

Situational Ethics and Social Epistemology in Confucian Philosophy

Abstract

It may seem strange, if not highly Western, to hear the term 'epistemology' placed side by side the *Analects*. Yet, this paper dares to pronounce the epistemological import of the *Analects*. To what end? To argue the co-foundationality of ethics and epistemology in Confucian Philosophy. There are a variety of ways in which ethical and epistemological ideas figure in the *Analects*. This paper however focuses on the Confucian take on average intelligibility referred to here as 'knowing-to'. This paper argues that this knowing-to is a form of social epistemology that is the ground of what can be called situational ethics in the *Analects*. Furthermore, it is stressed that this social epistemology, is in return grounded in the social commitment for ethical consistency.

Introduction

Once in the *Analects*, the Chinese sage Kong Zi was asked by two of his disciples a similar question to which the ancient Master gave two different responses:

11.22 Zilu asked, "Upon learning of something that needs to be done, should one immediately take care of it?" The Master replied, "As long as one's father and elder brothers are still alive, how could one possibly take care of it immediately?" (That is, one should continue to defer to the judgment of one's elders and not take the initiative.) [On a later occasion] Ran Qiu asked, "Upon learning of something that needs to be done, should one immediately take care of it?" The Master replied, "Upon learning of it, you should immediately take care of it." Zihua, [having observed both exchanges], inquired, "When Zilu asked you whether or not one should immediately take care of something upon learning of it, you told him one should not, as long as one's father and elder brothers were still alive. When Ran Qiu asked the same question, however, you told him that one should immediately take care of it. I am confused, and humbly ask to have this explained to me." The Master said, "Ran Qiu is overly cautious, and so I wished to urge him on. Zilu, on the other hand, is too impetuous, and so I sought to hold him back."

This conversation between Kong Zi and his disciples found in the *Analects* takes us to a unique understanding of human action and the kind of knowing it requires. This paper seeks to uncover the kind of ethical and epistemological import, passages in the *Analects* similar to this, could bring to the valuable discourse on the relation of action and knowledge.

It begins by highlighting the puzzle human beings are confronted with in practical life: the question of what one ought to do. This question is analyzed from the context of human relation, human understanding, and human disposition. This paper proceeds from the assumption that the building block of action is found at the heart of the first moral awakening in human consciousness: that one is born into the world with the human other (*Ren*). It is this special relation human beings have with their fellowmen supplemented by their self-reflection that should give birth to an understanding of human disposition that could orient man towards finding a response to the question of what must be done. Finally, this paper argues that the knowledge about human disposition arising from this imposes the social responsibility for ethical consistency.

Part I: Situational Ethics and Knowing-to

There are a variety of ways in which epistemological and ethical ideas figure in in the *Analects*¹. This paper however, focuses on the Confucian take on average intelligibility to introduce some form of epistemology of action. Here, I argue that the *Analects* endorses what can be called situational ethics—one that requires a certain form of knowing, i.e., a knowing-to.

Situational ethics is an ethical framework that involves close observation of one's social environment, a conscientious understanding of people, and a basic familiarization of oneself to social norm, tradition, rituals, practices, and behaviour. All in all, these provide humanity the average intelligibility that gets translated into action / decision in the field of practical life.

In the Confucian paradigm, what could be sensed is a non normative attitude towards the prescription of moral conduct or specific practices. By this I mean, there is in the *Analects* a palpable insight about the elusiveness of a normative maxim that could orient human agency. This is precisely what one gathers from the quotation above.

In another section, Kong Zi describes different conducts befitting to different situations:

12.2 Zhonggong asked about Goodness. The Master said, "When in public, comport yourself as if you were receiving an important guest, and in your management of the common people, behave as if you were overseeing a great sacrifice.' Do not impose upon others what you yourself do not desire. In this way, you will encounter no resentment in your public or private life."

What is recognizable in these passages is an understanding of human action that emphasizes the "specificity of situations"² which calls for a perceptive ability to deliberate and reflect upon what is to be done always in relation to context. Here, the stress is placed not so much on the content of knowledge more than its aspect of performativity.³ Precisely because of the multiple elements involved in the performance of an action, there appears to be a problem when one's eye is gazed towards a normative rule that could be applied universally to situations.

Such value placed on the situationality of actions, highlights the distinct feature of the Chinese view of human understanding, or in this regard Confucian view. This is the take that understanding itself is always situational, is always contextual. Its focus is the 'unrepeatable uniqueness'⁴ of cases, and people. It is an ethical view that necessitates the conscientious observation of and familiarization to one's world, and an instinctive ability to weigh the timeliness and appropriateness of one's planned course of action. This is what is referred to in this paper as knowing-to.

Here, I am borrowing the qualification of 'knowing-to' by the Confucian scholar, Karyn Lai, as "the ability of the agent to realize her knowledge, beliefs and commitments in *context*."⁵ It is a form of knowledge oriented towards the specificity of situations and an instinctive ability to deliberate what must be done.

Part II: Social Epistemology

¹ Karyn L. Lai, "Knowing to Act in the Moment: Examples from Confucius' *Analects*," in *Asian Philosophy* Vol. 22 No. 4 (November 2012), pp. 347-364, p 348.

² Lai (2012, p 354)

³ Lai (2012, p 359)

⁴ Cf. Cua (1971, p 34) in Lai (2012, p 350)

⁵ Lai (2012, p 359)

If Confucian situational ethics requires a certain mastery of knowing- to, how do human beings attain this level of practical wisdom within the Confucian paradigm? When drawing out the epistemological import of the Analects one can recognize how agency is tied to the attitudinal disposition of the agent of action. For instance: **On knowing man** 12.22 [*Fan Chi*] asked about wisdom. The Master replied, "Know others." and 2.10 The Master said, "Look at the means a man employs, observe the basis from which he acts, and discover where it is that he feels at ease. Where can he hide? Where can he hide?" (That is, how can his true character remain hidden.); **On self-reflection** 4.17 The Master said, "When you see someone who is worthy, concentrate upon becoming their equal; when you see someone who is unworthy, use this as an opportunity to look within yourself."; 1.16 The Master said, "Do not be concerned about whether or not others know you; be concerned about whether or not you know others."; 14.30 The Master said, "Do not worry that you are not recognized by others; worry rather that you yourself lack ability."; **On Political wisdom** 2.20 *Ji Kangzi* asked, "How can I cause the common people to be respectful, dutiful, and industrious?" The Master said, "Oversee them with dignity and the people will be respectful; oversee them with filiality and kindness, and the people will be dutiful; oversee them by raising up the accomplished and instructing those who are unable, and the people will be industrious."

Despite the different situations 'knowing' is applied to, what can be noticed is an understanding of epistemology that has human agency at its locus. Knowledge in the Confucian sense, in relation to the passages above, is knowledge of how to act according to specific contexts. In the examples cited, this context involves the question of the disposition of man in general, as well as the more specific question of who one's fellow men are and who oneself is.⁶ Understanding this provides one an orientation regarding one's ontological condition as socially situated. Knowledge of what to do therefore can only come about as the result of one's social world. This is what is referred to here as social epistemology.

This is also observable in the Chinese five-relationships. When man is born into the world and as he grows up, he is not left without a purpose, because he is born first and foremost into a social world, where he becomes either a subject or a ruler, a son or a father, a husband or a wife, a junior brother and senior brother, a junior friend or a senior friend. Within the five-relationships and the world of ethics, a moral agent is not left without a starting point because there is his fellow man right at his disposal to serve as a guide. Kong Zi speaks: 7:30 "Is Goodness really so far away? If I simply desire Goodness, I will find that it is already here."

What is most attractive in this take on ethics is its groundedness to reality, which asserts that there is no such thing as situationless ethics. Without a context that could orient the moral agent, he is only left with his heaven of moral maxims without an earth so to speak.

Part III: Ethical Consistency as Social Responsibility

The situational character of understanding that accompanies Confucian ethics, however, requires another principle in the field of human action. This is ethical consistency on the part of man himself. Here is an important Confucian saying:

15.6 *Zizhang* asked about getting by in the world. The Master replied, "In your speech, be dutiful and trustworthy, and in your conduct be sincere and respectful. In this way, you will always get by in the world, even if you find yourself in some

⁶ This idea of human disposition must not be taken however as the question of whether the nature of man is good or evil, which had been the topic of debate between Meng Zi and Xun Zi. Instead, it refers to the more generic understanding of nature, in the sense of human disposition, without the moral valuation yet of it being good or evil. Relating this to situational ethics, the performativity of an ethical act then becomes grounded in an understanding of what man is, and who oneself and one's fellow men are. It is what provides the moral agent clue as to what he or she will do.

barbarian state. If your words are not dutiful and trustworthy, and your conduct is not sincere and respectful, how can you possibly get along, even in your own region? When standing still, visualize these principles standing by your side; when riding in your carriage, see them resting before you on the crossbar. Only then will you get by in the world.” Zizhang then wrote these words on the end of his sash.

The significance of this passage from the *Analects* is its stress on the consistency of one’s character. Under the Confucian paradigm, real knowledge is not only about knowing what is the appropriate thing to do. But most importantly, that it should be accompanied by the agent’s attitudinal commitment to realize what he or she has learnt.⁷ It requires the consistency of one’s thought, word, and deed. This is how one builds trustworthiness. This is the moral value of the Confucian virtue *Xin*—“As we think, so do we speak; as we speak, so do we act.”⁸

This view brings to the fore the intricate interconnection of one’s thought and being. If anything, the mark of a true knowledgeable individual under the sense just sketched is the congruence of these two aspects of the human individual. As one thinks, so should one act, or the reverse, one should act according to what one thinks. We could be reminded here of what Karol Wojtyla spoke of as ‘action reveals the person’. One’s action is taken as a manifestation of one’s beliefs and value commitments, and by extension, one’s character. Thought is indicative of one’s being, while one’s being is at the same time indicative of one’s thought. Kim-Chong Chong comments, “The force lies in the exposure of a fact about oneself, that this *is* what one is.”⁹ Yü-sheng Lin meanwhile, in interpreting Meng Zi’s take on this aspect of Confucian thought writes: “Man should cultivate and develop [one’s ethical consistency] insofar as he wants to keep and sharpen this identity.”¹⁰ Finally Lai comments, “A truly benevolent person is aware that her benevolence can only be realised in lived, actual contexts and, further, she *learns to be benevolent* by *being benevolent* in different situations.”¹¹

It is through this that one gains authority, credibility, or reliability as a person. In the words of Kong Zi’s disciple Zixia: 19:10 “*The gentleman imposes labours upon his people only after earning their trust. If he does so before having earned their trust, they will think him cruel. The gentleman remonstrates with [his ruler] only after earning his trust. If he does so before having earned his trust, his ruler will think him insolent.*” This authoritative character earned through earnest self-discipline and ethical consistency, could even be interpreted to open up the possibility of intersubjectivity. In this context, no one is left without a hint in employing the Confucian golden rule (*Zhong* and *Shu*), for truly so, it is not a one way street where only the I determines what should be done. In the first instance, this ‘I’ earns only its identity through his embeddedness within a society. One learns to do things, incorporate or discard value systems through the society (most particularly through the five relationships, through *Li*, and one’s social appellation). By actuating what one has learned and believes in, the I, who tries his best to measure the proper course of action is not totally left to itself, as it only needs to read the consistency of the Other’s character. When one has finally established one’s consistency, that is the moment one can gain the Other’s trust, and vice versa.

Kong Zi provides us the guiding remark: 2.10 “*Look at the means a man employs, observe the basis from which he acts, and discover where it is that he feels at ease. Where can he hide? Where can he hide?*” Furthermore, 4.7 “*People are true to type with regard to what sort of mistakes they*

⁷ Lai (2012, p 359)

⁸ Alfredo P. Co, *The Blooming of Hundred Flowers: Philosophy of Ancient China* (Manila: UST Publishing House, 2005), 113.

⁹ Kim-Chong Chong, “The Practice of *Jen*,” *Philosophy East & West* Vol 49 No 3 (July 1999), pp298-316, p 305.

¹⁰ Cf. Yü-sheng Lin, “The Evolution of the Pre-Confucian Meaning of *Jen* and the Confucian Concept of Moral Autonomy,” *Monumenta Serica (Journal of Oriental Studies)* 31 (1974-1975), in Chong, (1999, p 303).

¹¹ Lai (2012, p 360)

make. Observe closely the sort of mistakes a person makes—then you will know his character.” Finally he says, 7.30 “Is Goodness really so far away? If I simply desire Goodness, I will find that it is already here.” Ethical consistency in the Confucian paradigm is an individual’s responsibility to his fellow men.

Part IV: Conclusion

It may seem strange, if not highly Western, to hear the term ‘epistemology’ placed side by side the *Analects*. This is true when one recalls epistemological problems like that of Plato in the dialogue *Meno*: how is one to know what one does not know? Or the Parmenidean observation that even when what you see is multiple, what you have in mind is just one! Or the Cartesian dictum that no knowledge is sacred, believe only that which does not leave room for doubt! Or finally, the Kantian critique of pure reason of seeking to know the limits of knowing itself!

Yet, this paper dares to pronounce the epistemological import of the *Analects*. It argues that the ethical framework introduced in Confucian Philosophy requires an epistemology of action—the kind of knowledge that serves as the foundation of action. Adopting Lai’s qualification, this paper refers to it as ‘knowing-to’. What is noteworthy in this discourse of human knowing is the gravity of the reciprocal relationship of the society and the individual in the formation of knowledge. Insightfully, Co, when referring to the fundamental Confucian virtue *Ren* renders it as “consciousness-of-human-other”¹² and explains it as man’s moral awareness of the fact that he is not alone.¹³

In this paper I take this as the strongest support for the argument that Kong Zi throughout the *Analects* had been presenting a **social epistemology grounded primarily in our being-with-others**, possibly similar to that of Martin Heidegger or Emmanuel Levinas. This is the first point of the paper. It is the society first and foremost which provides us the average intelligibility of things which we need in order to go about our everyday life. Our familiarization to our environment and the entire network of human activities we are involved in, together with the values they carry will always and immediately be our departure point. It is at once a consciousness-within-a-situation that should keep in mind Kong Zi’s caution, that one’s assimilation to one’s world of familiarity should be done with deliberation. There is no universal prescription that could encompass all situations. In Levinasian language, the face of the Other is the seat of infinity, hence the need for a discerning consideration of all the elements involved in a situation.

Meanwhile, the second point of this paper is the reiteration of the ethical imperative imposed by this epistemology. Insofar as one’s only access to knowledge in the Confucian sense of knowing how to act in such and such a way in timely and appropriate cases is through outward or external actions and words coming from others, a necessary consequence of this is that one should be as consistent as one could in the enactment of one’s thoughts and words. That is why the highest form of immorality would be the total noncongruence of one’s thought, word, and deed. This behaviour distorts social harmony by promoting misunderstanding. It is to this sense that we can say, there is no place for the dishonest man in a Confucian society. Only those who can stand for their words, and reconcile their thoughts with their being are to be regarded as true members of the society. For it is only in keeping with the **social responsibility for consistency** that a society can have any possibility of achieving some form of harmony.

Here, we realize an idea of ethics that is not pretentious to the inner joys of man. For a truly enlightened man never doubts that he must sustain the consistency of the society if this is the only

¹² Co (2005, p 107).

¹³ Ibid.

way he can sustain his own, not merely because he thinks it is wise, but fundamentally, because he revels in it. This I refer to as the highest manifestation of an exemplary society with exemplary individuals, one sustaining the other and vice versa through an act of ethical consistency within one another's being.

Finally, to the question about the relation of action and knowledge, this paper responds that that **knowledge must be indicative of action and that action must be indicative of knowledge**, but with the added ethical value of belief. In a Kantian way of formulating it, the *Analects* enjoins us to act only according to the maxim by which we can at the same time truly believe and stand for it as a manifestation of the singularity of oneself, but also universally, of humanity, goodness, and benevolence, unwaveringly striving towards becoming the authoritative person that we can ideally be.

If these three elements are present: (a) an understanding of the disposition of humanity in general, (b) an appreciation of this understanding or knowledge as something that must be oriented towards building harmonious relationships with others, and (c) the upholding of social responsibility for ethical consistency by members of the society; an epistemology of action that supports the Confucian situational ethics can already be achieved. And so finally, with this, we can have an answer to the perennial question: What is to be done?

Part V: Philosophical Implications

- (1) It provides support to an understanding of ethics as something that cannot be systematized. That there is no general system of ethics. In a system of ethics, we assume that there is such a thing as an overall pattern of behaviour and social relations. We scientify behaviours and human relations. It is not to be said however, that we should discard frameworks in ethics pure and simple, but to recognize these as merely supplements to our actual human interactions. We can take ethical systems as frameworks that can help us figure out a possible course of action, but we should not pursued at the expense of our relationships. The danger is sometimes, when we think through these frameworks, we isolate human subjects, treat them simply as individuals, and discount the different kind of subjectivities we assume when in relationships.
- (2) By implication, this goes against an essentialist position in ontology. This form of ethics is receptive of different situations and people. Hence, an account of ontology that is anti-essentialist, but also non-relativist, insofar as it is no longer a battle between different truths or notions of the good, but a question of the most fitting course of action for very specific situations and individuals involved.
- (3) It gives a different account of epistemology as not centered on the transcendental subject. One of the dangers of the transcendentalist approach in ethics is the assumption that we have at our disposal the openness/receptivity towards knowing what must be done, but it does not necessarily provide us a knowledge about the source of our ethical judgment. It stops in its discourse about the condition of the possibility of ethics. At the same time, the transcendentalist approach in its extreme form can result to an assumption that we have a general consensus about what is good or evil, right or wrong. In this framework, this is frowned upon, because the emphasis is the "specificity of situations."
- (4) Confucian situational ethics imposes the responsibility to be self-aware by becoming readers of ourselves and others. It gives an insight about the dialectical process involved in identity formation. It enjoins us to look into who people are, who you are, and fortifies you with the courage to face the truths regarding the motivations of human beings in general.

- (5) Finally, this paper highlights the necessary relation between ethics and epistemology being co-foundational. Situational ethics is dependent in the social epistemology of knowing-to. But this form of epistemology is in return dependent on ethical consistency. By looking at ethics and epistemology under the Confucian paradigm, we not only discover a way on how we can be more human, but see it as our responsibility. At the same time, we see it as not something given but one that is to be learned and taught only within one's social situatedness.

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