

Behind Contrastive Identity Prioritizations: A Moral Reconciliation between Confucian and Utilitarian Ethics

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Abstract. This paper is based upon identity prioritizations made by Chinese and Europeans contrastive to one other. It looks into Confucian ethical grounds for prioritizing relational and family identities, and utilitarian ethic grounds for prioritizing independent and friend identities instead. The goal is to find out how the Confucian and utilitarian ethics behind contrastive identity prioritizations may be reconciled. Through analyses, the first two identity prioritizations are ascribed to the etiquette of Zhengming (rectification of names) and modelization of family identities in Confucianism, and the last two identity prioritizations to assumptions of respectfulness and impartiality in Utilitarianism. Finally, through comparison of the Confucian and utilitarian treatments of moralities, this paper is concluded with the reconcilability and irreconcilability of the two ethics in treating moralities.

Introduction

The multiplicity of personal identities is a feature of social membership. In modern societies, with complex social networks, each person engages in various relationships, and is assigned with various identities in accordance with the relationships he is in. Identities are highly relational matters, and since relationships are largely determined by the positions of people in contact and the contexts that surround their contact, these two factors also shape the identities of each social being.

Nevertheless, for most people, their different social identities do not all carry the same weight. Some identities are considered more important than other ones, and a person prioritizes them over his other identities by showing more concern with the former, as well as performing more obligations related to the former. For some reasons, people hold different criteria for identity prioritizations. In consequence, they come to different identity prioritizations as well, and for the same identities, they pay unequal attention. Such unequal attention can give rise to interpersonal conflicts, when during a talk, one person does not understand why the other pays more attention to “undeserving” identities and relationships than to “deserving” ones. To settle this problem, it is vital to recognize factors to different identity prioritizations, and understand the reasonability of others’ prioritizations. One main factor to different identity prioritizations is the different ethics people have observed. Ethics not only set criteria for the judgement of good or bad, but differentiate all sorts of “good”s and “bad”s as more or less fundamental. Under certain ethics, people are confirmed that identities which allow more fundamental “good”s to be achieved, should be prioritized over other identities that enable only lesser “good”s to be practiced.

In international communication, people from different ethical backgrounds hold different criteria for the importance of specific “goods”, and make different identity prioritizations. One case in point is communication between Chinese and Europeans. The former are known to be influenced by Confucianism, and the latter by Utilitarianism. In accordance, Chinese generally reveal a stronger tie with family members than with friends, while European students socialize more with friends. Additionally, Chinese students call their teachers by titles to declare the relationships, whereas their European counterparts often call their teachers by first names and demonstrate interpersonal

independence. Understanding the ethical grounds of those different prioritizations and their reasonability not only would facilitate the understanding between Chinese exchange students and native Europeans, but would shed some light upon the Confucian and utilitarian views and treatment of moralities, as well as similarities and differences between Confucian and utilitarian ethics.

Confucianism: Ensuring Morality B through Morality A

Prioritizing Relational Identities: Ensuring Inner Moralities through Formalized Moralities.

Confucianism has had over 2000 years of history in China. Throughout the ups and downs of Confucianism in history in and modern ages, many Confucian rituals, etiquettes and behavioral codes have been preserved. Addressing teachers by their titles is a Chinese social norm formed under Confucian etiquettes. It indicates politeness required in Confucianism, as well as interpersonal relationships in Confucian societies. However, as with many other Confucian etiquettes and rituals, addressing elders by their titles are codes of behavior and speech. Though in line with Confucian propriety, they have been questioned by contemporary western philosopher to be mere forms which were ethic-based originally, but whose ethical grounds are rarely remembered now [1]. As these questioners claim, Confucians do formalize their ethics by formulating corresponding etiquettes. Nonetheless, according to Amy Olberding, who investigates into the moral meanings of Confucian etiquettes, such formalization itself is necessary under Confucianism, because Confucian ethic is not a purely theoretical system, but a highly actionist ethic that requires ethical practice. *The Book of Rites* demonstrates a Confucian view that practice combined with vigorousness is key to magnanimity.

One type of ethical practice, as exemplified in addressing one's teachers by their titles, is Zhengming (rectification of names). Experts explain Zhengming as labeling items appropriately according to their nature, and calling social members appropriately according to their social positions and their ethical relationships with oneself. Confucians attach considerable importance to the roles taken up by social members, as well as responsibilities related to these roles. Unlike utilitarians, who identify each individual as a community by itself, Confucians demonstrate communities and societies necessarily as networks of individuals, based upon relationships rather than independent individuals. Moralities, as well as the attempted social harmony, are based upon members' proper occupation of social roles, and upon their adequate and voluntary fulfillment of their duties while in roles and relationships.

In this light, Confucians insist upon the rectification of names in relationships, through which they remind both others and themselves about their roles and responsibilities in those relationships, and in this non-compulsory way, persuade both sides to take their own responsibilities. For instance, when Chinese students address their teachers by titles, those teachers not only feel respected, but are reminded of their own duties as teachers: to guide their students patiently. Meanwhile, in calling their teachers by titles, students are also suggesting their relational identities as students, and thus implying their own duties as students to respect their teachers and pay close attention to the latter's teaching. Gradually, both students and teachers will supposedly develop their sense of responsibility, namely their inner moralities in their relational identities. Such inner moralities, however, have derived from students' respectful rectification of names, the latter known as their formalized morality.

Prioritizing Family Identities: Developing Extended Moralities from Fundamental Moralities.

On top of prioritizing relational identities over independent identities, Confucians also prioritize family identities over friend identities. Such prioritization does not contradict their praise of overall social harmony, but Confucians regard the significance of relationships as determined by members' mutual intimacy. As a result, they suggest family relationship as the most significant of all, in which members share blood relationship, as well as "living resources, mutual experiences, and a sense of identity" [2]. Family identities thereby are also the most important of personal identities.

But why should intimacy determine the significance of relationships and identities? One reason is stated by Roger T. Ames, who investigates into Confucian conducts and describes Confucianism as “pragmatic naturalism”. According to Ames, Confucians are convinced that personal moral worth can be enhanced by “enchaining the ordinary affairs of the day” [3]. Even ordinary, daily affairs can be a moral matter when conducted in interpersonal relationships, and compared with greater issues, these affairs more frequently allow moralities to be performed. Since families are the major contexts or networks that host ordinary, daily activities, each family is referred to by scholars as a “closely knitted moral community”; family identities are greatly treasured as the positions in which people experience social life and practice moralities most frequently. Besides, in Confucianism, family identities are authorized also as models for other identities in the wider society. Traditionally, each Confucian family involves both hierarchical relationships (between parents and children) and egalitarian relationships (among siblings)—the basic patterns of wider social relationships as well.

In addition, as some scholars claim, Confucian families also embrace the most basic social obligations and moralities—respect for the superior by the inferior, caring of the inferior by the superior, and besides, brotherhood or sisterhood between those of similar positions. Consequently, Confucians designate a family as a model for the whole society, and extend the obligations and emotional ties within a family into the society. For example, it is proposed in *Mencius* that people should treat all elders with reverence due to age, and the young with kindness due to their youth, as though they were treating elders and young people in their own families [4]. This altruistic teaching reveals an extension of family emotional ties and obligations into the whole society, grounded by the view that the society itself is an extended family. Under this Confucian theory of family extension, friends care for each other as sisters in an “extended family”, yet the original family identities lie at the core of the entire social family, serving as models and roots of all other identities, and their fundamentality are unrivaled.

Utilitarianism: Ensuring Happiness through Assumed Moralities

Prioritizing Independent Identities: Ensuring Egalitarian Happiness through Assumed Respectfulness.

Unlike Confucians, who seek social harmony and individual moral achievements, utilitarians point out a human inborn desire for pleasure, and take the acquirement of pleasure as their social and personal goals. Since each individual can obtain happiness by himself whether he observes social rules or not, is in isolation or not, and furthermore, whether he is the only being in the world or not, the goal of utilitarianism can be approached independently of relationships. Even though there are relationships in reality, these relationships are simple and not emphasized, because though necessary for social harmony and members’ moral achievements, relationships are not indispensable for the ultimate good in Utilitarianism—happiness. Therefore, compared with Confucians, utilitarians consider social members as more equal beings, and they flexibly seek such social patterns that create more happiness overall.

With no special emphasis upon relationships, utilitarians pay no special attention to the various roles in relationships, either. Addressing someone by his or her title is no longer a necessary good to be advocated, and the preferred address for someone is one that brings the greatest sum pleasure to the two sides. Hence, the way students address their teachers, either by first names or by titles, is up to the agreement between students and teachers. In reality, since students addressing teachers by their first names creates a relaxing relationship between both sides, adds to their friendship and often produces active classes, this act is welcomed by many European students and teachers.

Although Utilitarianism grants Europeans with some freedom of making their own choices, its exclusive pursuit of happiness receive continuous criticism from Confucians and other morality-seekers, who articulate that keeping moralities out of sight can lead to widespread immoral happiness and social deterioration. John Stuart Mill responds to such warning in *Utilitarianism*,

where he justifies the utilitarian measurement of happiness. According to Mill, happiness is measured in utilitarianism in a two-dimensional way—both quantitatively and qualitatively. He argues that ideal pleasure ought to be not only large in quantity, but high in quality as well; and high-quality pleasure refers to the noble, virtuous one. Therefore, genuine utilitarians would not accept seriously immoral pleasure, regardless of its quantity. But a problem exists: how to ensure that common people take moralities into account in seeking happiness? Utilitarian theorists such as David Hume assume virtue as part of human nature that elevates humans over other animals, and speak of “goodness as a person”. In this light, students who address their teachers by first names are determined by human nature to be virtuous and respectful in their intention. This over-idealistic assumption seems to receive support from Leonard G. Ratner. Inspired by Darwin’s biological theory of “human reciprocity” throughout natural evolution, Ratner establishes a similar, sociobiological hypothesis that humans may have developed their “‘noble’ human capacity for ‘sympathy’” throughout social development [5]. Although this hypothesis supports the utilitarian assumption that human are born to be moral, Ratner reasons that it could not have been applied by “classical utilitarians” earlier than Darwin.

Prioritizing Friend Identities: Developing Fraternal Happiness from Assumed Impartiality.

The utilitarian pursuit of happiness seems both indulging and demanding. Individuals on the one hand are acknowledged as independent beings that each actualizes happiness; on the other hand, however, they are educated to take a beyond-individual scope, and “do an act with best consequences” by maximizing the sum happiness of all considered ones. Therefore, whether to seek their individual happiness or not is determined by whether or not this act would add to the mainstream happiness among people. In some cases, when the overwhelming majority of people possess evil and unrighteous happiness, the small minority of people seeking righteous happiness may have to give up their own happiness if unfortunately the righteous happiness reduces the total amount of happiness. In most actual cases, however, the tension between personal and communal happiness does not concern the matter of right or wrong.

Whereas Chinese students normally place their family identities before other identities, and spend much time contacting with family members, European students hold a large number of parties with large circles of friends, and in some cases, they appear to prioritize friend identities over family identities. For example, in the case of birthday celebration, Chinese students usually consider this as an occasion with family members and a few close friends, whereas European students often receive and send birthday wishes from and to someone they are not close with, say, a friend of their own friend. Thus, among European students, temporary relationships seem easier to form. On the one hand, Facebook creates a large, unlimited room for people to join, in which not only individual persons, but even their networks are linked. On the other hand, European students hold frequent parties open to anyone coming by, as well as to groups of people. As a result, people get to know a wide range of people at one time, and they socialize with each other not merely by person, but by network. Such wide-range socialization occupy European students in their spare time, and can decrease their contact with family members.

For Confucians, who place families at the very core of their personal networks, and weave relationships only within a small number of friends, it can be confusing why Europeans contact with so wide a range of people, rather than develop and deepen their friendship with only a few people. Indeed, within a large circle of new friends, the pleasure felt by each individual is less than within a circle of close friends, and even less than within a few family members, so how to ensure that members of a large yet loose circle each feel considerable pleasure? One idealistic approach may be impartiality in treating one’s family members and close and common friends, so that regardless of their familiarity, members of each circle would devote themselves to each other as though they were close to each other.

However, this approach is discarded by Geoffery Scarre, who points out that such absolute impartiality would require excessive sympathy and devotion from each human individual for others,

and thus be surely unaffordable. Scarre further warns against being impartial to all the others as “a deeply alienating experience” that would destroy the ties among genuine friends and family members without successively drawing strangers together, arousing more misanthropy than altruism [6]. Impartiality and equal attention to all the other members is possible, but only within a circle, rather than beyond it. Admittedly, in sending goodwill to common friends, utilitarians may not obtain as much pleasure as they would in doing the same thing to close friends or family members. Notwithstanding, within each circle, members not only treat each other with impartial affection, but assume that they themselves are also treated by others with impartial affection. This assumption of impartiality within each circle may cultivate members’ mutual trust, and contribute to fraternal happiness within each circle of friends.

Irreconcilability: Morality as a Premise or as an End

As has been stated, Chinese are generally educated by Confucian etiquette to prioritize relational identities, and pushed by the structural fundamentality of families to prioritize family identities; whilst Europeans are largely persuaded by Utilitarian assumptions of human virtuousness pursue egalitarian and fraternal happiness. Behind those prioritizations are two patterns of treating moralities: Confucians practice one morality so as to achieve another morality, whereas utilitarians take certain moralities as grounds of certain happiness. In specific cases, Confucians deal with formalized and inner moralities, fundamental and extended moralities, etc. while utilitarians deal with assumed respectfulness and impartiality, as well as egalitarian and fraternal happiness, etc.

But ultimately, Confucians honor one morality as the final end of all other moralities: the perfect virtue, or Ren. Ren literally refers to benevolence or humanity, and unlike filial piety or fraternity, which are confined to certain relationships, Ren is a full-rounded virtue that covers humanity in various relationships. Either children’s filial piety for parents or students’ respect teachers, or a number of other Confucian virtues, is involved in this perfect virtue. In addition, because of their practical tendency, Confucians underscore the practices of those moralities, and endow Ren with both inner and practical meanings. In the practical part, they legitimate formalized behavior and speech as an insurance of adequate moral practices. Finally, through combined possession and practice of various moralities, Confucians set their eye upon the realization of the perfect virtue or humanity.

Compared with Confucianism, utilitarianism appears less of a philosophy about moralities, but more of a philosophy about happiness. Admittedly, utilitarians do take moralities into consideration, for they base their “greatest happiness” principle upon the assumption that humans are naturally virtuous; besides, they call upon “the greatest sum amount of happiness”, requiring consideration of others. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that human beings would stick to elevated pleasure and not generate self-indulgent happiness. Even Mill does not deny that happiness is rooted in the animal nature, and noble human happiness may corrupt into uncivilized, animal pleasure[7]. For instance, when a student prioritizes her identity as an independent individual or a friend, over her identity as a student or a family member, she is not safe from the immoral happiness of disrespectfulness. Meanwhile, since the low quality of happiness is frequently offset by the considerable amount of happiness, utilitarians might settle with a large amount of immoral happiness—as may be the fact if all students address a professor by her name, and steep themselves in the pleasure of being disrespectful.

Although utilitarians base their happiness theory upon assumed human virtuousness, their attitude towards immoral happiness is negative—instead of offering to elevate such happiness, utilitarians ascribe it to irreversible moral deterioration. In other words, unlike Confucians, who regulate moralities with such forms as etiquettes, utilitarians make few endeavors to guard the moral basis of their happiness, and do not protect happiness from corruption. The unwillingness to acknowledge, or the failure to recognize any ultimate value in moralities, is surely a crucial defect of utilitarianism.

Reconcilability: A Common Faith in Human Ability to be Moral

Either Confucianism or utilitarianism require moralities in their ethics. In Confucianism, a debate used to prevail in terms of the goodness and badness of human nature. Among celebrated early Confucian philosophers, Mencius, suggested that human beings are born to be good because of their “conscience and the original heart” as well as their “moral emotions and moral conscious activities” out of human nature; another Confucian philosopher, Xunzi, insisted that human beings are by nature evil, and that such evil cannot be offset by human intellectual talents.

Despite their disagreement about human nature, both philosophers accentuated the necessity of later moral cultivation. Mencius warned that human beings could be evil without full development or expansion of their original goodness. As for Xunzi, though presuming the evilness of human nature, he advocated later and intentional moral cultivation—that is, practicing rites and observing moralities so as to develop a sense of propriety and justice. Generally, Confucians hold that human beings are able and supposed to be moral. They agree that moralities not only harmonize human societies, but are of ultimate value and deserve the endless pursuit of human beings. As a result, Confucians value the inner cultivation and behavioral practice of moralities

In Utilitarianism, although the fulfillment of moralities is underestimated as merely a means to the end of happiness, Jordan Howard Sobel, who investigates into Hume’s theories about right action, defends utilitarian attitudes towards moralities. Hume takes the social utility of an act as the criterion in judging the right and wrong of that act. Despite some consequentialist elements of this theory, Sobel reasons that since social utility derives largely from moral practices, the pursuit of social utility effectively urges people towards such practices. He further explains that in order to achieve the greatest amount of utility or happiness in a social range, people would join together in moral practices [8].

What is it that bestows happiness with long-term value? Based upon certain utilitarian teachings, the bestowers would be moralities. An authentic Confucian is supposed to respect her teacher genuinely, and to treat her friends as her extended siblings; similarly, an authentic utilitarian is supposed to cherish respect for her teacher despite their egalitarian relationship, and to treat all friends and family members with goodwill that they deserve. Ultimately, Confucians would feel pleased with their virtuous prioritization of identities, and so will utilitarians cherish noble prioritizations of identities. Their faiths in human ability to be moral unify Confucianism and utilitarianism preliminarily; moreover, their moral exhortations, which increase human willingness to be moral, unify the two philosophies ultimately.

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