**duty/义(Yì)**

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| Final Remarks | ZHAO Tingyang, Nikolas Århem | 23 May 2022 |

ZHAO Tingyang: Dear professor Nikolas Århem, I agree with you that, as you say it, it is very difficult to anchor the idea of a “universal morality” within a coherent scientific theory from an anthropological point of view. It seems to me that modern philosophy argues for the universal values in a wrong way. There is no universal morality or value that could be defined in and by an individual. I mean modern thinking has misemployed the basic unit to support universal morality. The fact is that, no value could be determined and defined upon the unit of an individual. And value is always relational, or, determined by variables of a relational function. So I think, if we choose “relations” to be the basic units, it is possible to define some universal moralities, such as duty, especially, human duties, paralleling and underlying human rights. I see that modern people want more rights than duties, and modern politics support it. I should say that the unbalance of rights over duties is dangerous, as all kinds of unbalance are dangerous in a long run.

Nikolas Århem: There are many similarities between the Chinese and “European” understanding of the word “duty” (Chinese: Yi) – but also some differences. In my contribution I have emphasized the strictly hierarchic and feudal social order which characterised most European societies until fairly recently, and how this social order influenced the concept of duty from the Bronze Age and forward. By contrast, one might say that Chinese society abandoned feudalism as a political system over two millennia ago while nonetheless preserving a hierarchic notion of family and kinship relations as well as of society as and the state in general. In my brief exposé European history, I illustrate how a warrior’s duties towards his lord during the course of several millennia (at least until the 18th century), served as the conceptual paradigm of “duty”. The warrior code of duty had thus for millennia defined the morality of the nobility (much more so than it influenced the moral code of the common man), and only began to lose political relevance in the 18th century. Even so, in all spheres of European society until the Enlightenment, individuals were strictly assigned clearly defined roles and duties according to the particular position, class or professional group into which they were born.

Beyond the political domain, in which only the nobility had real power, the Church generally had the responsibility of ensuring that duties and moral obligations – both domestic and civic – were upheld. Discussions of morality and duty outside of the feudal and theological domains only really emerged during the Enlightenment (although they sparsely occurred already during the Classical Period), but the concept of duty never really acquired any clear and consistent meaning outside those two aforementioned domains. Today, the concept typically has a rather “mundane” and secular meaning (such as carrying out one’s work properly and diligently, or simply following legal obligations). When it comes to values, the concept of “human rights” is much more commonly used in western discourses; indeed, it could be argued that the idea of human rights has largely replaced the notions of individual and collective duties/responsibilities.

Zhao Tingyang shows us how the Chinese concept of duty, from its earliest pictographic representation to its expression in Confucian philosophy, is continuously connected to the idea of selflessness or self-sacrifice. It also appears to be intrinsically connected to, even inseparable from, the concept of justice. Duty and justice (Yi), then, means “to help while expecting nothing in return”, or “to sacrifice one’s own good for the benefit of others”.

Returning, for a moment, to the myths and epic poems of the Indo-Europeans, we see that this idea of duty as a kind of self-sacrifice is very pronounced in the actions of the great archetypical warrior heroes such as Achilles, Sigurd the Volsung and Arjuna: a characteristic of these heroes is that they always are faced with seemingly impossible choices, and that they invariably choose the “hard path” – which typically leads them to their early death. Yet the mythic poems make it very clear that precisely these “impossible choices” are what prove them to be true heroes. In their choices they demonstrate the “true path” and their “true nature”. Curiously, the character of the Christ, although not a bellicose figure, also makes such a choice, in order to fulfil his destiny and show his true being.

Kant, in his influential theory on morality, concluded that true morality is not “utilitarian”; i.e., the righteousness of an action is not a function of how rewarding its results are. It is the motive behind an action, not its consequences, that determines its moral value. Kant’s theories have strongly influenced modern Western ideas about democracy and statehood. Yet, both I and Zhao Tingyang seem to agree that morality is culturally rooted; different cultures need to negotiate their different moral values and premises if they want to create a universal “workable framework” of morality. Zhao Tingyang makes the important observation that duty must always precede rights, since it is by following our “human duties” that we are entitled to “human rights” (the concept of rights always presupposes duties, whether explicitly or implicitly). I would add that Western discourse on human rights is often loud and self-assured without acknowledging its implicit, cultural and rather hazy notion of “human duties”. The selective application of “global justice” by the West, hints at this implicit and unequal value scale, a scale biased against non-Western societies and political systems.