

Islamic Ethics and the Controversy about the Moral Heart of Confucianism

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Published online: 14 May 2008
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This essay briefly evaluates the ongoing controversy between LIU Qingping and GUO Qiyong (and their followers) about the “moral heart” of Confucianism in order to draw a comparison with Islamic ethics for mutual illumination of the two traditions (see Guo 2007: 21). Liu argues that Confucianism is basically consanguinism and, as such, it lands into an “embarrassing paradox” in its moral thinking when dealing with conflicts between filial piety and brotherly love on the one hand and public good on the other. It also lands in a “profound paradox” when it comes to extending family love to humanity in general because such extension is impossible without a universalistic human love (Liu 2007). Guo contests this view and insists that the root of morality in Confucianism is not family love but our “moral heart/mind,” endowed by “Heaven” with universal human love. Filial piety is only the “root of practice” of this universal human love and not the root of all morality. Therefore, Confucianism has all the resources for a universalistic ethics and it is “the natural order” of the practice of human love to start with parental and brotherly love (Guo 2007). This controversy revolves particularly around *Analects* 13.18, where Confucius talks about fathers and sons covering up for each other, and *Mencius* 7A35 and 5A3, where Mencius talks about King Shun leaving his empire and running away to help his father escape punishment for murder (7A35) and giving princely status to his murderous brother (5A3). Liu challenges Mencius’s presentation of Shun as a great hero, sage-king, of Confucian tradition because these cases point toward public corruption by Shun in the name of filial piety and brotherly love. Guo, however, defends Mencius’s position as underlining the need, per traditional Confucian culture, for “grace” rather than “righteousness” in the private sphere of life, and also as protecting family love as the “root of practice” for universal human love. These two opposing interpretations can be pictured as follows:

Picture A:

Root of morality in general	First pool	Second pool
Filial piety and brotherly love	Love of humanity	Love of other things

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Picture B:

Root of morality in general*	First pool Root in practice	Second pool	Third pool
Moral heart/mind or goodness of human nature (bestowed by Heaven) with its four beginnings	Filial piety and brotherly love**	Love of humanity	Love of other things

*There is a natural order of flow (of water, so to speak) from the source/root to the first pool and onwards. Also there is a moral priority and superiority belonging to each preceding column (Guo 2007: 28, 29).

**Parents and relatives need not be criticized frankly for minor faults. They need not be followed blindly either and can be remonstrated only pleasantly. While righteousness rules the public domain, in private matters involving relatives, one has to follow grace (Guo 2007: 26).

Picture B is severely challenged by Liu. He not only questions the authoritativeness of the textual evidence presented in support of this picture by his critics (Liu 2007: 11) but also contends that “on the one hand, Confucius and Mencius repeatedly stress the supremacy of consanguineous affection in various ways—in special cases or in general statements; on the other hand, they neither definitely give humane love the top priority over consanguineous affection in any general statements, nor definitely contend that kinship bonds ought to give way to humane love in case of conflict in any special cases” (Liu 2007: 4–5). Liu concludes, therefore, that his interpretation of Confucianism, Picture A, is not only the right interpretation, but its critics offer nothing to challenge this interpretation except their own “general or abstract assertions” (Liu 2007: 11).

Given this picture of Confucianism as consanguinism, Liu argues that it conflicts with any idea of universal morality, including the Confucian idea of universal love of humanity itself. If filial piety/family love is the ultimate good, then any public good that comes into conflict with it must be sacrificed for it. So one is always justified in placing his/her relatives above the general public. This obviously paves the way for corruption in society and shows the inner paradox of Confucianism. Also, if consanguine love is the foundation or root of morality, then we are theoretically not justified to extend it to humanity in general because such extension is disrupted, as soon as it conflicts with the interests of one’s relatives. As long as there is no such conflict in practice, we can extend consanguine love to other human beings. However, theoretical possibility of the emergence of such conflict cannot be ruled out *a priori*. Hence, consanguinism cannot yield a universal love for humanity at a general level. This is paradoxical in view of the Confucian claim that filial piety paves the way for love of humanity.

A closer look at Picture B shows that it is marred by inherent conceptual difficulties in addition to, as charged by Liu, its lack of authoritative textual basis in Confucius and Mencius. If, as assumed by Picture B, our moral/heart mind already has universal humanity in it (Guo 2007: 27), then its “flow” into the first pool, i.e., parental and brotherly love, can be interpreted only as an application of a universal principle to a particular case. So parental love, or the so-called “root of practice” for inculcation of the love of humanity, is a particularistic manifestation of a universal principle. Extension of this parental love to the rest of humanity will, therefore, involve movement back to the universal principle before it can be applied again to other particular human beings. Therefore, it is conceptually only the principle of universal love of humanity which is extended to other humans and not the particular parental love or brotherly love which is itself an application of the universal principle. It is not clear, therefore, what conceptual advantage is lent by the so-called “root of practice” to the process of extension of love to other human beings, except that it is a natural “training ground” for an already available universal principle. In fact, the whole idea of parental love being the “root of practice” of love for other human beings is made to look

conceptually useless by Picture B. Parental love does not seem to add anything to our humanity. It is not a defining element in our humanity. However, the supporters of Picture B want to declare parental love to be a defining element of our humanity when they say that “if someone advocates ‘universal love’ or ‘humane love’ without insisting on the supremacy of piety to parents or of loyalty to the sovereign, he or she will no longer be a human being (not to mention being a Confucian), but merely a beast” (Liu 2007: 12).

Advocates of Picture B might argue that universal human love is in us only as a sprouting root, so to speak, and is “developed” through its application to the family as a trunk of a tree and its applications to other human beings are like the branches of this tree. This metaphor, however, does not solve the conceptual problem mentioned above. The sprouting root is obviously universal in character, as per assumption of the advocates of Picture B (see Guo 2007: 22). In that case, there is nothing “developmental” about it. A universal principle does not develop in the sense in which a tree does. All one can say is that a universal principle may be applied to new cases and situations and that such applications can make one more adept in using the principle. These applications do not help the principle “develop.” Therefore, this metaphor does not seem to help much in making family love a defining element of our humanity.

Advocates of Picture B might claim that the sprout of human love in us is just a disposition or natural tendency for human love in the beginning. However, if they claim this tendency to be family-specific in the beginning, they run counter to Mencius’ own example of a child falling into a well. For him, our spontaneous response to such a situation is not contingent upon who the child is. It is universal. It may be granted though that such a natural tendency can be claimed to be applied first to the family and then to others.

All that Picture B succeeds in establishing, therefore, is that our universal love of humanity is “trained” within the family in the beginning. However, this is a far cry from such claims as made by YOU Rou, a distinguished disciple of Confucius: “Filial piety and brotherly respect are the roots of humaneness” (*Analects*, 1.2). Or “the true meaning of humanity is to serve one’s parents and the true meaning of righteousness is to obey one’s elder brother” (*Mencius*, 7A27). It is true that Guo quotes CHENG Yi’s interpretation of these passages (Guo 2007: 23–24), which is in line with Picture B, but that interpretation fails to make service to one’s parents “the true meaning” of one’s humanity or obedience to one’s brother “the true meaning” of righteousness. As we saw above, that interpretation only makes parental love etc. the beginning of the application of one’s humanity.

Islamic tradition is clearly against making blood relations or consanguine love the basis of our humanity or morality. The Quran explicitly makes righteousness the criterion of judgment in the sight of God:

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know [recognize] each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (*Quran* 49: 13)

However, it is remarkable that the Confucian concept of moral heart/mind is present in the Quran as well: “It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when ye knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affections [*al-af-i-daa*]: that ye may give thanks (to Allah)” (*Quran* 16:78).

The term *al-af-i-daa* (singular *fu'aad*), which literally means “the hearts” in Arabic, is the seat of both intelligence and affections for the *Quran*. It is from this seat that approval or disapproval of right or wrong issues. The *Quran* notes that humans are the only creatures

of God who have been given the Trust (ability) and the responsibility to choose between right and wrong: “We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but man undertook it. He was indeed unjust and foolish” (*Quran* 33:72).¹ This grave Trust of moral choice, therefore, is inherent in human nature, according to the *Quran*. Therefore, in the matter of a moral heart/mind in a human being, the *Quran* and the Confucian Picture B above are equivalent. The overall Islamic position on morality and family love can be pictured as follows:

Picture C:

Root of morality in general*	First pool Root of moral and spiritual practice	Second pool	Third pool	Fourth pool
<i>Fu'aad</i> or moral heart/mind bestowed with trust of moral choice by God	Choosing faith in one God over holding of partners with Him	Filial piety and respect for relatives	Love of other human beings	Love of other things

*For major moral and religious duties, the universal standards of righteousness have to be applied in an even-handed fashion to relatives and all other human beings. For example, in matters of justice, you cannot bear false witness against a human being in order to protect your parents or other relatives (*Quran* 4:135). For optional actions (of favor to others or spirituality), parents and relatives are supposed to be given preferential treatment. An optional religious action, for example, might be dropped in deference to parents' needs or interests (see Al-Ghazali 1937/1938, *Ihya*, Vol. II, p. 352).

It is obvious from Picture C that filial piety is of great significance in Islamic ethics as well. However, as noted below, it is not a defining element of righteousness. It is only the “root of its practice,” so to speak. It is just the beginning of the application of our universal righteousness, bestowed by God in our moral heart/mind as a grave Trust.

The following verses of the *Quran* and the prophetic traditions provide textual evidence to support Picture C above:

Say: “Come I will rehearse what Allah hath (really) prohibited you from”: join not anything as equal with Him; be good to your parents; kill not your children on plea of want—We provide sustenance for you and for them—come not nigh to shameful deeds, whether open or secret; take not life, which Allah hath made sacred, except by way of justice and law: Thus doth He command you, that ye may learn wisdom. (*Quran* 6:151)

Thy Lord hath decreed that ye worship none but him, and that ye be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in thy life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them. But address them in terms of honor. And, out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility, and say: “My Lord! Bestow on them thy Mercy even as they cherished me in my childhood.” (*Quran* 17:23–24)

There are other verses dealing with the subject but these two give the gist of the Quranic position (see *Quran* 2:83, 2:215, 4:36, 29:8, 31:14, and 46:15). The first verse clearly places belief in God's absolute unity and uniqueness at the foundation of the Islamic world view. This belief is immediately followed by the Quranic emphasis on the need to do good to one's parents. Perhaps, placing this need immediately after belief in God's unity implies that human beings can naturally learn to practice righteousness by starting with their parents. This is followed by prohibition of all shameful deeds and insistence on the

¹ For interpretation of “Trust” as (moral) responsibility or choice, see Ali's (2003) commentarial notes 3378–3379.

complete sanctity of life. This prohibition and insistence imply good treatment of all humans and, beyond that, of all things in the universe. The second group of verses (*Quran* 17:23–24) underline the attitude of deep humility and mercy with which parents have to be treated. This, in a way, is the foundational attitudes in treating all other human beings and things as well insofar as it functions as a training ground for righteousness beyond one's family.

In addition, there are many sayings of the Prophet of Islam which accord great importance to filial piety.² While enumerating cardinal sins, for example, the Prophet is reported to have said:

Narrated Anas: The Prophet was asked about the great sins He said, "They are: (1) To join others in worship with Allah. (2) To be undutiful to one's parents. (3) To kill a person (which Allah has forbidden to kill) (i.e. to commit the crime of murdering). (4) And to give a false witness." (*Sahih Bokhari, Volume 3, Book 48, Number 821.*)

This prophetic saying more or less mirrors the above-quoted 6:151 from the *Quran*. However, as is evident from the following verse, Islam does not place filial piety above everything else in its ethico-religious scheme:

We have enjoined on man kindness to parents: but if they (either of them) strive (to force) thee to join with Me (in worship) anything of which thou hast no knowledge, obey them not. Ye have (all) to return to Me, and I will tell you (the truth) of all that ye did. (29:8)

O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do. (4: 135)

It is obvious that filial piety is not allowed to interfere with God's absolute uniqueness and unshared worship-worthiness. Neither is it allowed to disrupt the central value of justice. Therefore, while extremely important, filial piety is not the ultimate source of values in Islam. Like all other values, filial piety is based in the sense of right and wrong granted to humans by the sole creator of the universe.

In conclusion, it can be stated that there are some parallels between the Confucian and Islamic traditions, particularly when Confucianism is interpreted as per Picture B above with parental and brotherly love not as defining elements of humanity or morality but as the beginning of its application/practice only. It is natural to start applying one's love for humanity to one's family first and thereby become adept in its further applications to other human beings. Islamic emphasis on filial piety seems to have similar connotations insofar as it functions as a training ground for application of one's sense of righteousness with faith in God's absolute unity as the creator of all that there is in the universe. The goal in Islamic ethics is to achieve *Taqwa*, virtuous character, through practice of religious and moral virtues that are all based on a sense of right and wrong given as a Trust to mankind. Family love in this context is a very important training ground for virtue but does not define right and wrong.

² See in Khan's (2008) *Sahih Bukhari*, for example, vol. I, book 10, No. 505, vol. III, book 34, No. 418, vol. IV, book 51, No. 10, and many more.

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