

CHUNG-YING CHENG

## PREFACE: MUTUALITY AND AUTONOMY IN MORALITY AND RELIGIOUSNESS: CHINA AND WEST

By empirical observation, we know that all world religions have themselves each containing a code of ethics as a part. This is because it is necessary that one has to act apart from believing or from believing and thus action and conduct in a fiduciary community is unavoidable. It is often the case that this code of ethics or moral principles deciphered within it is considered derived from certain religious beliefs or to be founded thereon. If it is the case, we have to say that there is no ethics or morality without a religious beginning or a religious foundation. Of course, religious origination and religious justification are two different matters: one concerns history and the other reason. But very often this distinction was not well made. Besides, there is the question on what constitutes religion. However, once we have the idea of religion clearly defined, we could raise the question as to whether a system of ethics must arise from a given fixed type of religion or whether it must have a given fixed type of religious justification.

Thus, if we assume that a community of people come to have a belief in Christian God and developed a religion of Christian God with a system of rituals and institutions, we may eventually come to have an ethics arising from this religion of God and will consider that it is to be justified by this form of religion. On the other hand, there are Buddhist ethics and Confucian ethics which are not to be said as arising from a belief in a transcendent God, but to rise from other beliefs concerning reality and nature of man. We have to say that ethics may have different types of origin and justification other than a given fixed type of religion as its origin or as its basis for justification. Hence we must separate the domain of religion from that of ethics in both matters of origin and justification. What is clear is that ethics must have its own origin and its justification, and these need not to be consigned to a fixed sort of origin or

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a fixed sort of justification. In this light, we can see how the Buddhist ethics of compassion and self-effacement may be different from the Christian protestant, Christian self-reliance, and self-responsibility. Similarly, one can see how Confucian ethics may have an origin from an insight in the cosmology of the heaven and earth and a self-reflection of human nature in the scheme of things. We may thus enlarge our sense of religion or basic beliefs of life to include beliefs other than those of Christianity, and only require that ethics must be grounded on have understanding of certain beliefs on the ultimate reality and the ultimate value of human life. We need not judge which religions must be better than others but only which ethics may satisfy human life and make human life better and healthier (I shall leave out spelling what is better here). As we do see how ethics is required for public good and public right, we have to argue that we need an ethics that could warrant public goodness and public rightness. In this sense, we would have to evaluate religion in light of the ethics it engendered or justified, instead evaluating ethics in light of its basis in religion from which it is engendered.

Comparison between Christian and Confucian or Buddhist ethics has an important structure in that each ethics has its moral principles and each has a source in some body of beliefs. Thus, for example, instead of God, there is heaven and human nature as basis for self-cultivation and for justification in Confucian ethics. But in speaking of this, one must not forget that for Confucius the more important basis is the awareness of humanity as source for moral principles. He speaks of *ren* or the universal feeling of beneficence for other people as basis for social and political action. This Confucius expressed in the mottos of not doing what you do not wish others to do to you, and helping others to achieve their value goals in life as one would achieve for oneself. It is clear that for Confucius the motive and passion for moral love should come from extension of self-regard to regard of others. This is to be done by an inner feeling of oneself, not due to belief in a transcendent authority such as God or the ruler, which is obviously different from following God's love for man in order to love other man. This is the difference between autonomy of moral reason versus heteronomy of religious faith.

Now there are two questions that would arise from such a contrast: Can we argue that Confucianism is also a form of religion even if it may be a different one? On other hand, we may ask the question whether Christian ethics as commonly understood can be treated and practiced as an ethics independent of its religious source and its religious justification. This means that a non-Christian could practice Christian ethics independent and without Christian religion.

For the first question, it is clear that there is no reason for not recognizing that in the practice of Confucianism there is a sense of strong commitment and intense piety devoted to the realization and

refinement of the moral ideals of humanity such as *ren* and *yi*. For many Chinese common people, not just the educated or the well-learned, throughout the ages, take Confucian ethics of *ren* and *yi* source of moral motivation and reason for action. People are willing to die for the fulfillment of *ren* and *yi* or even filial piety (*xiao*) based on the Confucian ethics of virtues and duty. To them, this ethics means the only way that one could realize one's life and preserve one's dignity as human beings. As to whether they will find an afterlife and immortality of soul is not a question to be answered but a hope to be entrusted to heaven. In this sense we may say that there is an implicit sense of transcendence that has expressed itself in the values of morality and ethics. It is in this sense of implicit commitment and total trust in life and moral values in Confucian ethics that we can indeed speak of a moral religiousness that is comparable to the explicit belief or faith in the religion of transcendent God.

But, however, philosophically speaking, still one should not mix the two modes of consciousness here: the implicit religiousness or moral faith in some ultimate principle of life and the explicit beliefs in God that is supported by some well-established church and ritual system. The Confucian ethical faith indeed would have to be sustained and supported by self-cultivation in understanding life and humanity. This self-cultivation may also contain a belief in and consciousness of the nature of humanity and its relationship to heaven. There is indeed an implicit onto-cosmological principle of unity of heaven and man (*tian-ren heyi*) in support of the explicit moral principle of knowing and action (*zhixing heyi*). Without such a self-cultivation project, Confucian ethics may not become functional or meaningful at all. In this sense we must say that Confucian ethics is not just a play of roles in social relations that reduces humanity to a set of relations and nothing else. We have to say that the life of ethics for Confucians comes from an inner source of understanding and awakening of its grounding in one's unity with a creative source in heaven or the ultimate reality.

We may answer the other question as to whether Christian ethics could function on a principle of moral autonomy. As it appears, the Christian ethical principle of heteronomy can be transformed into a principle of moral autonomy by seeing a person's care for others as derived from a reflective reason rather than from an external authority like God. This seems to be precisely what Kant has done in arguing for the self-legislation of a moral will in defining what moral action is about. The point is that one must recognize the principle of practical reason in which one finds oneself to be self-motivated by the moral law as founded by moral will. This amounts to transforming the moral law into an act of moral will of oneself, and reciprocally, institutioning a moral will that would give rise to moral law as an imperative for moral

action. I have argued in my other writings that this was made possible by influence of Confucianism in the Enlightenment Era of eighteenth-century Europe. However, it is also important to point out that Kant has to eventually introduce three postulates for the warrant of his principle of moral autonomy, namely, the postulates of existence of moral will, the existence of God, and the immortality of soul. For Kant, these are transcendental principles required by reason for the possibility of exercise of moral autonomy. For Confucius, we could say that these principles are actually deeply experienced as onto-cosmological principles of human life. Thus, for Mencius as developer of the Confucius' moral philosophy, there is the heaven that one experiences within oneself, and there is moral will on which one could make a choice between what is right and what is wrong, or between what is righteous and what is simply profitable. As to immortality of soul, one has to see the intrinsic value of one's moral realization of life as a form of immortalization of one's nature in Confucian theory of heart-mind and nature.

The moral from this comparative inquiry is that a religion may evolve into an ethics with autonomy of its own, while a system of ethics may contain an implicit sense of religiousness which provides an inner source of moral understanding and moral action. Christianity is an example of the former scenario whereas Confucian ethics in its authentic practice illustrates the latter situation.

Without going further, my discussion is intended to serve the purpose of providing a framework for questions to be raised and answered on the topic of Morality and Religion, East and West in this special issue. We have a rich repertoire of contributions from our 2013 symposium on religion and morality in China and West in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the publication of the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* at King's College London. All the papers that are made available for this special issue have gone through a process of critical review. I wish to specifically thank Professor Xinzhong Yao for hosting the symposium and for further working on this special issue. I wish also to thank all participants of the symposium and all authors for making their great and important contributions on this important topic. Finally, I wish to thank Professor Lauren Pfister, Professor On-cho Ng, Dr. Linyu Gu, Professor Eric Nelson, Professor Timothy Connolly, and Professor Mathew Foust for their contribution to this issue and other projects.

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