A Moral Metaphysics and a Metaphysics of Morals: Xunzi and Kant

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Abstract

I explore two important ways of thinking that the philosophical understanding of morality requires metaphysics: the moral metaphysics I ascribe to Xunzi and Kant's metaphysics of morals. Both Xunzi and Kant held that a metaphysics of nature is inadequate for a metaphysical understanding of human moral agency. Xunzi invoked the human Dao to allow for the agency of the heart-mind, and Kant invoked the Categorical Imperative to allow for the agency of the moral self. Both Xunzi and Kant stretched metaphysics through rejecting the wrong sorts of rigour as preventing us from having an appropriate understanding of metaphysics and morality. I turn to their different placements of humanity that reflect deep differences in Xunzi's and Kant's underlying metaphysics. Xunzi placed humanity as a virtue or power that allows our psychology to become a moral psychology. Kant placed humanity as an ideal that allows our psychology to be a moral psychology.

Keywords

metaphysics and morality – rigour – humanity

I am exploring two important ways of thinking that the philosophical understanding of morality requires metaphysics. My approach applies the method that Jiuyuan Yu and I developed two decades ago. Our approach involves creative philosophical engagement by investigators with views striking them as worth considering in their attempt to grasp many-faceted truths about philosophical issues that perplex them. From this perspective, comparative philosophy goes beyond the aims and methods of comparative philosophical history with which it is inevitably entwined. In this essay, I aim to identify questions emerging from my own attempts to think about Xunzi and Kant together regarding their conceptions of metaphysics and morality.

Anyone acquainted with Kant's moral writings has some idea of what he sought to achieve with his Metaphysics of Morals. But what of Moral Metaphysics, which I ascribe to Xunzi? We must be careful with the term because it is drawn from Contemporary Neo-Confucian philosophers and applies more straightforwardly to Mencius than to Xunzi. I start with the claim of Mou Zongsan (1909–1995), himself deeply engaged with Kant's philosophy:

Moral metaphysics accounts for the existence of things with moral substance which are exhibited by moral consciousness. Thus, moral substance is at the same time metaphysical substance.³

There is room to criticise Mou Zongsan’s formulation in terms of the unity of metaphysical and moral substance, but I chose it in light of Mou’s serious attempt to bring Kant’s views on metaphysics and morality into relation with Chinese views on similar themes for mutual consideration.

In questioning this “substance” account, my thinking is influenced by Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), who flourished at the same time as Mou Zongsan and was also deeply engaged with Kant’s philosophy. Levinas rejected both Husserl’s epistemology and Heidegger’s ontology as first philosophy, the philosophy that grounds and brings into perspicuous order a comprehensive programme of philosophical investigation. He sought rather to justify a fusion of metaphysics and morality as first philosophy.⁴ With his notion of “otherwise than being”,⁵ Levinas extended metaphysics beyond being, beyond ontology and beyond substance. My conjecture is that keeping Levinas in mind will free “moral metaphysics” from Mou’s Kantian framing of the term, allowing deeper insights into Kant’s Metaphysics of Morals as well as into Xunzi’s Moral Metaphysics. I turn first to Xunzi and then to Kant in considering some resonances and dissonances between their philosophical methods and what emerges from their methods.

⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence, Alphonso Lingis, trans. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

1 Thinking about Xunzi

In Book 6, “Against the Twelve Masters”, Xunzi was critical of earlier celebrated followers of Confucius and their own contemporary followers closer to his own time for their pernicious persuasions. In rejecting the false heritage of their different views, he repeatedly used the formula:

Nevertheless, they can cite evidence for maintaining their views, and they achieve a reasoned order in their explanations, so that it is enough to deceive and confuse the foolish masses.⁶

Regarding both predecessors and contemporaries, Xunzi distanced himself from what I shall call the wrong sorts of rigour, rigour by which we are narrowly and disastrously misled in trying to understand and guide human agency, to form human institutions and to manage human affairs. Insofar as we free ourselves from narrow obsessions, we can achieve the open-minded, comprehensive and adequate view required to deal with complex human reality.

In Book 21, “Undoing Fixation”, Xunzi likewise criticised earlier non-Confucians, arguing that in various ways their mistaken doctrines each arose from pursuing narrow fixations or obsessions that at best yielded partial knowledge and at worst missed entirely what they were seeking to understand.

People of twisted understanding observe one corner of the Way and are unable to recognize it as such. So, they think it sufficient and proceed to embellish it. On the inside, they use it to disorder their own lives. On the outside, they use it to confuse other people. As superiors, they use it to transfix their subordinates. As subordinates, they use it to transfix

their superiors. This is the disaster of being fixated and blocked up in one's thinking.

Here Xunzi was alluding to Confucius in *Analects* VII. 8, “I hold up one corner to show them, and if they can't come back with the other three, then I don't go on.”7 Like Confucius's inadequate students, those criticised by Xunzi for not going beyond their different chosen corner all failed to engage comprehensively with Dao itself as constant yet covering all changes. Also in Book 21, Xunzi provided his alternative to narrow rigour by attuning our knowing heart-mind to the stillness, unity and emptiness of Dao:

> How do people know the Way? I say: with the heart. How does the heart know the Way? I say: it is through emptiness, single-mindedness, and stillness. The heart is always holding something. Yet, there is what is called being “empty.” The heart is always two-fold. Yet, there is what is called being “single-minded.” The heart is always moving. Yet, there is what is called being “still.”

I am most interested in his criticism of Zhuangzi, where Xunzi claimed that in pursuing Dao, Zhuangzi was obsessed by heaven/nature and did not understand the importance of the human heart-mind. Zhuangzi would completely absorb human Dao within Dao of nature, the general metaphysical principle constituting or regulating the workings of the world.

At the core of Xunzi’s concern was his notion of the heart-mind, which he saw as part of us, but not in the way that our purely physical parts, such as our limbs and organs, especially our mouths and stomachs, are parts of us. If our heart-minds were like our mouths and stomachs, we would be limited to acting solely to seek benefits and avoid harms, and there would be neither room nor need for a human Dao to guide and explain our actions.

For Xunzi, the psychology of many individuals was indeed limited to the shrewdly calculative employment of reason, emotion and desire to achieve such ends, with the result being that individual lives and the social order of his time were afflicted by chaos, conflict and violence. His explanation for this was that desires in us were incompatible, prone to lurching from one object after another and either insatiable or, once sated, recurring. His remedy was not the elimination of desire because he held that reason on its own could not issue in action; nor was his remedy that of the legalists who succeeded him: the acceptance and coercive manipulation of a society exhaustively populated by individuals assumed to have this psychology. Rather, his solution was to enhance this natural psychology with additional powers or virtues that could moderate and order our capacities and thus open the possibility of human individual and social harmonious flourishing, thus transforming psychology of perception and agency into a moral psychology of perception and agency, reaching its fullest development in the sage.

For Xunzi, the leading power or virtue was benevolence or humanity, to be achieved through an unending process of self-transformation, guided by a master inculcating both the inner and outer practice of Confucian rites. He understood all of this as providing the contents of human Dao and all of this to be a matter of artifice, not in the sense of being false or fake, but in the sense of being humanly created. For this reason, human Dao – Xunzi’s highest moral metaphysical notion – can also be understood in terms of human creativity, rather than merely as an instantiation of cosmic Dao of the natural world in which human agency was located and with which human agency can in some sense become attuned.

In terms of creativity, Xunzi identified human Dao as sagely Dao, Dao of the Ancient Kings and Dao of the Later Kings, because each was grounded in wide comprehension, including but extending beyond the narrow fixations or obsessions that he discerned. This was Xunzi’s standard

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of being one Dao rather than the standard of rigid conformity of expression in language, ritual and music. If heaven or nature could speak to us, this flexibility of expression might be foreclosed, but for Xunzi language, like ritual and music, originated in human artifice, and, like ritual and music, is open to human vicissitudes of remembering and forgetting, understanding and misunderstanding, renewal and replacement, conservation and innovation, decay and rectification. For Xunzi, names and their use in distinguishing things and kinds of things can be appropriate or inappropriate as a matter of human practice, but this practice is not answerable to any further standard of appropriateness of names to the things they name.

In addition to one human Dao, Xunzi recognised, in a mundane rather than metaphysical sense, additional kinds of Dao, for example, those of generals, officials or various barbarian peoples. The test of the superiority of human Dao over each subordinate or alternative Dao was whether individuals and societies lived and harmoniously flourished when one Dao or another prevailed.

My account of Xunzi’s human Dao as produced by artifice is quite understandably open to controversy. When I sketched it in a 2007 conference in Munich,8 Paul Goldin replied with astonishment that I suggested something so clearly mistaken, but he later sent me a copy of Kurtis Hagen’s monograph The Philosophy of Xunzi: A Reconstruction,9 which is similar to my independently developed views. Goldin said he was not convinced, but that he was no longer sure that I was wrong. At issue is whether human Dao is humanly discovered or humanly created.10 Is sagely Dao always the attunement of empty, unified and still heart-mind with empty, unified and still Dao of nature, yielding human Dao universally applicable whatever the circumstances of time, place or society? Or does such attunement allow creative artifice attentive to such variations of circumstances. I have tried to some extent to reconcile our two perspectives.

Let me conclude this section with three reminders. First, Dao of nature provides a metaphysics with change or flux rather than substance as its fundamental feature. This conception of nature differs radically from the main conceptions of nature in Ancient Greece, aside from that of Heraclitus. It also differs from Kant’s endorsement of a Newtonian conception of nature.

Secondly, Xunzi’s conception was embedded in ongoing disputes over whether Dao of nature is normative as well as descriptive, perhaps providing room to disagree over how Xunzi understood human Dao as completing Dao of nature and Dao of earth. Is Xunzi’s human Dao best understood as realising normative possibilities already available for sagely discovery in the Dao of nature or best understood as punching beyond such possibilities, if any, through sagely creation?

My third reminder concerns Xunzi’s understanding of opposites. He explored inclusive opposites marked by soft-edged non-dichotomous distinctions, and even his taxonomy of kinds in Book 22, “Correct Naming” can be understood in this way rather than in terms of exclusive opposites marked by sharp-edged dichotomous distinctions. Even where terms Xunzi used in distinguishing a whole array of opposites sound familiar, his terms can easily be misunderstood if the underlying conception of opposites in his time is forgotten.

2 Thinking about Kant

For Kant, I begin with his Transcendental doctrine of method at the end of the Critique of Pure Reason,11 focusing on the discipline of pure reason

and the architectonic of pure reason. In the sections concerning the discipline of pure reason Kant distinguishes the metaphysical grounds and methods appropriate for mathematics from those appropriate for philosophy. His aim was to forestall substituting the standard of mathematical rigour for the standard of philosophical rigour that he employed in dealing with the philosophy of nature in the first Critique. In the architectonic of pure reason, he warned against using different kinds of rigour outside their appropriate domains in his wider critical system.

I take these warnings against the wrong sorts of rigour as having importance for Kant when he turned to the metaphysical grounds of practical reason and morals in the Critique of Practical Reason, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals and Metaphysics of Morals and to further matters, some bearing on morals, in other late critical writing.12 A wrong sort of rigour employs metaphysical aims and methods appropriate in one domain to a domain for which they are not appropriate or confines the array of metaphysical aims and methods of his whole critical programme to metaphysical aims and methods appropriate to one part of that programme. At another level, Kantian criticism of the wrong sorts of rigour can also be discerned in his rejection the accounts of knowledge offered by Hume in terms of sensibility and by Leibniz in terms of understanding in favour of his own comprehensive engagement with both faculties in his conception of experience.

A way to trace Kant’s transition from one metaphysical context to another is his multiple renderings of the self or subject. In the first Critique, the minimalist “I think” of the transcendental unity of apperception is deduced together with the categories, but as a “mere mode of combination of representations” rather than as a Cartesian thinking substance. Kant ascribed objectivity to the objects, causal interactions and laws of nature, but only subjectivity is available for his epistemological subject. The transcendental deduction of the categories turned out to be a unified deduction of the possibility of objectivity and subjectivity for Kant, an insight that structured and guided the whole further elaboration of his critical enterprise, crucially including his attempt to establish the objectivity of morality through his Metaphysics of Morals. To do this, he had first to turn from his conception of the knowing self of theoretical reason to his conception of the acting self of practical reason and then to his conception of the moral self of the Categorical Imperative.

The knowing subject seems inadequate to be the self in the version of the categorical imperative that enjoins each of us to treat humanity, whether in the person of oneself or the person of others, not merely as a means, but also as an end-in-itself. Kant’s introduction of the acting subject of practical reason might lead us to consider a categorical imperative substituting “practical reason” for “humanity” as that which we should treat not merely as a means, but also as an end-in-itself, but this altered version seems inadequate to Kant’s intent as well. Practical reasoning might be a necessary feature of moral agency, but it is puzzling why we would care about morality at all if our humanity were reduced to this capability.

I suggest that Kant chose to treat our humanity rather than our practical reason as an end-in-itself because his fuller awareness that our human vulnerability as well as our human powers compels our concern as human moral agents for the moral

law. I am inclined, following Christine Korsgaard, to see the origin of moral normativity lying for Kant in our capacity through a special employment of practical reason to construct in the same acts the moral law and ourselves as moral agents. I would go on to say that the joint origin of the objectivity of moral law and the subjectivity of our moral agency explains why the moral law is a law for us rather than a heteronomous imposition. It is not only the moral law; it is our moral law. We apply the moral law to ourselves as the human beings of Kant’s anthropology, with a full range of faculties, powers and vulnerabilities, including, at its extreme, the propensity to radical evil that places self-conceit rather than humanity as the maxim of our actions. We care about our moral law because as moral agents the ideal of humanity is the ideal with which we imperfect human beings must engage both for our legitimate self-respect and our being worthy of flourishing.

One implication of what Kant meant by treating our humanity as an end-in-itself can be illuminated by his discussion of our power of reflective judgment in the critique of the teleological power of judgment the third Critique. He wrote of the subjective but inevitable use of reflective judgment to treat organized beings, as beings in which the relations of parts to one another and to the wholes of which they are parts as mutual relations not merely of means, but also of ends. Here again we must avoid using the wrong sort of rigour by thinking of humanity in terms of one part of Kant’s critical metaphysics rather than in terms of its whole.

Finally, in this section, I turn from the “humanity” version of the Categorical Imperative to its initial formulation that enjoins acting as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature. For Kant, objective laws of nature are universal and necessary, and he holds that meeting a standard of suitability for universality and necessity is needed for subjective maxims to become objective. In this way, Kant brings his Metaphysics of Morals into alignment with his Metaphysics of Nature.

3 Thinking about Xunzi and Kant Together

In thinking about Xunzi and Kant together, I should let you know my own approach to metaphysics. Influenced by Adrian Moore, I see the general aim of metaphysics to be making sense of things, including ourselves, through our capacity for reflective judgment. I have already mentioned my debt to Emmanuel Levinas, whose fusion of morality and metaphysics as first philosophy saw metaphysics as extending beyond ontology, with both the other and the self under the heading “otherwise than being.” Regarding Moral Metaphysics, I see the main aim is to make sense of how the natural world can be or become the moral world, and my hope, following Peter Strawson, is that we can challenge or supplement a scientific naturalism with a human naturalism. Kant’s use of the language of two worlds in his distinction between the metaphysics of nature and the metaphysics of morals alarms me, unlike his different renderings of the self or subject according to the different parts of his critical philosophy.

A principal reason I try to make sense of the natural world and the moral world as one is that much of what we say about ourselves and our world employs thick terms which defy intelligibility if their descriptive and moral aspects are separated. Although Xunzi’s discussion of correct naming concerns such terms, he himself rejected


an obsession with names as pursuing what I am calling the wrong sort of rigour.

Xunzi’s metaphysics of nature is a metaphysics of change or flux, with a governing notion of possibility; Kant’s metaphysics of nature is a metaphysics of the Newtonian world in which entities causally interact according to laws of nature, with a governing notion of necessity. Xunzi deals with inclusive opposites distinguished through soft-edged non-dichotomous distinctions; Kant deals with exclusive distinctions through hard-edged dichotomous distinctions. We ignore these different orientations at our peril, especially since both together are open to exploration.

I hope that Xunzi’s sagely ideal of seeing ourselves, our societies and our world whole without obsessions can free Kant’s wonderful achievements from his own serial array of obsessions. My own concern to understand philosophy as being a humanistic discipline leads me to start our discussion with the difference that is made by seeing humanity as a virtue or power governed by reflective judgment in individual cases rather than humanity as a Kantian ideal governed by the universality and necessity of the categorical imperative. In my view, virtually all the other distinctions I have outlined between the views of Xunzi and Kant can fall into place if we start here. For those preferring a more abstract starting point, we could weigh the prospects of what might be called a Metaphysics of Impure Reason against those of a Metaphysics of Pure Reason.

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