Comparison of Chinese and Western Ethics from Perspective of Cultural Differences

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Abstract. Given the difference between Chinese and western culture, the article intends to compare and contrast the ethics of the two cultures briefly with an attempt to boost the cross-cultural communication and remove some cross-cultural communication barriers.

Introduction

Ethics or moral philosophy is a branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct[1]. The English word “ethics” is derived from an Ancient Greek word, êthikos, which means “relating to one's character”. The Ancient Greek adjective êthikos is itself derived from another Greek word, the noun êthos meaning “character, disposition”. Ethics seeks to resolve questions of human morality by defining concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime[2]. It is obvious that ethics is essential to human civilization, but it is now neglected by people. As a matter of fact, some ethical values such as honesty, loyalty and filial piety should be attached great importance to all the time. And ethics is deep-rooted in culture, so different culture may give rise to different ethics. In China, Confucian is considered as the founder of Chinese traditional ethics whereas in the west, Socrates and Plato is viewed as that of the western one. The Analects of Confucius has laid the fundation of the establishment and development of Chinese ethics, which still have great impact on people today. The Republic by Plato assumes the same position of The Analects of Confucius, which is a must to read for people who intend to research the western ethics. The differences of Chinese ethics from the western one arise from the cultural differences between China and the west. As a result, the paper attempts to explore the comparison of Chinese and western ethics from the perspective of cultural differences in order to awaken people's consciousness of ethics.

Literature Review

Introduction to Culture

Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving and it consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other hand, as conditioning influences upon further action. [3] Simply speaking, culture is what people have, do and think as members of a certain society.

When it comes to the features of culture, it is worth pointing out that people are not born with culture, but they learn and acquire it in the society they live in. People can learn culture through interaction, observation and imitation, through such sources as proverbs, myths and legends, art and mass media, etc. Education is the most important way for people to learn and spread culture. Besides, culture is shared by members of a certain society. The feature of culture enables people in the same society to predict other's behaviors. For example, when in China a child is praised in the face of his or
her parent, it is predicted that his or her parent to point out her defects immediately as a way of showing modesty. If his or her parent does not act that way, for example, they just agree with others’ praise, then he or she will be considered as arrogant. If the behaviors of people are not consistent with what shared culture forecasts, then people will get confused or shocked. Thirdly, culture is dynamic instead of static. Namely, culture is ever-changing and ever-evolving, so culture today differs from that of many years ago. To illustrate, the majority of Chinese women now work outside home, which makes them economically independent. The independence makes them less tolerant of their husbands’ defects, and then divorce rates increase immediately in China, where the stability of marriage was highly valued before and divorced people were despised in society. But now Chinese are tolerant of divorce, which is thought to be a natural consequence when the couple cannot get along well with each other. Culture change can come from outside such as the invasion of the dominant culture into the subordinate culture or inside such as the reform of the society. In other words culture can alter by diffusion (the spreading of culture from one society to another) or invention (the proposal of new ideas, new systems, etc.). But the core of a culture is resistant to substantial alterations. Fourthly, culture can be implicit and explicit but with the implicit parts as the majority and the values and beliefs as its core. Last, but not least, culture tends to be ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism is “the technical name for the view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it.”[4] Specifically, “Ethnocentrism is the notion that one’s own culture is superior to any other. It is the idea that other cultures should be measured by the degree to which they live up to our cultural standards. We are ethnocentric when we view other cultures through the narrow lens of our own culture or social position.” [4] In other words, it is the tendency of people to apply their own cultural values in judging the behavior and beliefs of people raised in other cultures. It is inevitable phenomena in cross-cultural communications.

**Introduction to Ethics**

Ethics is a system of moral principles and a branch of philosophy which defines what is good for individuals and society. They affect how people make decisions and lead their lives. There are three major types of ethics, namely, meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. Meta-ethics involves the theoretical meaning and reference of moral propositions, and how their truth values (if any) can be determined; normative ethics, the practical means of determining a moral course of action and applied ethics, what a person is obligated (or permitted) to do in a specific situation or a particular domain of action [5]. Meta-ethics offers a bird-eyes view of the entire fields of ethics, so that its research objects is not as clear as normative and applied ones. To a certain degree, normative ethics is a search for an ideal litmus test of proper behaviors. The Golden Rule is a classic example of a normative principle: We should do to others what we would want others to do to us. The key assumption in normative ethics is that there is only one ultimate criterion of moral conduct, whether it is a single rule or a set of principles, such as virtue, obligation. Applied ethics is the branch of ethics which consists of the analysis of specific, controversial moral issues such as abortion, animal rights, or euthanasia. In recent years applied ethical issues have been subdivided into convenient groups such as medical ethics, business ethics, environmental ethics, and sexual ethics. Generally speaking, two features are necessary for an issue to be considered an “applied ethical issue.” First, the issue needs to be controversial in the sense that there are significant groups of people both for and against the issue at hand. The issue of drive-by shooting, for example, is not an applied ethical issue, since everyone agrees that this practice is grossly immoral. By contrast, the issue of gun control would be an applied ethical issue since there are significant groups of people both for and against gun control. The second requirement for an issue to be an applied ethical issue is that it must be a distinctly moral issue. Although it is mentioned that ethics determines what is good or bad, what is correct or wrong according to a certain principle, yet in fact it is very confusing to confirm ethical beliefs reasonably because the ethical principles were originated from the internal nature instead of the external nature.
Comparison of China's and Western Ethics

Introduction to China's and Western Ethics

China boasts over five thousand years' history and China's ethics has come into being and developed in the long history. According to Cai Yuan pei, Chinese ethical ideas originated from pre-Qin dynasty and Confucianism constructed the core of Chinese ethics[6]. *The Analects of Confucius*, the collection of Confucius' instructions, remarks and opinions on different occasions with different people including his disciples or the kings, is regarded as the basis and core of Chinese tradition ethics. Confucianism highlighted “Ren”, a Chinese character which means “benevolence”, “virtue”, and “love” and so on for Confucius has interpreted the term of “Ren” in different situations. When his student, Yanyuan, consulted him about “Ren”, Confucius said, “To keep down one's desires and act on the proprieties is benevolence. If you can for one day keep down your desires and act on the proprieties, others will say you are benevolent. Whether to practice benevolence or not is decided by yourself. Can it be decided by others? Don't look at what is contrary to the proprieties. Don't listen to what is contrary to the proprieties. Don't say what is contrary to the proprieties. Don't do what is contrary to the proprieties.”[7] He told Fan Chi, his another student that “the virtue of love is to be obtained perseverance”.[7] And he still said that “Ren” means “loving people”. Confucius' Ren can be understood from two perspectives: specifically and generally. Specifically speaking, “Ren” refers to a special nature of characteristics; generally speaking, it covers all the virtues required and needed to serve the title of “Junzi”, a Chinese word which means “a noble and decent man”. Moreover, Confucius points out the approach to “Ren” is to restore “Li” of West Zhou Dynasty, which is to shape or transform traditional Zhou values.

Socrates is the counterpart of Confucius when it comes to ethics in the west culture. Cicero once praised Socrates as “the first to call philosophy down from the heavens and set him in the cities of men and bring him also into their homes and compel him to ask questions about life and morality and things good and evil.”[8] Socrates defines ethics as a system of moral rules which attempt to make people live a happy and meaningful life and he views the world as ethical matters rather than natural qualities. In addition, he focuses on “Happiness”, the core of western ethics, and set happiness as the prerequisite of ethics and final goal of human life. He further points out that the way to achieve happiness is virtue which Socrates offers a very high position. In Socrates' view, virtue is supremely valued for one's life in the world. He says, “wealth does not bring about excellence, but excellence makes wealth and everything also good for men. Both individually and collectively.”[5] Socrates connects virtue with happiness by holding that virtue is the way to happiness, and happiness is the final point of virtue.

Comparison of China's and Western Ethics

There are some similarities between Chinese and western ethics with Confucius and Socrates as the founder respectively. In the first place, Confucius and Socrates both consider life as a whole rather than separated moral incident. And they both center on the same issue of how to live whether as Socrates propose, humans acquire happiness by examination, or as Confucius advocates, humans make clear how to be a man through their investigation. Secondly, they both focus on virtue. Confucius maintains that Ren, as a virtue, is the only way to behave like a noble and decent man while Socrates holds that virtue is the way to achieve happiness. Thirdly, both of them believe that being pious means to the implementation of the divine missions. And they both consider their missions as divine ones because they are meaningful and important. Socrates and Confucius both integrate the significance of traditional values or beliefs to their respective missions. According to them, what is divine is what should be done in people's lives and being pious equals the optimal way to live lives.

There are still some differences between Chinese and western ethics with Confucius and Socrates as the founder respectively. Firstly, with regards to traditions, Confucius and Socrates adopt different attitudes. Confucius reveres tradition for he advocates that the past traditions and values of the West Zhou Dynasty should be restored to enforce the order of the society. Socrates advocates the
re-examination and re-evaluation of tradition given the people's limitation of their knowledge and their thinking. In other words, Socrates is absorbed in the re-assessment of traditions whereas Confucius is dedicated to the restoration of the past cultural rituals and social practices. Secondly, Confucius and Socrates have different understanding of virtue and they adopt different approaches to achieving it. Socrates proposes that virtue is knowledge, the reflection of the soul, and other feelings or desires just deriving from human bodies and that people distinguish morality and immorality by their intellects and that people achieve virtue by their radical thinking. However, Confucius supposes that virtue is “Ren” meaning benevolence, love, kindness, etc. and the pursuit of virtue is the realization of morality. Thirdly, Confucius and Socrates have different views about the relationships between politics and virtue. Confucius combines politics and ethics, which he thinks are united and inseparable, for he holds that politicians can serve as good examples to guide the people in their pursuit of virtue. That is why Confucius makes efforts to join in the political circle of various countries. On the contrary, Socrates separates politics from pursuing the virtue of justice. He declares “If I had long ago attempted to take part in politics, I should have died long ago, and benefited neither you nor myself. A man who really fights for justice must lead a private, not a public life it he is to survive for even a short time.”[9] In addition, he despises politicians and criticizes politics. Lastly, Confucius and Socrates have different opinions concerning the ultimate aim of ethics. Socrates thinks that ethics is intended to examine everything in general and he can achieve his virtue through the examination. And according to him, the top priority of pursuit of virtue is the examination. Without examination, life is meaningless and worthless to live. The ultimate goal of ethics is to assist people with their achievement of happiness. But Confucius resorts to ethics for guidance and the ultimate goal of ethics is to be a decent and noble man.

Conclusion

Culture and ethics are introduced firstly in the article, then Chinese and western ethics are briefly narrated. And in the article, the comparison of Chinese and western ethics is essentially that of Confucianism and Socrates' theory concerning ethics for Confucianism is the foundation and core of Chinese ethics and Socrates is the initiator of western ethics. It is concluded through the comparison that Socrates and Confucius both consider life as a whole instead of a separated moral incidents, they both focus on virtue and point out being pious refers to the implementation of divine missions. And the conclusion can also be drawn that Socrates and Confucius differ in their attitudes and opinions about tradition, virtue and the way to achieve it, the relationship between politics and virtue and the eventual goal of ethics. Through comparison, Chinese and western ethics can be better understood and some barriers in cross-cultural communications can be removed. But more researches in the field are necessary because the limitation of the author's research time and knowledge in the field.

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References