

Kant and Confucius: Moral Ethics Behind Western and Eastern Approaches to International Relations

Ksenia Radchenkova
University of Graz, Graz, Austria

International relations (IR) as a discipline is currently experiencing a crisis that may be viewed as a protest against the Euro-centric theories in humanities and the Western view on global politics, some of the most vocal opponents coming from Asia, with China at its core. This paper aims to compare the principles that depict moral ethics serving as a base for political idealism in the West and the East with Kant's views as a foundation for Western idealism and Confucius's ethical theory as a ground for an ideal society from the Asian perspective. The comparison is conducted along the following axes: the notions of *autonomy*, *will*, and *freedom*, initially developed to depict an ideal world order in the Kantian view. As a result of this comparison, the common feature between the two types of ethics, namely the strive for human dignity, becomes apparent. In conclusion, the paper suggests that researchers should concentrate on common features in the two philosophies instead of juxtaposing their apparent differences, which politically reflect the opposition of individualism and collectivism. Stress on human dignity shall become a unifying factor in modern international politics instead.

Keywords: comparative philosophy, moral ethics, international relations, Kantian ethics, Confucian ethics, international politics

Introduction

Scientific discourse in the field of international relations and international politics has been in recent years dominated by fears of the decay of Liberalism (Ginsburg, 2020), on the one hand, and the need to overcome the borders of euro-centric approaches (Mahbubani, 2021), on the other. The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and the utmost political loyalty of the Chinese regime to the European aggressor has worsened the uncertainty in international politics as well as suspicions about the true intentions of the Chinese economic, political, and cultural expansion, especially in light of its ambitions to challenge the American dominance on the international arena.

The concept Community of Shared Future for Mankind (CSFM) presents China's signature foreign policy vision; it is a comprehensive Chinese proposal for a better future for humanity that, in 2017, was incorporated by the United Nations into the resolution of the 55th Commission for Social Development (Resolution of the 55th Commission for Social Development 2017). According to Asian scholarship,¹ the concept's roots lay in Confucianism, which is, at the same time, the main political philosophy endorsed by the current political regime

Ksenia Radchenkova, M.Sc, Spec., Department of Global Governance, Institute of the Foundations of Law, University of Graz, Graz, Austria.

¹ Such authors as Uzma Khan, Huili Wang, Barack Lujia Bao, Veronika Sintha Saraswati.

in China as an ideal for local and international society. Looking into the philosophical roots of the modern international legal system, with the United Nations being the highest supranational organ, we shall come to Immanuel Kant and his understanding of international society construction. Until these days, it has been representing a conception of the world order in Western political idealism. My research aims to compare the two conceptions of moral ethics as a base for the construction of a perfect international society as grounded in Western and Chinese philosophical thought. Notwithstanding the civilizational differences between the two regions of origin, I claim that these idealistic approaches have more commonalities than are usually perceived in Western scholarship. Hence, both can be accepted as the philosophical base for the ideal model of an international political order grounded in human dignity as its highest value.

Unit of Analysis

To start my comparative research, I would first need to answer the “what is question” (Mair, 2008) as to what the unit of my comparison is. The unit of analysis in this study will be the conceptualization of moral ethics that I will derive from Confucian and Kantian philosophies. Among Confucian sources, I will use Confucian Analects (Lunyu 论语) and Mencius (Mengzi 孟子); as the source for Kantian ethics, Kant’s works *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (G), and *Metaphysics of Morals* (M) will be studied.

To prove that the units of my comparison meet the criteria of comparable conceptualizations and that I am not “comparing apples with oranges” (Stegmueller, 2011, p. 471), the common features of the two *Weltanschauungen* must be listed.

Firstly, in both philosophies, moral ethics is viewed as the necessary and most vital principle to regulate human society. Both Confucius and Kant, as well as their followers, stand out from the array of other philosophers since they both did not concentrate on military advice for the rulers of their states (like Sun-Tzu and Machiavelli) or did not strictly perceive the positive law with its coercive nature as the base for their theories (like legalists and positivists). Instead, both viewed moral ethics as the foundation for their political and legal philosophy. Kant proclaims that “philosophy can be none other than moral wisdom” (Kant, M 6:218), while Confucius covers all his teachings with one phrase: “Let there be no evil in your thoughts (‘诗’三百，一言以蔽之‘思无邪’)” (Confucius Analects 2:2).

Secondly, both philosophies engage deeply in the process of political and legal formation of the state and inter-state order. Hence, both conceptualizations refer to the modern disciplines of international politics and law that serve as a base for international relations theories. At the same time, both teachings up until now are considered philosophical masterpieces in state theory, both in China and the West. Even though a detailed analysis of the ideal state construction will not be conducted in this paper, such analysis based on a comparison of ethical foundations remains an option for further studies.

As the next similarity, I will point out the placement of an ideal human being at the center of philosophical scrutiny. The perfect human stands as the base of an ideal state both for Confucius and Kant. Confucius speaks of *junzi* (君子), the ideal moral man, while Kant, in one of the forms of the categorical imperative, gives humanity a central role, saying that humanity (*die Menschheit*) in oneself and others must be treated as an end in itself.

Considering modern legal theory, one can affirm that both philosophies have a monistic approach to the law with a hierarchical structure introduced explicitly in their writings. Both authors presuppose that ideal law exists as an artificial construct in the universe. It must be only formulated by the people. For Kant, monism may be seen

in the necessity for obedience to the laws of the categorical imperative, for Confucius — in following the concept of Dao.

Regarding political values, one should note that in both philosophies, the most fundamental value for a state is peace. The cooperation of independent states remains the primary goal of international politics.

Both authors prefer monarchical leadership within the state with a consultative body by the ruler's side.²

Last but not least, the positioning of happiness in the philosophies of Confucianism and Kantianism is, in fact, very similar. Kant seeks happiness only when the claims of virtue have been satisfied (Guyer, 2000). Similarly, for Confucius, happiness seems to be constituted by ethical pleasure, ethical desire, and moral innocence (Luo, 2019, p. 41), which corresponds to the Kantian view.

The list of similarities, however disputable, is relatively long, which would allow speaking of the possibility of a comparative analysis of these two ethical conceptions as a foundation of the ideal world order.

Methodology

Deciding on the methodology of the analysis, I would like to work in line with the conception proposed by Kwong-loi Shun, whose current research project is a multi-volume work in Confucian moral psychology. Shun, in his “Studying Confucian and Comparative Ethics: Methodological Reflection,” suggests that there exist three kinds of activities to analyze a philosophical text: *textual analysis*, *philosophical construction*, and *articulation* (Shun, 2009, p. 457). Instead of the common terms *interpretation* and *reconstruction* that are used not always consistently in literature, he proposes these three types of analytical scrutiny as they serve better for the study of Chinese thought. Following this approach, I will use the same methodology for Kantian texts.

To stay within the scope of this study, I will rely on the *textual analysis* from the scholarly literature articles. In other words, this article will not suggest new translations for the Chinese and German terms or give possible references to them in the historical literature. Translations, references, and their analysis will be taken from the works of other authors. *Philosophical construction* that “takes some insights from a text as a starting point and builds a philosophical account on that basis” (Shun, 2009, p. 460) will be, to a large extent, the tool of research. However, the preferable method in this study will be *articulation*. It attempts to connect the text and the “insights from the past” with the concerns and experiences of a contemporary reader.

As for Shun's critical claim of an existing asymmetry in comparative studies is reflected in a trend “to approach Chinese thought from a Western philosophical perspective, by reference to frameworks, concepts, or issues found in Western philosophical discussion” (Shun, 2009, p. 470), I can only agree with this point of view and apply in my research the methods that still fall into the same Western-originated trend. There are two major reasons for that. First, my educational background allows me to base the analysis on a Western perspective as I was raised in a Western philosophical tradition and may consider it already as a part of my own *Weltanschauung*. Knowledge of Chinese philosophy played a secondary role in it. Second and most importantly, a Western-centric approach to the study will echo a similar tendency in international relations and politics, which might give added relevance to the study.

Indeed, it is essential to create not an idealistic but a realistic comparative framework for the research. This does not mean that, in my understanding, only Western philosophical concepts have universal application. I rather claim that Western and Chinese concepts are and must be pronounced universally applicable. However, no human

² Kant in *Perpetual Peace* and Confucius in his description of the exam system for state officials.

being is capable of an unbiased and “machine-clear” analysis of any event or matter since not only reality but the human mind itself is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 2011). Hence, it would be scientifically significant to clearly state my origin—a Western philosophical background—and adherence to constructivism as an approach seizing the golden middle ground between different social theories of International Relations and Politics (Adler, 1997). In line with this approach and its deconstructive turn (Marko, 2019, p. 31), it is of significant importance to find functional equivalents to Western terms and compare the corresponding views on the construction of a perfect social order in Western and Chinese philosophies.

To navigate my research in a manner of comparative analysis of basic terms as specified in the Kantian understanding of the world order, I would like to separately search for functional alternatives to the notions of *autonomy*, *will*, and *freedom* in Confucianism. As the main ethical parameters necessary for the ideal functioning of the state in classical Western political philosophy, these notions are usually presented as a cornerstone for all the East-West comparisons in philosophy. Indeed, there is no mention of autonomy, will, and freedom in classical Chinese texts. Moreover, all these terms are serving as the basis for the Western liberal theory that modern Chinese political theorists are actively opposing. My main hypothesis is that classical Kantian understanding of autonomy, will, and freedom differs greatly from modern terms and, in fact, has much more in common with a Confucian understanding of moral ethics that serves as a base for the construction of an ideal society.

Autonomy

Many researchers would consider my comparison of Kantian and Confucian ethics based on individual autonomy a pathway with a dead-end because of the widespread criticism of Confucianism as failing to recognize the value of individuality as understood in the Western liberal tradition of political thought. This criticism originated in China during the May Fourth Movement (1919), when traditional Chinese thought was proclaimed to actively suppress individual autonomy (Chan, 2002, p. 281). Nowadays, this criticism surfaces in different forms—such as the incompatibility of the teaching with human rights or civil liberties due to the lack of respect for individual autonomy (Tiwald, 2012, p. 245). However, these claims are mostly based on the modern understanding of autonomy, which differs greatly from Kant’s own view on the matter. The goal of this part is to lay out the features of Kantian autonomy and show the similarities between them and corresponding Confucian notions.

For Kant, individual autonomy resides first and foremost in moral autonomy. He sees it as a necessary foundational quality for every individual and as a “key to his defense of the rationality of moral commitment” (Hill, 2012, p. 15). In Kant’s first work on morals, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), the “principle of autonomy” is presented as a version of the categorical imperative: It is a “principle of each human’s will as a will that is legislating universally through all of its maxims” (Kant G 4:432). Hence, the autonomy of the will is the “supreme principle of morality” (Kant G 4:440) and, at the same time, a legislative construct.

Interestingly, the notion of autonomy is used much more often in *Groundwork* than in *Perpetual Peace* or in *Metaphysics of Morals*, where we see it only twice (Kant M 6:383, 6:481). According to Pauline Kleingeld (2018), the reason for this lies in the difference in Kant’s political views. Kleingeld claims that in *Groundwork*, which was written in the 1780s, Kant regarded the moral permissibility of maxims as a fully analogous criterion to the justice of political laws. From this perspective, autonomy is manifested through the requirement for each individual to act as if through one’s own maxims, simultaneously giving universal laws to the entire moral

community (Kleingeld, 2018, p. 78). However, in the 1790s, Kant supposedly changed his position on just political legislation and added the further condition that the citizens must actually consent to the laws before they get enacted (Kleingeld, 2018, p. 79), de facto withdrawing a part of the full and indivisible autonomy of morals and transferring it partially to individuals. Kant's latter view would more likely correspond to the modern form of liberal legislation and the modern notion of representative democracy, given that Kleingeld is correct in her views. However, it is not within the scope of this work to analyze Kant's possible deviation from the original idea of autonomy. Hence, for reasons of consistency, I will assume that the principle of autonomy within Kant's moral philosophy stayed intact as it was formulated in *Groundwork* and had the same meaning and conceptual significance in *Metaphysics of Morals*.

In Kant's view, it is only rational for each person to choose moral objectives in each and every situation since only in this case would it correspond to the "supreme principle" of moral philosophy laid out in his *Groundwork*. The "supreme principle" is an abstract formulation of pure universal morality that has "its source in reason alone, before being applied to human nature" (Kant, 2012, p. 361). In other words, Kant views morality as an independent universal quality existing apart from humanity. Only after describing this quality separately in *Groundwork* of the *Metaphysics of Morals* does Kant apply it to humans by setting forth the entire system of human duties and rights.

Two important points have to be stressed in this respect: first, the independence of morality from humanity, and second, the introduction of human duties and rights as a manifestation of supreme morality applied to human beings.

The first point implies that morality, which among humans is expressed through personal will, is not an exclusive quality of human beings but belongs to all the subjects of the universe. This characteristic lifts morality to the level of the universal principles, or laws, that shed new light on the notion of autonomy. How autonomous are humans in this respect? Only to the extent that moral law allows them (and all the other creatures). Put simply, what we see here, in fact, is the autonomy of morality, not the autonomy of an individual. The monistic structure of the Kantian view on law is evident here. Universal moral law appears on the top, while the law of each different kind of creatures appears on a lower level. This corresponds to the Confucian monistic approach to the universal principles that are transcended for all the subjects of the universe through *Dao* (*dao* 道), and on the lower level, are formulated by Confucius in the form of his teaching aimed at human beings: "Set your aspirations on the *Dao*, hold to virtue (*de* 德), rely on your ren, and relax in the study of arts" (Confucius *Analects* 7:6). The idea of the overarching role of *Dao* does not originate in Confucianism; it is instead adopted by it as an already existing and self-explanatory ultimate truth. However, the connection of *Dao* with *De*, in this case, may imply that universal law has a moral dimension. Recurrent use of these two terms in conjunction signifies the strength of the moral connotation of the universal law. This may be seen as a parallel to the Kantian presentation of morality as one of the forms of the categorical imperative.

The second point defines the necessity of binary construction: duties versus rights to apply the laws of universal morality in human society. The *Metaphysics of Morals* hence describes the lower level of monistic construction of universal law that makes up "subsystems of duties, distinguished by the two kinds of moral laws that can be derived from the principle that unifies the parts into the whole system" (Kant, 2012, p. 361). Rights in this system correspond to duties and are de-facto authorizations to use coercion (Kant, 2012, p. 361). This structure drastically contrasts with the modern liberal formulation of rights that does not presuppose the existence of a parallel structure of duties. Only in communist constitutions, similar to Kant's original plan to

have a double structure of rights versus duties, do individual rights and social rights exist as opposition. Chapter II of the Chinese Constitution is still called *Fundamental Rights and Obligations of Citizens*, in sharp contrast to the majority of formulations in liberal constitutions that usually sound similar to *Rights and Freedoms of Citizens*. At this point, it is essential to formalize the structure of Kant's argument, namely that the autonomy of each individual presupposes the prevalence of universal moral law, under which rights and duties must be formulated.

In Confucianism, each person in the societal hierarchy is expected to perform an array of duties clearly specified according to their position. However, this does not mean that those individuals were not vested with any rights, as claimed by Robert Weatherley (2002). Yes, they are not explicitly described, as it is in the case of duties. The reason for that lies in the purpose of Confucian texts: These were teachings of good manners and good morality to raise an ideal human, a good scholar, or a perfect official, which did not presuppose the knowledge of their rights as it is established in the modern educational or legal system. However, certain ideas about the rights of individuals may be drawn from different parts of Confucian and Mengzi texts. The following passage from Mengzi is often cited in scholarship:

It is only a gentleman who will be able to have a constant mind despite being without a constant means of livelihood. The people, lacking a constant means of livelihood, will lack constant minds, and when they lack constant minds there is no dissoluteness, depravity, deviance, or excess to which they will not succumb. If, once they have sunk into crime, one responds by subjecting them to punishment—that is to entrap the people. With a person of humanity in a position of authority, how could the entrapment of the people be allowed to occur? Therefore, an enlightened ruler will regulate the people's livelihood so as to ensure that, above, they have enough to serve their parents and, below, they have enough to support their wives and children. In years of prosperity they always have enough to eat; in years of dearth they are able to escape starvation. Only then does he urge the people toward goodness; accordingly, they find it easy to comply. (Mencius 1A/7)

This passage may be interpreted as an introduction of the obligations of a ruler or benevolent government (*renzheng* 仁政), while from the perspective of his subjects, prosperity, livelihood, and access to food may be seen as their rights. It is also possible to widen this interpretation to moral rights: Not only should the government enable the people to live a dignified life, but it also must provide the people with a “socioeconomic basis upon which they can live a flourishing moral life, individual as well as familial” (Kim, 2015, p. 165).

There are further examples of political rights in Confucian texts. One of the most famous passages from Mencius endorses the right to depose or even kill a ruler if he acted as a tyrant and oppressed his people, which is sometimes called a “Confucian right to self-defense” in modern scholarship. According to Kim, such right to resistance is given to all the people, which aligns with Mencius's view on universal moral equality (Kim, 2015, p. 167):

After the death of Yao and Shun, the principles that mark sages fell into decay. Oppressive sovereigns arose one after another, ... so that the people could not get clothes and food. Afterwards, corrupt speakings and oppressive deeds became rife... Zhou Gong assisted King Wu, and destroyed Zhou. He smote Yan, and after three years put its sovereign to death. He drove Fei Lian to a corner by the sea, and slew him. The States which he extinguished amounted to fifty. He drove far away also the tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, and elephants—and all the people were greatly delighted. It is said in the *Book of History*, “Great and splendid were the plans of King Wen! Greatly were they carried out by the energy of King Wu! They are for the assistance and instruction of us who are of an after day. They are all in principle correct, and deficient in nothing”. (Mencius 2A/14)

In light of the latest discussions of Confucian constitutionalism and Confucian democracy, the legitimacy of the possibility of accepting some of the Confucian norms as rights seems indisputable.

As seen from the analysis above, the coherent Chinese equivalent of the notion of autonomy is hard to find. However, it seems possible to structurally compare the system of ethics based on the idea of categorical imperative with the moral autonomy within it and the system of ethics based on the notion of Dao.

Will

One of the main cornerstones in comparative studies is the notion of *will*, which is most of the time associated with Kant's autonomy. "Autonomy of the will is the property of the will by which it is a law to itself" (Kant G 4:441). This phrase has often served as the main argument for the incompatibility of Confucian and Kantian norms due to the lack of free will in the former. I would, however, claim that Kant's autonomy of the will has nothing to do with free will as we see it today. In Kantian understanding, *will* would rather be called "choice" or "reasonable choice".

The first mention of autonomy in the Groundwork is connected with the explanation of the sources of law that form the principle of autonomy:

...human being is bound to laws by his duty, but it never occurred to them that he is subject only to laws given by himself but still universal and that he is bound only to act in conformity with his own will. (Kant G 4:433)

Kant introduces the notion of *will* and its quality of autonomy to explain to his readers why they have a duty to follow the positive laws: because it was their own choice—the choice of the people—to create the laws in the first place. Autonomy in this light is nothing else but the authorization given to humans to be able to produce laws out of their own *will* to regulate their lives; however, only those choices (or wills) should end up being laws that correspond to universal morality as a form of the categorical imperative. In this constellation, the notion of individual *will* plays a much less significant role than is often claimed in the modern discourse on free will. By Kant, any will or choice of a person should be made into law only "in such way that the maxims of [this] choice are also included as a universal law" (Kant G 4:441). In other words, universal principles exist and form our reality while people willingly formulate concrete laws that ought to obey the universal principles in turn.

From this angle, the Analects and Mencius embody such formulations of laws by people. Although there is obviously no reference to the categorical imperative and Chinese philosophers did not speak of their *will* to formulate the laws in this particular way, their teachings nevertheless present rules in such a specific manner that their maxims end up being included as universal law into the concept of Dao.

It has to be explicitly mentioned that methodologically, ancient Chinese texts are not directly compatible with the European philosophical tradition of the 18th century. Neither in Confucius's nor in Mencius's texts will we find such a systematical structure and precise classification of relations between different terms and norms. For me personally, as a representative of Western culture, that was the reason to choose Kantian logic as a measure or theoretical basis to compare two types of ethics. Nevertheless, the goal is to compare the core perceptions of the two philosophies, not their outer shells. Hence, I will proceed with Confucianism.

It is disputed by scholars whether the Kantian version of autonomy applies to the Confucian agency. For some (Seok, 2017), it appears that Kantian autonomy does not allow certain characteristics of Confucian morality. For others (Shi, 2015), it seems possible to explain Confucian moral autonomy not through universal reason but through moral feelings. In this respect, one parameter of Kantian morality must be set aside, namely, the practical reason as an objective ground for moral laws. In the dichotomy of feelings and reason, Kant famously prefers the latter and attributes moral choices and autonomy to the realm of rational conditioning. This juxtaposition is alien

to Confucianism. *Junzi*, as an example of an ideal man, is following both his heart and practical reasoning. Instead of the two possible guiding principles - reason and feeling - for each individual, as laid out by Kant, Confucius maintains that there are “universal emotional states, which are moral feelings that reveal moral principles (*li* 理)” (Shi, 2015, p. 276). That means the decision that shall comply with the universal moral law is made by the “heart-mind” (*xin* 心) in Confucianism and by the mind (rationality) in Kantianism. The nature of “heart-mind” is central to Chinese philosophical tradition. For Confucius, it is the locus of the self which is capable of choice: “At seventy, I could follow my heart’s [heart-mind’s] desires without overstepping the bounds of propriety” (Confucius Analects 2:4). Mencius, in a similar fashion, sees it as self-determination and “believes that authentic moral agency can only be achieved through a process of self-cultivation guided by one’s “heart-mind” (Marchal & Wenzel, 2016, p. 376). He speaks of an “unmoved heart-mind” (*bu dong xin* 不动心) (Mencius 2A/2) that is a state of being in which a person is not affected by external factors, is independent and capable of establishing a correct “direction” (*zhi* 志) in accordance with the Confucian virtues. Both philosophers describe the “heart-mind” as a way an individual chooses to fulfill his moral obligations. Doesn’t it echo the obligation to choose autonomously in a Kantian way?

No matter if it is with the help of the “rational mind” (in Kantian understanding) or through the “heart-mind” (in Confucian understanding), in both cases, the decision—the active and autonomous choice of an individual—shall be made in compliance with the already existing universal moral law. This principle unifies both views on moral autonomy.

With reason and heart set aside, I may proceed to the analogs of *will* in Confucianism. The term free will *ziyou yizhi* 自由意志 is not to be found in Chinese philosophical literature until the middle of the 19th century when the works of European philosophers were first translated into Chinese. It is used extensively in modern scholarship but has no local historical connotation. According to the latest empirical research, the term is even nowadays “impenetrable to those without special knowledge” (Zhao et al., 2014). Only recently, the English-writing academia started reconstructing the concept of *free will* against the background of Confucianism (Berniūnas et al., 2021) with the acceptance of the fact that much of the scholarship in China was not concerned with this issue until the middle of the 20th century.

The faculty to make choices in Confucian philosophy is comprised of four notions that may refer to Kantian’s “free will,” namely 心 *xin* (heart-mind), 性 *xing* (human nature, inborn capacity), 命 *ming* (lifespan, fate), 自然 *ziran* (nature, spontaneity). All of them are connected to the notion of *will* to a certain extent.

With the nature of heart-mind being presented earlier, I have to make a clear stand on the other three notions that would rather fall into the category of unreasonableness for Kant. *Xing* 性 (human nature) is used seldom by Confucius, while for Mencius, it explains humans’ capacity for spontaneous actions, shared by all human beings, that has to be under control (Mencius 7B/24). *Min* 命 (fate) is a faculty responsible for communication with Heaven and can be influenced through ceremonies, gifts, and moral behavior. *Ziran* 自然 (spontaneity) is a Daoist term that is somewhat similar to *xing* but is seen as positive and should not be restrained as it signifies the naturalness of happening. If a person is doing something in *ziran* way, it always goes without effort and results in success. All three notions, at first glance, have little to do with the understanding of a will, let alone free will, in the Kantian sense; however, they do build up a network of causalities that affect the choices of individuals.

Additionally, the term *zhi* 志, as the direction of human virtues transmission, which is also often translated as “will,” must be considered as one of the faces of will in connection with Dao. In Mencius, the master stresses

that the person with an “unmoved heart-mind” will not be affected by external factors; instead, he will be able to establish the correct direction *zhi* or, in other words, make a right free choice to act in accordance with the virtues of “wisdom” (*zhi*) and “righteousness” (*yi*) (Marchal & Wenzel, 2016, p. 376).

This brings me to one of the main differences between Kantian and Confucian moral ethics—the logic of causalities. While Kant can explain causality through the pure rationality of the human mind in the best tradition of ancient Greek philosophy, Confucius and Mencius have to operate with a number of concepts that altogether affect individual choices. In a situation like that, human *free will* would not be enough to legislate; moreover, it would be considered naive and perhaps even stupid to hold that there is one ideal solution to a given problem without paying attention to the circumstances that might additionally influence the final decision of a person. If I could put it in mathematical terms, Kantian’s *will* would be a function of problem x expressed by the formula $F(x) = y$ where y is *free will*. In contrast, the Confucian function of problem x would rather look like $F(x) = y^n + b - a(k-n)$ where y stands for *zhi* 志, b —for *xin* 心, a —for *xing* 性, k —for *ming* 命, and n —for *ziran* 自然. In such a constellation, the share of y (which has the closest meaning to Kantian *free will*) in the problem resolution is sufficiently smaller than in Kant’s equation. Instead of connecting the function of x with only one factor, Confucianism introduces a comprehensive formula with many factors, all of which affect *free will* to a bigger or smaller extent.

As a result, the four faculties described above are fit to constitute an equivalent of *will* that is, from this perspective, definitely present in the Confucian formula. Most importantly, it is the moral obligation of an individual to express it, which echoes the Kantian view.

Freedom

Having established a connection between Kant’s *will* and its’ Confucian analogs, it is important to step forward to find the analogs of Kant’s concept of *freedom* in Confucianism. Kant connects freedom to the *will*, proclaiming that freedom of the will is nothing “other than autonomy, that is, the will’s property of being a law to itself” (Kant G 4:447). In the section dealing with autonomy, it was already discussed how this relates to the Confucian understanding of lawgiving. Even though it is not an obligation for each individual (due to the system of causalities mentioned in a section on will), it is nevertheless possible for *junzi*, a real gentleman, to formulate laws in conformity with the universal law of Dao. The moral side of such lawgiving is more critical for the understanding of freedom. “A free will and a will under moral laws are one and the same” (Kant G 4:447). From the question of causality, we get directly linked to the question of moral freedom. As Guyer puts it, freedom, in Kant’s understanding, is a value in itself (Guyer, 2000, p. 5). Not as a fact, but as a value, it enables individuals to act according to the moral imperative. Corradetti, in turn, puts the significance of freedom for Kant higher than reason itself. He states that it is freedom and not reason that justifies the concept of human beings being seen as ends in themselves (Corradetti, 2021, p. 119).

Indeed, we read in Kant’s lecture on natural law:

But reason is not yet the cause: since man is an end in itself, he has a dignity that cannot be replaced by any equivalent. But reason does not give us this dignity. It is freedom, and freedom alone, which makes that we are ends in ourselves. (Kant, 2020, p. 5)

Therefore, it is moral freedom that allows people to act under the moral formulation of the categorical imperative. Even though morality is rational and not connected with personal desires, the highest substance that

allows us to form the moral law is freedom. Claudio Corradetti sums it up in the best way. Freedom and the moral law are mutually related: freedom is the substance to the moral law and the moral law is its form (Corradetti, 2021, p. 120).

How does this understanding of freedom correspond to Confucian ideas? A broad spectrum of views exists on that matter: Some deny that Confucians conceive of freedom (Rosemont, 1988), while others point to the manifold forms of Confucian freedom. This research draws on the findings of the latter.

At first glance, the correspondence may be seen in the word freedom itself. The Chinese term for freedom that is commonly used today is *ziyou* (自由). *Zi* means self. *You* means “decided by or depend on”. Some of the ways the word is being used include (1) to follow, as in “follow this road,” and (2) by, as in “blown away by the wind,” which indicates the agency of an event. Combining the two words, the term *ziyou* means “following oneself” or “acting by oneself” (Li, 2014, p. 907). This term could easily imply the autonomy of free will as its first and most apparent characteristic. However, it was used for the first time only in the second century AD by Confucian scholars in the analysis of Mencius’ texts. Moreover, the word itself still had a very narrow meaning, referring to one’s ability to make his own choice, not more than that. For the purpose of this research and to find an equivalent to the freedom meant by Kant, we need a much more inclusive concept.

My opinion here coincides with that of Chengyang Li (2014), who argues that the existence of the concept of *freedom* was presupposed in Chinese classical Confucian literature even without being articulated and shall be accessed through the concept of “choosing,” since “no one can choose without freedom,” which identifies a particular orientation in Confucian discussions of choice by which to delineate its particular conception of freedom (Li, 2014, p. 909). In other words, the broad concept of freedom that Li tries to trace in classical Confucianism is shortly expressed in the following phrase by Confucius: “following one’s heart’s desires without overstepping the bounds of what is right and proper” (Confucius Analects 2:4) is an ideal of a self-cultivated moral character of an individual. Li persuasively contends that the Confucian conception of freedom has dimensions of choice and autonomy and builds up a social ideal. The realization of this autonomy is always relational, and its social harmony relies on accordance with what is good and proper (Carleo, 2021, p. 219).

Is this not an exact reflection of Kantian ideas? As Guyer puts the Kantian maxim, our complete good is a composite set by our dual nature: as rational beings and as animal creatures, whereas we should always subordinate the latter to the former. We need not deny seeking our happiness, but we must always seek virtue first (Guyer, 2000, p. 3).

As it appears, in both teachings, the necessity of practical self-consciousness to act under the idea of freedom that should lead to the formulation of laws in correspondence with universal laws is presented through the same lens. This necessity is prescribed by a human ability to choose the good that is inbound in every individual. And the name for this ability is *dignity*. Kant describes it in the following way: “...that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative worth, that is, a price, but an inner worth, that is, dignity” (Kant G 4:435). Confucius states: “The junzi seeks it in himself; the small man seeks it in others. The junzi bears himself with dignity but does not contend; he joins with others but does not become a partisan” (Confucius, Analects 15:21-22).

Hence, the idea of *human dignity* appears as a unifying construct between the two ethical teachings.

Though generally disputable and inclusive of many different characteristics, the concept of dignity in its modern Western reading is most often perceived as “a status human beings have, not because of their position

within a particular society but simply because of their common humanity” (Rosen, 2012, p. 61). Notably, it was under the influence of Kant that all the previous meanings of dignity (such as rank, status, or behavior) came to unification under the general recognition of dignity as the inherent value of humanity. This conception excludes human beings from the rest of creation due to their capacity to adhere to the moral rules of the universe/categorical imperative. Precisely this meaning is also expressed in Confucian teaching. As Qianfang Zhang (2016) notes:

While Confucianism takes gentleman as the ideal personality and humanity and righteousness as the central principles of the Way of Heaven, Mohism is based on mutual benefits and universal love under the will of Heaven, and Daoism endorses the amoral Way and Nature, which destine mankind to live a free and primitive life. Taken together, however, the three schools of thought do converge on a common moral precept: to treat every human being as the end in itself and not merely as means to other things. (p. 200)

Human dignity in Confucian reading, most notably, is transcended through the ideal of junzi, a gentleman who is achieving and training innate virtue through the practice of Li. This example of an ideal moral person “takes humanity and righteousness as the highest principles, and follows the Principle of the Mean by which he gains moral independence” (Zhang, 2016, p. 200).

The stress on the individual capacity to adhere to moral rules, as well as recognition of the necessity of learning and strict discipline of the mind and spirit while pursuing high moral standards, both in Kantianism and Confucianism, places the ultimate attention on the individual as a center of the moral universe and the main receiver of the philosophical teaching responsible for its correct interpretation. This perspective allows for the further incorporation of the dignity principle into the discourse of human rights and duties that shall be identified in accordance with the universal moral standards.

Conclusion

In this work, I tried to find common ground for Eastern and Western ethics by comparing Kantian and Confucian moral concepts and, at the same time, prove that relatively common “Asian values” arguments contrasting the sets of typically Western and East Asian moral values do not stand scrutiny up to closer study of the works from the chosen philosophers. Notwithstanding the absence of the scrutinized terms in classical Confucian texts, it was nevertheless possible to find a spectrum of commonalities between the two idealistic philosophies based on the deconstruction of Kantian concepts and contextual analysis of Confucian texts.

Among the important findings is the apparent restrictiveness of Kantian freedom and autonomy in contrast to its modern liberal understanding. In the proposed reading, it comes much closer to the Confucian view on ethics. Most importantly, human dignity is found to be representing the unifying concept between the East and West. Seen from today’s perspective, it gives hope for the widening of the philosophical base for international relations theory. Human dignity, as it is presented in the text of German Basic Law, could become a cosmopolitan value. One way to achieve this would be to implement the principle of *multiple diversity governance* proposed by J. Marko (2019). The endeavor might last decades, but the starting point can be seen clearly: The opposing parts of the world are much closer to each other in their moral and ethical histories than is often perceived.

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