

A Probe on the Universal Ethics Ideas Construction Based on the Modern Civilization

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Received 8 May 2015; accepted 15 July 2015

Published online 26 August 2015

Abstract

As the limited rational beings, humans have never stopped exploring the meaning of self-survival and relations of people-to-people and people-to-nature in the process of human civilization. The knowledge acquired by humans becomes richer with the development of history, to a large extent it brings freedom for the people to change the world according to their own will. However by comparing with these achievements, contradictions and conflicts of people-to-people and people-to-nature have never been actually decreased with the achievements increasing. In order to alleviate and solve such contradictions and conflicts, on the background of the new modern civilization, the construction of the universal ethics based on humanity might be a way out of this dilemma.

Key words: Human civilization; Ethics; Humanity; Universal ethics

Wei, M. Q., Sun, J., & Su, Z. Y. (2015). A Probe on the Universal Ethics Ideas Construction Based on the Modern Civilization. *Studies in Sociology of Science*, 6(4), 26-29. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sss/article/view/7463> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/7463>

INTRODUCTION

What does the “civilization” actually mean? Anthropologists point out the characteristics of some

civilizations which could distinguish civilization from tribal culture of the Neolithic Age. These characteristics include “the city center, the national political power based on systems, tributes or taxes, characters, class or leveled society, the huge buildings, a variety of specialized arts and sciences and so on.” (Stavrianos, 2009) These general characteristics have certain guide significance. Because not all the civilization in different areas and periods of the world have the same characteristics as such. For example, civilizations in Egypt and Maya don’t include the so-called cities. We are surprised that civilization created by humans brought us great convenience and they improved the life quality of the human beings. Especially after an overview of the beginning of human civilization of archaeology proof, the human civilization process of the Eurasia Civilization, from 3500 BC to 1000 BC. After entering into 21st century we see the fast development of economy and incessant changes of technology. At the same time the deteriorated global environment and the disharmonious relationship between human and nature also warn us to think about the connotation of civilization, does it only mean the advancement of technology and economy or there are more? This is the beginning to question the almighty science and technology, following tracks will be unfolded following this clue.

1. A POSSIBLE GUIDANCE OF THE MODERN SCIENCE: THE ETHICAL COMPASS

Jaques Cousteau, an oceanographer, had expressed his anxieties about the conflicts between human and nature. He said, “the harms the humans brought to the earth in the 20th century may be much more than the harms caused by humans in the whole previous history.” (Ibid., p.46) In the previous periods there were 5 billion to 40 billion species existed in this planet. But now only about 40 million

different kinds of plants and animals existed. In other words, 99.9% of the species disappeared while only 1% them survived. (Ibid., p.10)

Humans acquire unprecedented power through the progress of technology. The concept of centralism is deep-rooted in humans. The reason why our human are different from animals is that humans have reason and consciousness. It means that reason is the essential quality of humans. Thus humans dominate the nature and become its master because of this reason. Humans legislate for nature. The accumulated knowledge provides people with increasing energy to develop nature and the power to control and dominate the world. However humans firstly face themselves in the world throughout history without any companions. Humans have no other enemies after their enemies are eliminated by themselves. We just have ourselves. It is a hard task to fight against ourselves instead of the outside world. Thus what we need to be not only more knowledge and technology but also ethics more reason to ensure knowledge is rationally used in right purpose and direction.

Now humans are working on to find the way to avoid becoming “economic animals”, more accurately, to find an ethical compass to guide the development of technology. It is an unprecedented and huge challenge for human beings. By far humans have utilized their remarkable wisdom to dominate the environment and then establish their principal status in the earth. But in today’s society and environment humans have to face the new challenge of losing their principal status in the world. It demands people to transform from clever primates to wise humans, namely, “from cleverness to wisdom” (Ibid., p.12).

2. COMMON MORAL GROUND OF THE MODERN CIVILIZATIONS: THE “GOOD” LIFE

With the development of science and technology and popularity of information technology, people in different continents could change their remoteness to closeness and exchange their information faster. As the rational beings, we must think what we should do to make better use of science and technology brought by civilization and to serve our life better.

Humans work on pursuing goodness of life. As truth is the central issue to control the real world scientifically, aesthetics is the central issue to control the real world artistically while goodness and evilness are the central issue to control the real world ethically. As core of ethics and major standards of moral judgment goodness is changeable in history. In academia scholars consider that philosophy is national and historical. Therefore different nations have their own different ethic regulations and standards.

Any question about ethic rule and social time is always like this: where do ethics rules and social practice belong? Are they essentially a part of local custom or a part of the universe? In a kind of social order, some traits in people are basic elements of a steady society. But these same traits could be destructive in another society. (Macintyre, 2003, pp.45-46)

In one place we think it is goodness while in another place it is not. In this new era we face a new ethic confusion that the content of the word “goodness” is uncertain and relative. The process of civilization has brought humans under such condition: we are more reliant on each other, we are closer with each other, we have to face the problems of atmosphere, ocean, land and resources together, which is our common problem and needs everyone’s attention. So we should think that how we could jump across the old state-nation concept and stand for human race and to re-examine ethic core for the purpose of constructing universal ethics to guide people’s life in today and in the future.

Referring to the ethical rules and restrictions, we could not ignore the effect of religions in the world such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and so on. We should realize that we could not neglect the differences among these religions although they have crossed nationalities and affect well to particular groups in the large world. These differences caused the loss of dialogue and certain independence which make their doctrines lose the chance to be the only universal ethic regulation basis. Russel pointed out questions that already have definite answers have been placed into all kinds of science. And these left parts without definite answers comprise the residual part of philosophy. In Russel’s eye philosophy exists the free zone between science and theology. For Levinas, the real confused philosophy question is no more about beings and consciousness, beings and knowledge, beings and time, beings and nothingness, but about beings and goodness, beings and justice, beings and otherness. In new historical environment, it is necessary for us to reassess the ethic core-goodness. By Aristotle, “the goodness means happiness, it is a kind of soul activity” (Russel, 2005, p.225). And Hegel believes goodness is the realized freedom as the final and absolute purpose. To explore the goodness in the 21st century we can never ignore humanity and relationship of human and goodness. In Bacon’s article *On Goodness and Goodness of Nature* he explained the concept of goodness. He said,

I take goodness in this sense, the affecting of the weal of men, which is that the Grecians call philanthropia, and the word humanity (as it is used) is a little too light, to express it Goodness I call the habit, and goodness of nature the inclination. (Hegel, 1982, p.132)

Bacon explored the origin of goodness from humans’ natural quality and points out the nature of goodness which is the form of preserving and sustaining individuals and groups. For Bacon everything, even include lifeless things, has duality of goodness.

The first is like that, everything is a total or substantive. It is actually individual goodness. The second is, it is a part or member of a greater body. It is group goodness. It is same with public goodness and social goodness. And Bacon thought the second goodness is higher, greater and more valuable. Because it could be saved as a universal form. (Yu, 2001, p.372)

Bacon also thought social and public goodness is better than individual goodness.

For Rousseau, the main concept is the simple but powerful concept of human nature. Human nature has been shielded and twisted by today's society and political system. While the real desire and need of human nature provide a basis for ethics and a ruler to judge whether the social system is corrupting. Other scholars seek help from primitive human nature. Rousseau's concept of human nature is much more complicated and profound than other scholars'. Rousseau did not deny humans have their own history. But human's history could be changeable with new desire and motivation emerging continually. Human history begins with the natural state which is understood differently by Rousseau and Hobbes. In Rousseau's view, firstly, the natural state is not social. The natural impulse of human without hesitation is not self-aggrandizement. Natural person is driven to move forward by self-love. But self-love is different from compassion and sympathy. After all even some animals help their peers. Secondly, what humans need is limited by the natural environment. Rousseau clearly knew that Hobbes didn't realize this point. Humans' desire could be triggered by a desire object while natural people have little desire object. In the world what he knew about the good things are only food, women and sleep. The only bad thing he fears is the pain and hunger. Thirdly, Rousseau believed people in natural state still have no distinction about ethics because it is unnecessary to distinguish justice from injustice without properties. Hobbes thought so, too. But for Rousseau it doesn't mean the word ethic is useless. The natural persons take actions according to their needed impulse and causal compassion. It is good, not evil. Just like Hobbes's natural doctrine Christian theory-original sin is also false. Rousseau in his book *Savory Priest* seems to insist that the real conscience is always accessible. If we ask for advice from conscience, we always depart from reason instead of ethics. Thus, when conscience is transformed to caution which become the voice of universal wills because its respect to goodness and justice principles. The result still is that universal will be correct and helpful to public interests. But it doesn't mean people's caution is always correct. Although we could not always realize what is goodness our universal will always follow goodness in our hearts. People will never be corrupt. But they are often deceived and their will could tell them what is evil at this moment.

In the context Rousseau thought goodness is unique and common and he took it for granted. All the desire and need of citizens conforms goodness. And there are no two

social groups being irreconcilable. Our worst plan about the goodness is making wrong decisions. But why the common goodness is neglected while private interests are increasing. Rousseau's insight on disruption of modern society is modest but excellent. It is different from his views of ethic and emotional power in other places. This dilemma is not only owned by Rousseau. Rousseau's comments on common people's ethic, conscience and dignity deeply influenced Kant and make him isolated a prior and unchangeable moral factors.

For Kant everything becomes goodness is conditional except the will of goodness. Health, properties and reason are goodness only when they are used proper. For Kant the concept of goodness and evilness exists after ethical code emerge and they are set by the ethical code. (Kant, 2003)

After the research of humanity based on empiricism Kant already isolated the order which all the rational people should observe consciously. It is absolute order of Kant. All rational being should obey the rule. "They should regard themselves and the others as their purpose of themselves instead of tools." (Kant, 2007)

3. THE COMMON PROBLEMS, A REALISTIC CALL FOR THE UNIVERSAL ETHICS

The key question is how to use the universal ethics to ensure its binding power in the world?

"Humans wouldn't survive without global ethics." (Kung, 2002, p.3). It's no more groundless alarm. Ethics has entered the life of people from altar and it is widely used in a variety of areas as there are environmental ethics, bioethics, science and technology ethics and so on. As dynamic being humans have never stopped to reflect on their own behaviors. In the 17th century, with the rise of technological revolution, Bacon had effusively praised pursuit of "knowledge and skills" through science. But he also mentioned that this pursuit needs to be guided with humanity and goodness. And it's a kind of pursuit for improving quality of life instead of enjoying oneself, being superior, chasing fame, fortune and power and any other similar humble utilitarian purpose.

Our civilization continues to move forward after Bacon's time. In 21st century our material life has been greatly improved. So do these general civilizations. But humans become contradictory and confused at this moment. Why the environment becomes more and more unfit for humans to live when human become more and more able to live according to their own will. Humans' ability of learning and developing technology exceeds the previous' a lot. Humans seem to control the world. Why many lives extinct, it is one hundred times faster than their extinction in the natural state. Humans already have a variety of ethics and norms. Why humans seem increasingly unable to deal with the problems of people-

to-people peacefully. Meanwhile, the relationship between nature and human is becoming more and more confrontational and tense? Although we can't deny human beings always could find solutions to deal with different contradictions. They also never cease to think about the humanity and their future. But by the popularity of computer technology, rapid development of science and technology and short distances among countries, we seem to be closer to each other. But sadly the distance of thoughts is not shortened because of the regional shortened distance. After Iraq War, oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico and atomic bombs explosion in Hiroshima and Haganaki, our ethics code in today seems to be ineffective to these serious events happened to humans. Thus, constructing a powerful universal ethical norms may be a solution for humans. Such a hard task still needs our efforts and actions around the world.

CONCLUSION

The progress of modern civilization makes the contradictions of people-to-people and people-to-native visible. Thus urgently we need a kind of universal ethics to guide the people in today and in the future. Based on the obligation theory of Kant, we explore the possible basis to construct global ethics. It is at the heart of the ethics, namely goodness and humanity. The reason or self-awareness of human essentially distinguishes people from animals. Thus people to acquire the supreme divine status and become the final resting home of all the things in the world. Although people continually change the nature for living with the help of technological progress,

as the limited being and a part of the earth people is still not free because of nature's bound. But as only dynamic being of humans could be totally independent of all perceptions and own absolute will of freedom. Hegel said that

The absolute and noble mission of humanity is: He knows the good and the evil. In a word, humans should be responsible for ethics including goodness and evilness. Humans should be responsible for everything, even including his goodness and evilness of freedom owned by him, not only a special thing. (Hegel, 2003, p.34)

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