of the moral law and what the Man can do, postulates the immortality of the soul, which opens the perspective of reconciliation, through an infinite program of the will perfect adequacy to the moral law.

The aim of this moral rule is self improvement, this is the Man's law, but above it there is perfection, and this is the law of the Sky, and the real principle of all the other laws.

By this, Confucius reaches the sublime idea that morality is superior to nature, and that it is the first principle of universe. The sky and the earth are, undoubtedly, great; yet, the man found imperfection even in them. That is why the wise man, thinking that the rule of the moral conduct is even greater, said that the world could not contain it (XXV, 1).

So, what is the cause of universe?

„The active power of the sky and the earth“ answered Confucius, may be expressed in one single word: perfection. Perfection is the beginning and the end of all beings; without it, the world could not exist“ (XIII, 1). These are the general principles of Confucius's morals.

The greatest individual virtues that Confucius recommended were: the power of the soul, moderation – which means to keep constant on the middle course-, justice, and above all, kindness. Confucius was searching for perfection and the means to reach it in the field of the exterior conduct, of the „phenomenon“, and from here there came the importance of the etiquette. In fact, Confucius's philosophy is a pragmatic formalism.

Confucius suggested a moral doctrine made of applicable precepts to the individual's everyday life in society. Without metaphysical speculations, with no mystical concerns, but with a few hints towards divinity, a simple and practical ethics, fidelity to traditions and to ancestral rites, honesty and a spirit of justice, love to the dear ones and family devotion, respect to hierarchy, sense of duty, virtue... The virtuous attitude, in Confucius's morals, leads to wisdom. So, Confucius's philosophy had a pragmatic finality; starting from the premises that the individual is an ever perfectible being will require the duty of perfection. All individuals, from the strongest to the most humble one, should strive to touch the ideal perfection.

1) What is „perfect“ is perfect in itself; the duty of law is a duty of law in itself.

2) Without perfection, the individuals could not exist. That is why the wise one will always praise perfection, more than anything else.

3) A perfect individual will not be content only to improve himself, he will strive to improve others, too. Improving oneself is, undoubtedly, a virtue while improving others

is a high level science; these two kinds of improvement are virtues of nature or of the pure rational skills (Tchung-Iung or the Environment Invariability).

The self improvement or melioration is, in Confucius's opinion, the starting point and the absolutely indispensable way to reach the others' improvement. The higher the rank of the individual in a society, the higher his duties towards himself. The pure improvement, behind everything else, is a law of the sky; the improvement resulting from the fervent efforts to observe the law of the sky – which with Confucius means to comply with the human nature - is just an incomplete and inoperant morals. But, in order that the individual conforms his conduct to the moral law, he should know it first. „In the world, says Confucius, there are people who are entirely perfect, who could know their inner nature, their finite law and duties coming from it, they could understand, through this, the nature of the other people, their finite law, and could show them the duties they must observe to meet the demands of the sky” ..... (Tchung- Iung or the Environment Invariability).

There are different steps to improve. The highest one is over the human condition, reflecting the hidden and immutable human nature substance, not what might be really improved. Those who reached that step, says Confucius, could foresee the future, the peoples' destiny, their rise and fall, behaving- due to these high skills of the spirit - like the immaterial intelligence, they are the quasi-divine individuals.

In the middle of Confucius's lecture there stays the faith in a superior order in which the Man could contribute through the improvement of his own conduct. The outcome is the importance of ceremonies and religious rites, duties which represent the supreme way of the individual's collaboration to the laws of nature. Essentially, the moral laws and the laws of nature are parts of the same normative system; there is a single order in the world, embracing the sequence of the seasons and the alternation of the day with the night, all these inside the harmonious norms of the moral conduct and of those reigning over the evolution of universe.

Admitting the substantial identity and the interdependence of these laws is an indispensable condition of the moral law, the way leading to ideal, together with the basic norms of responsibility: when people do not accomplish their moral duties, when the father is no longer a good one, when the husband ceases to be the good husband, when the leader stops being the proper leader, and when the subordinate would no longer obey, then politeness, intelligence and fidelity towards duty are neglected, the social order leads to anarchy, and nature itself is affected. Then, the universe turns into the real chaos.

Immanuel Kant thinks that perfection is similar to holiness, it is not a gift given to any rational individual, here, on the earth. We might approach it only through a progressive process which, if it cannot reach its goal in this world, it will continue in the other world, through our eternal personality in that world, so that we must admit the immortality of the soul as a „consoling hope”. Kant considered that morals should not resort to the idea of the supreme individual, to meet the duties the Man has, it should not use other reasons than the moral law to fulfill them. Morals should be enough in itself.

Kant sustains that morality is entirely based on reason which involves the moral requirements that all our actions should observe. The German philosopher considers that all moral norms are representations of the same general moral norm, which he called the absolute imperative. Its most important forms are the Universal Law – which acts for the utmost will to be in agreement with it – and the Aim in itself – which acts for always treating mankind as a goal in itself, and never as a mean, at both individual and collective level. The basic idea in its first form is that morality demands that the same standards should be applied to everybody. We must always think whether we would like somebody else to do what we wish to do. In the second form, the basic idea is what

morality demands, namely to treat people - ourselves included -, as holders of value in themselves, not only in relation to their wishes. Rationalism demands to treat similar things in similar ways

The Kantian humanism is a perfect answer to Confucius's doctrine rendered in such maxims as „to treat others as you like to be treated”. The rule of life is reciprocity (Ta-hio X, 3); (Menz-tzu, II, IV): „One day Fan-ci asked Confucius what the human virtue meant”, and the philosopher answered: „It means to love the people. You must love the people from the bottom of your heart. The great man is the one who shares the same feelings of understanding and kindness to everybody. I should like to bring support to the older ones by a comfortable rest, to always give my friends the same feeling of truthfulness, to take care of women and children with a real paternal love!”. One day, one of Confucius's disciple bitterly said to him: „Everybody has brothers, but I am only a single child!” „The great man”, answered the philosopher, „must consider all the people living inside the four great lines as his own brothers!”

(Lun- yu, I, XII, 22, I, 6, I, X, 14, V, 25, XII, 5).

**3.** The ethical thinking of the two philosophers had a beneficial influence on the societies they lived in, and nevertheless, on posterity. It is important for any society that any exterior behaviour to be according to the moral conduct. Kant thought that the doctrine of the moral good was according to the common moral thought, and that it was necessary to any rational individuals. Morality should be universal. The same moral requirements should be available to all the people, anytime and in any circumstances.

So, even if there are no written works by Confucius,- his theories were gathered in „Lun-yu”, his thinking is fundamental for the Chinese civilisation.

„His disciples went a bit too far, presenting Confucius like an inspired prophete or a God. They even tried hard to make his theories more complex, by adding their personal explanations and attributing them to him”(Histoire de la Philosophie 1, Encyclopedie de la Pleiade).

The originality of Confucius's theories, from the point of view of the western school, consists in the fact that it is not sustained by a theory or a dogma. First, it is about the matter mostly related to dogma, the matter of the divine and the kingdom of „spirits”.

The ethics in Confucius was intended to be a social pedagogy, too as many ethics were. The maxims are general, some are abstract. And so are the imperatives. „Treat others as you like to be treated”, „Love the people from the bottom of your heart”, „The greater Man should consider all the others his own brothers”, „The greater Man hates those who, from the bottom of society, would slander their superiors, those who would not obey, and who are not disciplined.”

„The way” in Confucius is one praising „life”, because all his cogitation shows the human value, meaning to be „together with the others” (Analecte, 18, 6). The theme of the human solidarity invoked is spectacular.

For Immanuel Kant, the humanism in each individual was sacred. „Act to treat humanism, in yourself and in others, like a goal, not like a mean.” So, respect is the only true universal feeling, being a pragmatic love, which does not owe anything to the sensitiveness of its generator, and which is meant to everybody, beyond any sentimental resemblances.

By means of a beautiful idea, Kant depicted the sky above and the moral law as the order of necessity and liberty. The characteristic of the human free nature is to contradict nature. To do one's duty does not mean to be as you used to be, to fight against the signs of nature (our intentions or desires). This Man's duplicity to be both sensitive and intelligible makes him capable of morality. The German philosopher firmly rejected the theological interference in morality, considering it etheronomic and against morality.

His ethics is based on reasoning, and it is a priori universally valid for every thinking individual.

The whole world is founded on the moral law, and Kant stated his high esteem for two things: a sky full of stars above and a moral law inside consciousness. For Confucius's disciples, the „kingdom in the sky above” is the representation of the moral law. It becomes active in a static universe, and from the perspective of the perfectly balanced world, it is hard to perceive the possibility or the reason of any deeper changes in the order of things, to lead to the essential progress in the history of society, and to the living conditions of the „common mortals”.

Kant's undeniable merit in the field of morals was his inexhaustible endeavour to build a scientific, universal ethics, so we may consider the Kantian ethics superior to Confucianism. His deeply grounded moral ideas are summarized in his works „Fundamentals of Moral Metaphysics” and the „Practical Reason Criticism”.

Despite all criticism, of which some very well grounded works with regard to his thinking, the Kantian conception on morals represents a major step in the general philosophical thinking.

These two philosophers succeeded in drawing a universal dimension to morals which they founded metaphysically, by admitting an eternal celestial order or a universal order reflected in the human reason, masterly objectified in the ETHICS OF DUTY.

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