

Original Paper

The Differentiation and Analysis of Relationship between “Ethics” and “Morality” in the Chinese Context

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Abstract

In both Western and Chinese contexts, “ethics” and “morality” have always been confused by semantics and blurred boundaries, and “ethics and morality” or “morality and ethics” are often confused with each other. This situation has brought a lot of inconvenience to academic research. Although there have been many research results on the relationship between their, there is no general consensus, and it is necessary to re-analyze and summarize them. In summary, there are three types of research on the relationship between ethics and morality in recent years in Chinese academia: synonymous, heterogeneous, species and genera. Clarifying the relationship between ethics and morality can effectively prevent the tendency of ethical moralism and moral ethicism, help clarify the issue of attribution of ethics and moral disciplines, and at the same time help rebuild the moral beliefs of contemporary people.

Keywords

ethics, morality, Chinese context, analysis

1. Problem Formulation

In recent years, “rewriting Chinese ethics” has become a buzzword in domestic ethics circles, so it is inevitable to return to the division between “ethics” and “morality”, the meta-concept of ethics. Both in the Western and Chinese contexts, “ethics” and “morality” have always suffered from semantic confusion and blurred boundaries. “This situation not only brings inconvenience to academic research, but also leads to misunderstanding of the disciplinary characteristics of ethics.” The relationship between ethics and morality is a major frontier issue that has not attracted sufficient academic attention but has profoundly affected the quality of modern moral philosophy, and the coldness it has encountered has made it a benchmark for testing the academic stamina of modern people. In a sense, modern moral philosophy, ethical relations and moral life in modern society will truly mature only if

the necessary academic self-consciousness and theoretical resolution of this subject are achieved. (Fan, 2011)

At the beginning of the 20th century, there was a movement in the field of Western ethics for the precision of concepts and the logic of judgments, and the concepts of “justification”, “good”, “evil” and “obligation” were successively delimited and defined. However, so far, the confusion between the concepts of “ethics” and “morality” has not yet been fundamentally solved. It can be said that the relationship between ethics and morality is an issue that must be clarified but has not yet been clarified. Therefore, it is important to clarify these two concepts as well as their connection and distinction. This paper aims to sort out and summarize the discussions on the relationship between ethics and morality in the Chinese academia in recent years, in order to contribute to the study of this topic.

2. Three Kinds of Relationship between Ethics and Morality

There have been many research results on the relationship between the two in the academic community, but no general consensus has been reached, and the author summarizes them into the following three:

2.1 Ethics and Morality Are Inter-conceptual Synonyms

Rather than absolute synonymy, the theorists focus on the similarities between ethics and morality, arguing that they can be used in both Western and Chinese contexts, despite their differences. As Professor Luo Guojie says, “In both China and foreign countries, the two concepts of ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ can be regarded as synonymous in certain etymological meanings, referring to social and moral phenomena. However, they are different in that morality refers more to the actual moral relations between people, while ethics refers more to the reasoning about such relations” (Luo, Ma, & Yu, 1985); Professor Yang Guorong also holds this view: “There is no fundamental difference between the words ethics and morality from ancient Greek to Latin. Rather than distinguishing between ethics and morality, we should focus on the several relationships that morality implies.” For morality entails both reality and ideality, and involves a threefold relationship between individuality and sociality, and between universal norms and individual virtue. “When we distinguish between ethics and morality and focus on one aspect, we are often highlighting one aspect of the triple relationship embedded in morality.” (Li & Yang, 2014)

The author thinks that although tautologists are concerned about the differences between ethics and morality, the distinction is not clear enough, and it is naturally brilliant to start from the common ground, but from the perspective of long-term development of the theory, it is easy to cause confusion between ethics and morality in the academic world. It is obvious that ethics and morality have different extensions. In short, “the view that ethics and morality are not separate has not disappeared, but it is difficult to have an academic market in rigorous academic research.” (Fan, 2016)

2.2 Ethics and Morality Belong to a Heterogeneous Relationship between Concepts

Heterodox theorists believe that although ethics and morality are connected, “in strict scientific assertions, there should be no such confusion, but a strict distinction must be made.” (Tang, 1985) In

the history of world ethics, Hegel was the first scholar to make a clear distinction between “ethics” and “morality.” (Tang, K. et al., 1985) In the history of ethics in the world, Hegel was the first scholar who explicitly proposed the distinction between “ethics” and “morality”. In his *Principles of Philosophy of Law*, there is a passage which says: “Morality and ethics are customarily used almost as synonyms. But they have fundamentally different meanings. Although etymologically morality and ethics appear to be synonymous, the philosophical division is not at all an external one, not an outward classification of real material according to one or several grounds of division taken in from outside, but it should be an internal distinction of the concepts themselves.” (Hegel, 1961) In China, ethics and morality belong to the mainstream of the heterogeneous relationship between concepts, that is, most scholars focus on the distinction between the two concepts. Professor Li Zehou has clearly proposed that “the distinction between ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ is very important; ethics is social content, while morality favors psychological form,” and the key to the distinction between the two is to highlight This psychological form. Among them, “ethical norms are the requirements, orders, constraints, controls and jurisdictions of the group on individual behavior, which are diverse, numerous and complex, and vary”; (Li, 2017) morality, on the other hand, is the conscious behavior and psychology of the individual, from conscious awareness all the way to unconscious intuition. In short, he believes that ethics focuses on the relationship between “man” and “morality”, while morality focuses on the relationship between “man” and “reason”. In short, he believes that ethics focuses on the relationship between “man” and “morality”, while morality focuses on the relationship between “man” and “reason”. (Fan, 2012) Ethics is objective, universal, and real, and is expressed as a “spirit”, while morality is subjective, individual, and reflective, and is expressed as reason or rationality. (Fan, 2011) It should be noted that Professor Fan Hao’s analysis of the relationship between ethics and morality does not emphasize either their commonality or their heterogeneity, but tries to build a symbiotic and interpretive relationship between them; (Fan, 2011) Professors Zhu Yiting and Eddie Chen elaborate on the focus of ethics and morality in terms of their extensions: “‘Ethics’ is the relationship between human and human beings. ethics’ is the relationship between human beings and their order; ‘morality’ is the concretization of ethics, the prescription of moral obligations for individual roles” (Zhu, 2018); in traditional China, “morality” is “nature”, “nature”, “nature”, “nature”, which deals with man’s relationship with heaven and himself, while “ethics” is the “nature”, which deals with “Ethics” is the “place”, “duty” and “name” that deals with interpersonal and intergroup relations; (Eddie, 2019) Professor Li Jianhua distinguishes between ethics and morality in terms of connotation and extension, arguing that “Ethics focuses on objective ethical relations and their external statutes, with emphasis on concrete situational analysis; morality focuses on subjective internal pursuits and their self-discipline, with emphasis on principles adhering to as one.” (Li, 2020) At the same time, both ethics and morality are externally concerned with the relationship between man and nature, man and man, and man and himself, but ethics connotes value orientation and normative requirements, while morality is the reflection, identification, and practice of several relationships. (Li & Liu, 2020)

In summary, this difference is mainly that morality tends to have more subjective, subjective connotations, while ethics has more objective and object connotations, ethical relations are the basis of morality, and morality is ethical self-consciousness. First, morality is more individual and ethics is more social; second, morality is more subjective and self-regulatory, while ethics is more external and other-regulatory; third, morality is more spiritual and subjective, while ethics is more practical and objective; fourth, morality is more pluralistic and ethics is more monistic; fifth, morality is more contingent and ethics is more real.

2.3 Ethics and Morality Belong to the Relationship between Species and Genera

The development of academic history shows that ethics and morality not only have a synonymous and heterogeneous relationship, but also manifest as to which one has priority. There are three main views of those who hold this thesis:

Firstly, ethics is higher than morality. According to Prof. Wang Haiming, “Morality and ethics, from the etymology, are the same word in the West, both referring to the norms of how interpersonal behavior should be; but in China, it is the relationship between the whole and the part, and ethics is the whole, which has two meanings: the law of how interpersonal behavior is and its norms of how it should be; morality is the part, which has only one meaning: the norms of how interpersonal behavior should be.” (Wang, 2008) According to this understanding, ethics includes both actual and contingent, while morality is only a contingent, then morality cannot account for the actual moral quality of the subject and the social moral phenomenon, nor can it account for the actual moral consciousness, moral emotion and moral behavior of the subject. Although this view sees the difference between ethics and morality and notes the cultural differences between the Eastern and Western contexts, it is far-fetched in the past; ethics is superior to morality, and the reason given by Professor Wu Minying is that “ethics has to highlight the ‘bar’, more rational level and more generalized abstraction. In contrast, ethics is more concrete and detailed, referring generally to the sum of behavioral norms that deal with the relationship between people and people and between people and society.” (Wu, Ed., 2002) This view of morality as the sum of behavioral norms is questionable, because “morality includes human pursuits and activities, and moral norms themselves reflect and embody the needs and intentions of human development”; (Xiao & Han, 1988) Professor Gao Zhaoming emphasizes: “ ‘ethical priority’ is not in a strong sense, but in a weak sense, i.e., not ‘ethics’ overshadowing ‘morality’, but in coexistence with ‘morality’ ‘coexist in symbiosis’”; (Gao, 2020) Professor Fan Hao’s perspective is exactly the opposite, and he highlights the value orientation of ethical priority while emphasizing the symbiotic interaction between ethics and morality (Fan, 2016); other scholars believe that ethics is the objective basis and basic premise for the formation and development of morality, and ethics is both the principle and the essence of morality; Morality is the epiphenomenon and the necessary reference of ethics.

Secondly, morality is superior to ethics. Professor Zhao Tingyang discusses this view from the nature of the concept itself, and he argues that “the basic nature of morality is self-sacrifice, while the basic nature of ethics is universal reasonableness, and the relationship between the two is that morality is

higher than and not lower than ethics” (Zhao, 2020); in the same perspective, Professor Li Jianhua argues that ethics is a relational concept and morality is individual concept, and based on this sense ethics is a subordinate or secondary concept of morality (Li, 2020); from the source, some scholars argue that morality is the root of ethics and ethics is the manifestation of morality. (Mao, 2008)

Thirdly, ethics and morality are mutually interpretable. This view is that ethics and morality have no superiority or priority, and that they can be interpreted and symbiotic with each other. For example, Hegel elevates morality to ethics, while Li Zehou advocates entering morality from ethics.

3. The Significance of Clarifying the Relationship between Ethics and Morality

It is of great theoretical value and practical significance to clarify the relationship between ethics and morality. It not only prevents two tendencies of ethical moralization and moral ethicization in academic research, but also helps clarify the disciplinary attribution of ethics and morality, and at the same time is beneficial to the reconstruction of contemporary people’s moral beliefs, as follows:

3.1 Prevent Two Tendencies of Ethical Moralization and Moral Ethicalization

Ethical moralization is to equate ethics with morality, which is mainly manifested by spiritualizing and subjectivizing the entity of ethical relations and subjectivizing the contingency, which abstracts the root of necessity of the contingency relations between man and nature and man and man, and essentially lowers the status of ethics. In this way of thinking, ethics is purely subjective, and human will becomes the source of ethics, and people can set or even change the standards of the contingency of ethical relations according to their own needs and will, which will easily lead to ethical relativism or ethical extremism; Another tendency is the ethicalization of morality. Equating morality with ethics, or even replacing morality with ethics, is mainly manifested in treating morality as an entity with the same objectivity and necessity as ethics, which leads to moral supremacy or moral absolutism, believing that morality is the supreme good outside the subject, and that man should prostrate under it and carry out the external supreme morality to the end without doubt. This essentially elevates the status of morality (Li & Liu, 2012), ontologizes, abstracts, and de-lives morality, and is an objective idealism that separates morality from the concrete ethical relations of human beings.

The common error of both is the confusion of ethics and morality. Ethics and morality are both human morality originates from the world of human contingent relations, i.e., the ethical world, and is not an a priori thing morality operates according to ethics, and its purpose is to be ethical, i.e., to be in accordance with human contingent relations, and not with the subjective will of man.

3.2 Be able to Clarify the Disciplinary Attribution of Ethics and Morality

Broadly speaking, ethics is a social perspective on human beings, dealing with and adjusting the relationship between human beings, therefore, ethics should be classified as a sociological discipline. The purpose of both ethics and sociology is to realize the benign operation of society, and many social norms can be upgraded to ethical norms; therefore, “ethical sociology” and “social ethics” are the terms for their close relationship. Morality is the experience and confirmation of the individual’s inner being,

and therefore, morality belongs to the discipline of psychology. Of course, ethics is also related to psychology, because “ethics is not only a study of ‘morality’ but also a study of ‘reason and emotion’.” (Jiao, 2020)

The author can only make a general statement about this division of disciplines. In order for morality to be put into practice, it is necessary to find the psychological base. To make morality a deep psychological factor in the structure of the subject, it is necessary to explore the role of the subject’s emotions in realizing morality. In the process of moral development, although rationality makes human activities conscious and self-acting, being rational is not the same as being virtuous. Moral emotion judgment starts from “benevolence”, touches the heart and cleanses the spirit, which is significant for promoting moral subjectivity and enhancing moral responsibility.

3.3 It Is Conducive to Rebuilding the Moral Faith of Contemporary People

There are two main reasons for the lack of moral beliefs among contemporary people: Firstly, the mainstream view of society understands morality mainly as a system of rules to regulate and restrain people. Although the normative role of morality is valued, the fundamental significance of morality for people is belittled, and there are only moral rules without moral spirit, which abstracts the ethical roots of morality, thus leading to the lack of people’s inner morality. Without virtue, the goodness inherent in practice will not be realized, as MacIntyre says: “Man has moral value only when he has virtue; without virtue, man has no moral value” (MacIntyre, 2003); Secondly, because people treat the world of human relations in a simplistic and utilitarian way, ignoring its contingency. Some people simplify the relationship between man and nature as the use of nature for man, the relationship between man and man as the relationship of interest, and the purpose of existence of the self as the acquisition of profit. Such a distorted view of life and values that deviate from ethical contingency inevitably leads to seeing morality only as a tool, without the possibility of generating moral beliefs that inquire into the meaning of life. The common feature of these two tendencies is that they sever the essential connection between ethics and morality, and treat ethics and morality in a one-sided manner.

To clarify the relationship between ethics and morality, it is necessary to understand ethics and morality from the perspective of human existence, to understand morality as the spirit and practice of the subject based on the ethical world of human beings, and to establish the spirit of morality and the world of human meaning from the contingency of the ethical world, so that morality can become a part of the meaning of life and the process of pursuing morality can become the process of generating the meaning of life, and only then can moral faith be truly established.

Project Information

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