

What arguments have Chinese thinkers raised against the idea of the individual self as the basis for ethics?

INTRODUCTION

The concept of individualism is one that conveys a different meaning depending on your cultural orientation of Eastern or Western thought. In this case the division is Chinese and European thinking which also incorporates American thought, simply because Europeans by large populated America. How these two cultures understand and have developed their civilizations is very much based on the understanding placed on this concept of the 'individual self'. It is the intention of this paper to explore this concept of individualism and its relationship to ethics. However before the evaluation it will be necessary to establish **(a) what is the individual self in Chinese Philosophy and Thought?** In this section of the paper I will objectively critique and try to present an understanding and a perspective of this term, which is somewhat complex depending on your social conditioning and cultural perspective, which your understanding is derived from to some extent. Unlike Western civilization, Chinese society is said not to stress the individual as being separate, totally autonomous and the uniqueness of a person. But more emphasis is placed on their relationships, unity and harmony to external powers, authority and the cosmic whole. This viewpoint is held by academics particularly of classical Chinese philosophy and is somewhat Confucian in its narrative. Investigation of this perspective will be reviewed.

(b) What arguments exist in Chinese Philosophy, against the concept of the individual self, being the basis for Ethics? In this section of the paper I will give a brief understanding of the individualism self as viewed from a Western perspective, being distinct, autonomous, and independent from external powers and authority to a degree. This perspective is to see if both cultures have contrasting philosophies. The evaluation of the subject matter will then look at the critique raised by several Chinese philosophers and thinkers, including Laozi, Zhuangzi, Mencius and Confucius. These philosophers and thinkers have been chosen as they represent two indigenous Chinese philosophies, Daoism and Confucianism. Both of these schools of thought appear to have conflicting ideas, which I will evaluate.

The reason for examining the opening question is that I consider the question deals with the fundamental aspects of human society and civilization. After all we are all individuals on the physical plane of existence; but on a conceptual ontological plane are we still separate from the cosmic whole? Or do we form part of the cosmic order? The word 'self' in the opening question has no gender and its meaning has been defined in the Collins Gem English Dictionary as: (distinct individuality or identity of a person or thing; one's basic nature). This western definition focuses on the individual person as being distinct yet uses the word nature, which I take to be referring to human nature. This being the case is human nature a part of a shared collection of human characteristics such as thinking, feeling along with ethics? The Chinese concept of the self is less of a dichotomy of the mind and body within Chinese thought, more of an integrated process takes place internally and externally. Where do these constructs come from? These questions have raised much philosophical and academic debate over time. It is not my intention to address all

these questions however I will address the question of this paper, which I contend that ethics is derived from both the individual self and external sources.

WHAT IS THE INDIVIDUAL SELF, IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY AND THOUGHT?

In both the academic and philosophical world, there has been much debate regarding this concept. As a result a number of schools of thoughts have been derived, however two main ones are at the forefront. The first school of thought takes up the standpoint and reasons that the term individualism (please note the words individual and self will be interchangeable in this paper) is not a term that can be used when learning Chinese History and culture. In fact it is unsuitable, because Chinese culture is inclined to be group orientated; and perceptions particularly in the Western hemisphere, see the culture as being orientated towards duty and obligations to external powers and institutions such as family, socio economical and political institutions. In one sense the expression of the individual self is less important than the collective expression of the many or the greater good (ad maius bonum), where ethical codes of conduct and behaviour are paramount to the functioning of society. This ideology appears to be virtuous collectively, however infringement on the individual expression and freedoms may be perceived as dogmatism or even totalitarianism in the eyes of the West.



Within another school of philosophy and academia there is contrasting thought, which to some degree regards the Chinese individual self as a reference that is applicable. In if the term is denied then individual objectives, aims and values are negated. One could further contend logically that the expression of the individual self can be found in the context of the arts such as painting, music, writing and other forms of expression of individualism. The understanding of the meaning of the word individual self, has been very much influenced by the English language, however, we do not need to limit its meaning when using it in the context of the individual self with Chinese expression. In the Western context the word itself has the meaning of uniqueness, separate, distinct, autonomous and free will. These are traits that are found within western culture and society, however these values can also be found in everyday experiences of Chinese individuals in the culture and society. Although this may be expressed within the framework of the family, community and culture. Conceptually a conductor may be directing an orchestra to play a piece of music. There are people on the dance floor dancing. Both couples and individuals will dance in different areas on the dance floor; however, the way the music is danced and expressed by the individual will be different from everyone else. One could contend that this expression of the individual self is similar to that which takes place within the framework of family, community and political order. And this expression is no less distinct, separate and autonomous than individual expression in the west. One could say that this construct of the 'individual self' is one, which needs to be understood from a cultural perspective because the construct of the individual self can be defined in both cultures that are more group orientated and those cultures that are perceived to be more autonomous.

WHAT ARGUMENTS EXIST IN CHINESE PHILOSOPHY, AGAINST THE CONCEPT OF THE INDIVIDUAL SELF, BEING THE BASIS FOR ETHICS?

Before looking at this argument I would like to present a brief perspective from a Western philosophical viewpoint. This is merely to provide an alternative point of reference. The individual self as been critiqued from Plato to more modern philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein. This construct shapes and plays a role in what and whom we think we are in our everyday experience of existence, as

independent individuals, through to our social interactions in society with other people and institutions. John [Lock](#), the English philosopher is just one of several philosophers who influenced the construct of individualism in Western philosophy. His “idea of the free and equal rational individual self became the grounding concept of modern Western moral philosophy”(Rosemont, 2015, p.34) Lock is saying human beings are able to act independently via free will and govern themselves with their own reasoning of the law. Lock was influenced by Theology and linked this to political theory. (Rosemont, 2015, p.33) Indirectly Lock has also linked this principle to Christian theology and the ethical governance by those moral principles found in the Bible, which are said to come from a Christian God whom is separate and outside of the individual Self. David Hume a Scottish Philosopher, presents a contrasting critique of the individual self when he says, “we have no experience of a simple, individual impression that we can call the self”. (Wrenn, 1995, S.7) He comments further that with self-introspection.

Human beings are nothing but a bundle or collection of perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.... They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind.

(Hume, 2007, p.iv)

In other words human beings are just a set of psychological continuations and there is no individual self or core. Continuing with Hume’s school of thought, he reasoned that human moral characteristics are determined from traits, which can be virtuous or vicious. Natural or artificial virtues govern these traits. Natural virtues being benevolence, meekness, charity, and generosity and the artificial ones being justice, keeping promises, allegiance and chastity. The traits are derived not only via DNA, but also more importantly by human relationships and social interaction within their cultural environment. This being the case then the individual self could be considered the basis for Ethics from this perspective.

Daoism

The philosophy of Daoism is derived from the Daodejing, which one could describe as a philosophical or religious book. Its author Laozi is believed to have lived approximately around the 6th- 5th Century BCE. (Littleton, 1996,p.120) This construct of Dao in the opening verse gives the following impression of the Dao:

1. One cannot cognize Dao only by speaking about it.
One cannot name by a human name that Origin of the sky and the earth, which is the Mother of everything.

(Vladimir, 2007, p. 1)

This verse is saying that the Dao is beyond thought and words and cannot be comprehended it is the cosmic or universal principle, the same verse goes on to say: “Dao and Its Creation are one in essence, though are called by different names”. One of the major objectives of Daoism is for the individual self to become one with the Dao. Within the Daodejing the individual self is not made clear, however, characteristics that are associated with the individual self can be found within the text. In verse 20 it speaks about egotism and vanity which one could class as personality traits or characteristics that are associated with the individual self. If one is to enter into a state of harmony and enlightenment then, one has to become one with the Dao by transcending mind and body. One agent that can facilitate this transcendence and self-cultivation is the concept of De (Morality, goodness or virtue). There are a number interpretations of this principle, however one translation that is relevant is De

as Power. (Karyn L, 2008,p.101) This force can range from a sort of magical strength to moral virtue. De could further be the power of an individual's ability to be benevolent or wellbeing and self-realization. De is a part of the Dao or comes from it. Verse 51 says: Dao creates beings; De nurses them, raises them, helps them to develop, to mature, takes care of them and supports them. De as a construct is the basis for ethics, which comes through Dao as apposed to the individual self. However saying this one needs to transcend the lower self to the higher self. The other important book in Daoism is that of Zhuangzi (Zhuang Zhou) who is also the author. He lived approximately between 370-300 BCE. Chapters 1-7 are attributed to him. Zhuangzi like Laozi does not provide or give clear separate distinction to the individual self. However, like his predecessor Laozi, he also advocates union with the Dao by transcending the mind-body self or lower self in order to become the higher transient self, which is associated with liberation and freedom.

Individuals are not valued in and of themselves but through their connection with a higher authority or power. Realized individuals – the goal in Zhuangzian thought – are not unique, autonomous individuals who stand apart from external powers, but unique manifestations of the workings of a shared Dao.

(Wrenn, 1995,s.6)

The agent of the Dao helps to achieve self-cultivation. Which is the inborn nature (human nature). In the following verse from Zhuangzi he goes further than Laozi in that it implies that there is an inborn nature.

The men of ancient times who practiced the Way employed tranquility to cultivate knowledge. Knowledge lived in them, yet they did nothing for its sake. So they may be said to have employed knowledge to cultivate tranquility. Knowledge and tranquility took turns cultivating each other, and harmony and order emerged from the inborn nature. Virtue is harmony, the Way is order. When Virtue embraces all things, we have benevolence.

(Watson, 2013,p.308)

This inborn nature could be interpreted as the higher transient self that is cultivated or stimulated by the interplay of knowledge and tranquility, which brings about virtue, which is harmony. The autonomous individual self is not the basis of ethics however when cultivated and stimulated by virtuous knowledge, it transcends to that self which is part of the collective distinctive expressions of the Dao, which is virtuous.

Confucianism

Confucius philosophy presents a different philosophy, which appears to be in direct opposition in some instances with that, which is presented in Daoism. The mechanism for moral cultivation of the individual self is more structured and pragmatic with the use of what could be called codes of conduct; based on a hierarchical system of interaction within social structures starting with families, communities and institutions within the culture and society. The writings of Confucius (brief sayings of Confucius) can be found in the Analects (Chinese name Lunyu meaning collated conversations). The name Confucius is a Latinized version of the Mandarin Chinese title Kong Fuzi meaning Master Kong.

The cultivation of the individual self ethically cannot be avoided within Chinese philosophy and concepts. The construct of (Ren) Humaneness is a particular principle that is associated with Confucius although it is mentioned in some texts such as the

book of Poetry (Shi jing), which predates Confucius. There are a number of meanings that are associated with (Ren) however one particular example is Ethical Wisdom (**Lia, 2008,p.40**) which is found in the Analects and is given five attitudes: deference, tolerance, making good one's word, Diligence and generosity (**Leys, 2014, p.52**). This example of ethical values is a means by which cultivation of the Self is undertaken. However where does ethics come from? Is a question that is complex and depending on your cultural and social conditioning will render an answer

In the Analects Confucius uses a number of cultivation tools for the individual self or gentleman (junzi), which includes rituals, moral education, music and internal faculties such as will power to facilitate moral cultivation. This idea of the gentleman is an ideal status for an individual self. Looking at one of the tools mentioned earlier, Chapter 3 in the Analects deals with the general issue of ritual. When critiqued in verse 3.4, one of Confucius disciples asks the master about Li, to which the master response by saying "it would be better to be frugal than to be extravagant". (**Eno, 2015, p.9**). In the same verse the master also says "in a funeral ritual it would be better to be guided by one's grief than simple to attend to the ritual stipulation." Frugality in one sense means to exercise prudence and not to waste things. This quality could be classified as virtuous, but more importantly in the later part of the verse the master conveys a meaning that one's grief could take precedence over a ritual. This in the context of the individual self shows grieving as fundamentally a human emotion, which is natural and can be expressed by the individual self. Although there is ritual stipulation for the funeral to be observed by those affected, there is still recognition for the individual to be guided by their feelings, in this case grieving. Verse 3.4 in the Analects provides virtuous action within the ritual however there is still room for individual expression. Both the virtuous action and the individual expression are derived from the principle of Li (Behavioral Propriety (**Lia, 2008,p.41**). This construct of Li has extensive flexibility in its Confucius meaning, one of which is: standard ways or codes of conduct in classical Chinese society. Li as a fundamental Confucian concept provides spiritual education and guides function. This is the cultivating process instilled into individuals via the socializing process. The concept of the individual self within Confucianism is a matter of philosophical debate for academics, primarily because of how individuality is expressed and the moral cultivation of that individual. Some of which is illustrated in the dialogue that takes place within the Analects between Mengzi and Xunzi, where Mengzi favors moral action as a process for moral cultivation. However with Xunzi there is a movement from the natural moral cultivation to behavior or codes of conduct that have been sanctioned by institutions. In the Analects 6:18, Kong Fuzi advocates a balance between the two approaches. In Confucian philosophy ethics is derived from knowledge, social interactions of families, communities and government institutions. This is how the individual is transformed into a higher self.



When discussing Confucius it would be difficult not to discuss Mencius because he embraced and propagated the teachings of Confucius. The name Mencius, like Confucius is a Latinized version of his real Chinese name, which is Meng Ke. His students or disciples referred to him as Master Meng. Mencius like Confucius before him had his writings are documented in a book called by his name Mencius. The book of Mencius was produced after his death by his followers. Debate as to its historical accuracy is questioned because of the willingness of the writers to possibly embellish his writing to suit political agendas of the time. This debate is an issue for another paper. Although Mencius propagated and revived the teachings of Confucius he did so in his own distinct style, which one could say, was more intellectual, varied and sophisticated than Confucius if this is at all possible. He developed contending

constructs, which were creative and innovative in regards to self-cultivations and human nature. These two areas where Mencius develops and stimulates a more intellectual sophisticate argument than Confucius are:

(A) The construct of the self and cultivation of the self, Mencius essentially theorizes that innately human nature is fundamental morally good. This is where Mencius develops or departs from Confucian philosophy by internalizing self-cultivation; this now can be achieved by the individual innate moral agencies or human nature opposed to just external authorities. The individual body becomes the source of cosmic authority for the cultivation of the self. This dichotomy is demonstrated in Mencius 2A and all of chapter six. In both of these two chapters there is a discourse taking place in regards to the idea of the moral agency,

Here is why I say that all human beings have a mind that commiserates with others. Now, if anyone were suddenly to see a child about to fall into a well, his mind would be filled with alarm, distress, pity, and compassion. That he would react accordingly is not because he would hope to use the opportunity to ingratiate himself with the child's parents, nor because he would seek commendation from neighbors and friends, nor because he would hate the adverse reputation [that could come from not reacting accordingly]. From this it may be seen that one who lacks a mind that feels pity and compassion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels shame and aversion would not be human; one who lacks a mind that feels modesty and compliance would not be human; and one who lacks a mind that knows right and wrong would not be human

(Bloom, 2009,p.58)

The above verse from Mencius conveys a meaning that, we as human beings are interconnected by our humanness and given a certain situation one could react with pi a compassionate manner. This innate reaction and feelings are part of human nature and not to behave or react in a given situation with pity, compassion, shame, modesty and compliance would be inhuman. These are internal individual cognitive responses to certain situations, as well as also knowing right from wrong. Further on in verse 6A6 Mencius speaks of the four seeds (B), which are commiseration, which is the seed of humanity (ren), shame is the seed of righteousness (yi), respect is the seed of li and right and wrong is the seed of wisdom. These virtues are innate within human nature and by using ones mind the individual can cultivate these seeds to obtain self-actualization or oneness with the cosmos.

By fully developing one's mind, one knows one's nature. Knowing one's nature, one knows Heaven. It is through preserving one's mind and nourishing one's nature that one may serve Heaven. It is through cultivating one's self in an attitude of expectancy, allowing neither the brevity nor the length of one's life span to cause any ambivalence, that one is able to establish one's destiny.

(Bloom, 2009,p.176)

Human nature is the individual self-connection to the cosmic order authority (Dao) and this is possibly where your ethics or virtue comes from, therefore one's individual cosmic nature could be seen as the basis for ethics.

Summary and Conclusion

The historical classical construct of the Chinese individual self as viewed by the West is very much influenced by Confucian philosophy where the individual self exists and is expressed within the context of a group, relationships and governance by external authorities and institutions such as family, socio economical and political institutions. These social codes and constructs can be found in sayings of Confucius as presented in the Analects and are a means for social cohesion and harmony with its codes of conduct not only for the individual but also society at large. This Confucius philosophy is not necessarily the only perspective in regards to the individual self and how the self is view and expressed.

The classical concept and vision of the Chinese individual self, can also be viewed purely from a logical perspective which is autonomous and distinctly expressed through different creative mediums such art, writing, dancing, acting and many other channels but also in the day to day activities of living, which are individual means of being and expressing the self. These mediums are commonplace to both Western and Eastern culture. However Western philosophy and culture has evolved to give the impression that the individual self is autonomous and is totally distinct, and self-expression is tied to the notions of freedom and self-governance. In contrast to the Western impression the classical Chinese concept of the individual has evolved in a different manner, which is more structured and dependent on external authority for perceived freedom and governance. Both Western and Eastern understanding of the individual self can be seen as a matter of cultural perspective.

The basis for ethics and virtue is no less complex in the West than the East. The West was and is largely influenced by Christianity, particularly Catholicism where an external distant Christian God has provided ethical and moral guidance for society. However from Plato to modern philosophers such as Hume they have reasoned that ethics can also be derived via individual social interaction.

In regards to the opening question, I contend that both sides of the argument can be represented from the two major Chinese philosophies of Daoism and Confucianism. The Daoist philosophy presents and infers an individual self in its thinking but this is not totally clear. **However the ethical or moral agent is the Dao particularly De, and this is the basis for ethics.** Laozi presents this construct in the Daodejing. The other Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi Like Laozi is not very clear on the individual status of the self however he goes further than Laozi by reasoning that innate human nature is the basis for virtue, which is the true self or Dao. The foundation for ethics from the Daoist perspective is then the Dao which is outside the individual self however with self-actualization and realization the true self becomes one with the Dao.

Confucianism can be perceived as a diametrically opposed philosophy to Daoism or a counter balance. The individual self is defined with in the context of the family, community, society and external authoritarian institutions. Confucius sets out within the Analects, the educational framework and knowledge by which the individual and society can be cultivated to achieve social cohesion and harmony, therefore ethics and virtues are achieved through the individual social interaction, to be clear this ethics is derived and defined from the individual self within the Confucian framework. Mencius philosophy defines the individual self through similar Confucius constructs however, I think one could conceive that his ethics and virtues are derived not only though Confucius concepts but also by innate human nature which is the true individual self and is intimately connected to heaven. This being the case then ethics is derived not only by knowledge and social interaction but they serve to stimulate

innate human nature, which is tied to the cosmic order of existence. From the above passage Mencius says, “Knowing one’s nature, one knows Heaven”. (Bloom, 2009, p.176). This understanding is similar to a Daoist point of view.

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