

Kindness Ethics: A Possible Approach to Virtue Ethics

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Abstract: As a possible alternative approach to the modern virtue ethics, kindness ethics focuses on the specific virtue of kindness, which, essentially speaking means a person's moral capacity to be kind to life itself, not only one's own individual life. Kindness ethics, largely speaking, constitutes the core value or fundamental essence of the traditional Chinese moral doctrine of Confucianism. The general decline of the morality as well as the continuous worsening of the modern characters education have prompted us to work out a corresponding solution. Kindness ethics can possibly provide the modern people a way out.

Keywords: Kindness Ethics, Virtues, Virtue Ethics

1. Introduction

Disillusioned with the current Kohlberg's cognitive-developmentalism as almost the only main guide to the moral education practice carried out in the modern world and badly shaken by the obvious degradation and decline of the general level of morality among the youths, most of the teachers in China are turning to kindness ethics for the possible salvation of moral education. In some sense, the concept of kindness constitutes the essence or the core value of the traditional Chinese Confucianism.

Therefore, the spirit of kindness ethics has been deeply rooted into the traditional Chinese culture. We should not think that the ethical wisdom of Confucius is lofty and out of reach, or simply regard it as something that people today can only look up to with reverence. On the contrary, kindness ethics has, plainly and simply, told us how we can live the right and harmonious life.

The primary concern of kindness ethics is an existential, not a theoretical one. In spite of the fact that the kindness ethics has quite a lot in common with the mainstream traditional Human-heartedness moral doctrine proposed by Confucius, it still has its own unique characteristics based on the modern ethical background. But, to profoundly understand the essential meaning of the kindness ethics, we are supposed to trace back to its original theory root, that's, the Jen (human-heartedness). Specifically speaking, the jen ethics focuses on the formation of the individual virtues, such as kindness, integrity, discipline, tolerance, which are distinct from the social or organizational virtues. Put it another way,

the virtue of human-heartedness is a categorical imperative. "Every one in society has certain things which he ought to do, and which must be done for their own sake, because they are morally right things to do." [1]

2. The Essential Meaning and Value of Kindness Ethics

This study employed the philosophical-comparative research design. By putting the issue of kindness virtue into the comparative perspective of both the western ethics and Confucius ethics, the creative insights concerning kindness ethics can be created.

2.1. Fulfill the Life Mission of Becoming a Complete Person

Compared with moral empiricism, Confucius, like Kant, relies upon the rationality to establish the absolute authority of the categorical imperative. As a moral agent, one should, under no circumstances, act according to the exterior motives or the non-moral considerations. Yi (righteousness), rather than li (profit), should play the central or dominant role in the moral decisions. Human-heartedness ethics is not concerned with the considerations of the consequences of the moral acts, whether the consequences are tangible or intangible, measurable or immeasurable. Simply put, the moral agents that carry out his moral duties do the moral things not for the sake of getting something in return, but because they are compelled to fulfill the life mission of becoming a complete and whole person, more importantly, being what they truly are

and what they ought to be. Besides the rational dimension, the emotional dimension can not be ignored when we reflect the deep meanings of human-heartedness.

2.2. The Practical Reasoning of Kindness Ethics

Confucius says: "Human-heartedness consists in loving others." (Analects, XII, 22.) "Confucius said, only the man of humanity knows how to love people and hate people." (Analects). Concerning love, there is one significant point that we need to clarify: To love does not mean to love without principles or to simply spoil.^[2]

It takes not only common sense, but the practical reason or the practical wisdom to carry out the moral act of loving. Unfortunately, the power of emotion has been marginalized or even neglected over the last centuries. As the British philosopher David Hume puts it: "Reason, being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action, and directs only the impulse received from appetite or inclination, by showing us the means of attaining happiness or avoiding misery: Taste, as it gives pleasure or pain, and thereby constitutes happiness or misery, becomes a motive to action, and is the first spring or impulse to desire and volition."^[3]

From the perspective of humanity ethics, the essence of love transcends the mere emotional level and involves the combination of both the moral emotions and the practical reason. The eventual and ultimate aim of moral education is not to produce the rigid and perfect moral rules or principles, but to help the people with the originally good human nature to become the best of themselves. What matters most is not the better moral principles, but the better people. To successfully educate and cultivate the morally better people, we need to pay more attention to the emotional development of each individual moral agent. But as far as the virtue of humanity is concerned, it is sometimes referred to as a particular kind of virtue, having the similar meaning as the virtue of benevolence, and sometimes as a general or perfect virtue. This kind of ambiguity has to some extent weakened its practical value in the practice field of virtues.

The fundamental reason why the kindness ethics is proposed as an alternative approach to virtue ethics is largely because its essence and practical values are more concrete and definite.

3. Why Is It Kindness Ethics

3.1. The Value of Kindness Ethics

Throughout the twentieth century, the ethics of action has attracted most of the academic ethical attention. Undoubtedly, doing researches into the substantive ethical theory is necessary. With the modern world getting increasingly complex and complicated, we are faced with a huge number of moral dilemma or moral situations. Under this circumstance, "What ought we to do" is indeed seen as the ethical question.⁴ Making the right moral choice and doing the right things can indeed contribute a lot to the formation of corresponding virtues. After all, as Aristotle said, excellence is a habit. We

become just by doing just things and we become brave by doing the brave things. But is it really true that the virtues just result from the mechanical repeating? Even the most imbedded habits can be broken or unconsciously forgotten without the internal virtues serving as the solid basis. Most of the efforts that we have made to build the virtues by emphasizing the rigid moral rules and the external moral actions turn out to be in vain. Therefore, the attention should be turned to the ethics of traits of character rather than the ethics of actions.

3.2. The Definition of Kindness from the Perspective of Confucius Ethics

Kindness ethics is just such kind of ethics. strictly speaking, kindness embraces both the metaethics domain and the substantive one. When too much importance is attached to the practical aspect of kindness ethics, it can easily lead to the misleading understanding of it and, as a result, lead to the loss of what Anscombe called "the belief in divine command."^[5] Alasdair MacIntyre's classical book with regards to virtue ethics, *After Virtue* has also come to the conclusion that our best hope of escaping the moral collapse lies in a return to "the tradition of the virtues."^[6] And the "tradition of the virtues, specifically speaking, mainly refers to the ancient Aristotle ethics, which stresses the importance of living a good life and being a virtuous person. The tradition of kindness ethics can also be traced back to Confucius's doctrine of humanity, which stresses the significance of one's transcending spirit.

Apart from the consideration of the transcending dimension of the kindness ethics, kindness ethics is characterized as the ethics of practical wisdom. In fact, the Chinese character Jen (kindness or humanity) appeared in the Analects for more than 100 times. Sometimes, the kindness is used to express a particular kind of virtue, and sometimes it is employed to denote all the virtues combined. Under various circumstances and before different individual students, Confucius defined the essence of kindness differently. "When Chung Kung, one of Confucius's students, asked the meaning of Jen, the master said: 'Do not do to others what you do not wish yourself.'" (the Analects, XII, 2). It vividly shows that the virtue of kindness is not so noble that the ordinary people can not approach it. To be kind to others means thinking in others' shoes. At the same time, being kind involves not only the mere love and caring for others, but also the profound wisdom and sound moral judgment, especially when one is faced with the difficult moral situations. Besides, kindness ethics contains the meaning of the reverence or respect for life. Being kind to life means being kind to all lives, both animals and mankind, both creatures and plants. One more point that deserves our special attention is that being kind not only means being kind to others, but also means being kind to oneself first, which constitutes the foundation of being kind to others. The most important aim of learning is not to absorb the knowledge, nor is it to master skills, but to learn to be a kind person first, before he is able to extend his love or kindness to others. The mere benevolence or even altruism can not tell what the kindness ethics is all about. Being kind to others, according to

Confucius, first and foremost, means overcoming oneself or conquering oneself. "A disciple of Confucius, the favorite Yanhui, enquired what constituted the essence of kindness. Confucius answered, "Renounce and overcome yourself, and make yourself conform to the ideal of decency and good sense." (the Analects, XII). There are no so-called abstract virtues. To deeply discuss the essence of virtues, the historical perspectives are required. With the modern people's going into the information age and with the amazingly rapid development of the globalization, the originally general or perfect virtue of kindness has been transformed into an individual virtue, that's, the kindness ethics.

3.3. The Advantages of Kindness Ethics as a Possible Ethical Approach

Compared with the dominant ethical theories, whether they be the utilitarianism theory or Kant's moral theory, there are some distinct characteristics regarding kindness ethics. Firstly, kindness ethics puts enough stress to the importance of caring for the well-being and happiness of both the moral agents themselves and others, which demonstrates the humanity and emotional dimension of virtue ethics. Secondly, kindness ethics emphasizes the central concept of kindness, focusing not only on the moral obligations, but also on the moral feelings and the emotional motivations of virtues. After all, when too much importance is attached to the obligations of ethics, even virtue ethics will seem to be too detached and even dehumanized. Last but not the least, kindness ethics is practical, not going to the moral extremes. According to kindness ethics, reason or rationality alone can not determine whether the moral agents will make the right moral choice. Practical reasoning definitely plays a significant role in the moral decision-making process, especially when faced with the moral dilemma.

4. The Significance and Meaning of Kindness Ethics

4.1. The Context of Kindness Ethics

It is commonly acknowledged that the modern world is getting morally disappointing and the general morality is on the decline. Among all the elements that can account for this phenomenon, the lack of kindness is an important one.

Learning to love and to be loved is an integral part of the essence of kindness ethics. In order to dramatically reduce the widespread indifference and alienation so characteristic of the modern or post-modern life in the world, we should help the young people to cultivate the kindness virtue. Whether it is loving others or love oneself, firstly, we need to restore the respect and trust for life itself, in particular, the individual life. "As Sartre declared, the individual is a singular universal. He or she is a unique exemplification of the total culture, the objective mind of a period but not a passive product of it." [7] To profoundly understand the essence of man's existence or being, we should turn our attention away from the outer

universe and turn to the inner mind's universe. The focus of kindness ethics is to show caring and compassion to the suffering individuals' fates and destinies, namely, is on man-in-the-world. Only the individual life that can feel the power of kindness can truly be motivated to pursue or search for the eternal meaning of life. In some sense, the kindness ethics provides a practical personal salvation for the modern individuals. No one is supposed to be an independent island and, eventually, it is the virtue of kindness that brings us together and helps to overcome the inexpressibly despairing sense of being separated and isolated, and what's more, it is just the kindness ethics that can possibly make us feel a sense of solidarity with our fellow beings. Freedom does not come freely.

4.2. The Significance of Kindness Ethics

With greater freedom brought about by the modern science and technology, comes greater responsibility to be kind to oneself and others. Physically speaking, the distance between human beings is getting smaller and smaller, while, mentally speaking, each individual is becoming increasingly isolated and helpless, desperately desiring for the truly sincere kindness from others and the world. "Total responsibility in total solitude---is this not the very definition of our freedom? And by choosing for himself in freedom, he chose the freedom of all." [8] Thus, kindness ethics must be seen as not only humanistic, but also individualistic. It takes great practical wisdom to distinguish the truly good from the seemingly good, or the truly eternal kindness from the superficial and shallow kindness. "During a popular lecture on Existentialism, Sartre said that in choosing for myself I choose for humanity. Nobody is ever alone. We are in fact together in the world; It is through the other's responses that I get a sense of the quality of my own being; Moreover, in carrying out my own projects, I inevitably impinge on the world of others." [9] According to the doctrine of kindness ethics, being kind to oneself does not contradict with being kind to others. Being truly kind to oneself is not equivalent to being selfish. On the contrary, being really kind to one's own life, both physically and mentally, psychologically and spiritually, makes up the fundamental foundation of being kind to more people. Kindness ethics, philosophically speaking, provides the modern people with a possible way to go out of the existential crisis, reminding them of the individual dignity and the uniqueness of each individual life. With the alienation of the modern people, man has, ironically speaking, become the slaves of the tools and the mechanisms that have been made by themselves. People have become one-dimensional and have been degenerated into the means to all sorts of ulterior means. The inner kindness that make us who we truly are as a complete person with the intrinsic dignity and value has been marginalized and even been forgotten.

4.3. Kindness Ethics: Its Practical Meaning

Kindness ethics does not belong to the external ethics, which focuses on the moral rules and social moral

requirements, rather, it can be classified as the internal ethics, which focuses on the intrinsic value of the virtue of kindness, in other words, people do the kind acts not for the sake of the tangible kindness benefits, but for the intrinsic goodness of kindness. To be summarized briefly, the mainstream idea of the current view concerning human nature holds that human nature is far from being a fixed and unchangeable essence that is attached to every person as a unique individual. Rather, it is constituted by historically specific and historically evolving social relations.^[10] But when this perspective goes too far, ethics, including kindness ethics, tends to lose its originally sacred or divine dimension. The highest level of kindness is to achieve the fullest possible all-round development of human potential, namely, to realize the aim of self-actualization. As Confucius puts it: "Wealth and honor are what every man desires. But if they have been obtained in violation of moral principles, they must not be kept. Poverty and humble position are what every man dislikes. But if they can be avoided only in violation of moral principles, they must not be avoided. If a superior man (the morally good man) departs from humanity (Jen), how can he fulfill that name? A superior man never abandons humanity even for the lapse of a single meal. In moments of haste, he acts according to it. In times of difficulty or confusion, he acts according to it."^[11] In this sense, being kind can be equal to the meaning of mastering oneself. The people who can not overcome himself or herself can never be regarded as being kind to himself or herself. However, with the whole society getting smaller and, functionally, more powerful, it is becoming increasingly difficult and challenging for the individuals to stay away from the influence of the collective or the common societal Reason. For the purpose of the general attainments or accomplishment of the society as a whole, the individuals definitely have to sacrifice, at least in part, his own true identity, consequently, the individual identity crisis comes in the wake of it. The self examination of modernity has constantly reminded us of the importance of staying true to the real identity of each individual who has the originally good human nature.

"The capabilities (intellectual and material) of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before—which means that the scope of society's domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before."^[12] In this sense, the so-called contemporary kindness, has frequently been turned into the false or distorted version of kindness, even without the consciousness of the moral agents concerned. Kindness ethics definitely involves the dimension of the practical kindness wisdom, with the virtue agents truly knowing what is the real kindness and what is the seemingly good kindness. Kindness, by itself has to be based on the groundwork of morality.

4.4. Live the Life of Kindness Virtue

The questions of "How shall we live?" and "What kind of person should I be?" are also the fundamental questions that the kindness ethics has to answer. The most essential part of kindness ethics is the inner kindness. As Confucius puts it: "To be moral, and kind, a man depends entirely upon himself and

not upon others."^[13] This statement shows that the moral power source of kindness ethics comes from the inner kindness, which is, essentially speaking, a form of the inner life harmony. The inner moral or virtuous harmony constitutes the foundation of the interpersonal virtuous harmony. What's more, Confucius emphasized that: "Is moral life or the life of being kind and virtuous something remote or difficult? If a man is resolutely determined enough to live a kind and virtuous life, there and then his life becomes kind and virtuous."^[14] As a matter of fact, this is a significant point that deserves our special attention. While the general morality of the whole society is on the decline, each and every individual virtuous agent still has his own autonomous moral will to choose to live his own virtuous life based on his own virtue ideal or moral principles. The central idea of the kindness ethics is extraordinarily similar to the ethical doctrine of Immanuel Kant, who vividly stated that: "two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the starry heavens above and the moral law within."^[15] It is not by accident that man seeks the virtue of kindness. That he seeks to live the life of kindness is a consequence of his incompleteness, his finitude, both mentally and especially, spiritually. In his Confessions, Augustine wrote, "Oh God, Thou hast created us for Thyself so that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee." This statement shows that, by means of kindness virtue, we can not only live a well-balanced life, but also can go beyond the natural to the supernatural. Therefore, we can then fulfill the mission of being who we truly are. Fundamentally speaking, to be kind to life is to go beyond oneself and to fasten one's affection upon a noble life that is much larger than the narrow life living simply for oneself.

4.5. The Ultimate Satisfaction of Life: Kindness Ethics' Purpose

Thinking only about oneself or being selfish can not give one the ultimate satisfaction or happiness. On the contrary, by helping others and sharing what one has with others, or, by being kind to the people other than himself, one achieves the inner peace and inner harmony. To be kind to life, is then, the indispensable requirement for the ultimate well-being and fulfillment of a person, because, secularly and morally speaking, being genuinely and sincerely kind to the life of others is the only feasible approach to satisfy the fundamental innermost human need for the sense of transcending and being eternal. Kindness ethics, on the one hand, enables a person to be able to elevate himself to a divinely high place which is full of possibilities. On the other hand, the reason why human beings choose kindness ethics is because they consciously realize the acute fact that human beings are mortal. The mortality sense reminds a person of his inherent limitation and therefore, reminds him of the importance of being kind to others by virtue of which they can, to some extent, conquer the mortality sense and achieve the relative sense of being infinite and eternal.

Kindness ethics helps us to overcome the cardinal sin of being proud and arrogant, which negatively affect all aspects

of man's conduct. As an individual, the assumption of self-sufficiency is just an illusion. No one is an independent island and no one can survive well and live well by isolating himself from the social community or the whole society. In other words, man is never self-sufficient, neither physically, emotionally, nor mentally and spiritually. The individuals, tend to become powerless and useless when they are deprived of the virtue kindness.

Appendix

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