

On the Interpretive Significance and Limitation of the Confucian Concept of Virtuous Dignity

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Abstract

Modern Confucian scholars generally use the view of “virtuous dignity” in the modern interpretation of the idea of dignity. This view emphasizes that human dignity comes from the realization of human moral potential. The human nature thought of the theory of good nature is the value basis of this view. Due to the excessive attention to human dignity, the Confucian concept of moral dignity does not pay enough attention to “universal dignity”. I think the Confucian theory of moral dignity should take freedom rather than the realization of moral potential as the basis of dignity, so as to recognize the equality of human dignity in the sense of legal rights and the inequality in the sense of moral virtue.

Keywords

Moral Dignity, Universal Dignity, Human Dignity, Acquired Dignity, Theory of the Goodness of Nature, Freedom

1. Interpretation Problems in the Concept of Universal Dignity

In the general context, dignity has two meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the dignity of human beings. For example, many cultures honor the special status of human beings in the universe. On the other hand, it means that everyone deserves to be respected by others. The use of dignity is often to confirm the basic rights of people and defend the value of being human.

The concept of dignity has long appeared in the discussion of ancient thought, and it is generally linked to people’s social class status, honorary achievements, and moral realm, which is reflected in the pre-modern thought characteristics of dignity. Until the Age of Enlightenment, the concept of dignity and its related discussions did not enter the narrative of rights discourse, represented by Kant’s

thought of dignity. However, it was after World War II that the concept of dignity was, assumed as the highest ethical norms and value foundations of the constitutions of many countries. After the Second World War, based on reflections on brutal war killings, brutal totalitarian rule, and other unspeakable human crimes, the concept of human dignity gained unprecedented attention. “everyone’s dignity is inviolable” and other expressions about “universal dignity”, stand out from previous religious, moral, and philosophical theories, have become the core concepts that lay the foundation of human rights values at the constitutional level in many countries. Dignity as a legal concept and its institutionalized practice have made “human dignity is inviolable” a social imagination for creating a new society. Generally speaking, the emphasis on the concept of human dignity is always accompanied by the rejection of human violence or inhuman behavior. This has laid a solid value foundation for understanding human rights.

At present, the connotation of the concept of dignity is still controversial, and some people even propose to cancel this concept (Rorty, 1998). In particular, the interpretation of the concept of universal dignity has attracted many discussions. For example, in non-Christian, non-Western, and pre-modern cultural backgrounds, there is no “universal dignity”. How to understand this concept in a non-Western local context, different scholars have different interpretations. However, there is a consensus that the defense and admiration of human dignity after World War II came from the prevention and regulation of aggressive behavior.

In the discussion of the concept of dignity, the term “universal dignity” is generally considered to be the starting point for the foundation of the concept of dignity. The theory of universal dignity generally encounters two basic problems (Ni, 2011):

First, there is no unified value basis to justify universal dignity. It is generally believed that the source and basis of “universal dignity” are usually related to some innate intrinsic values of human beings, but these intrinsic values on which dignity is based are full of controversy. For example, Kant believed that human dignity is priceless and has unconditional and intrinsic value based on the concept of “man is the purpose” based on the fact that man is a free and rational subject. Under such a premise, it is possible to question whether those who are mentally disturbed, those who cannot control themselves, infants, and people in a coma have dignity. So dignity lies in the fact that people have life characteristics like their own, but this still does not mean that human life forms or characteristics are more dignified than other lives.

Second, the concept of “universal dignity” will also fall into the problem of “dignity paradox”, because, on the one hand, the universal dignity of human beings is regarded as inalienable, but on the other hand human dignity is easily violated and therefore needs to be defended. So, is this a factual description, or a value description? If it is a factual description, then this contradicts the requirement to protect the dignity, since no one can take away what cannot be taken

away. If it is a value description, a moral order, or a moral requirement, even if everyone should respect others unconditionally, then the value fulcrum of this moral requirement is still weak. Because, out of the inevitability of being disrespectful, the reasons for respect are rigid and morally unpersuasive. This involves the distinction between “is” and “should”, and it is necessary to think about the meaning connection between the two.

2. The Content and Characteristics of the Confucian Theory of Virtuous Dignity

As far as the basic consensus of the Chinese academic circles is concerned, it is generally believed that the concept of dignity is an imported product, while the domestic lack a legal concept of dignity or the concept of dignity at the level of universalism. In the Chinese context, the word “dignity” is not only an inherent compound word but also a foreign word (Qiao, 2013). As an inherent compound vocabulary, “dignity” first appeared in “Xunzi Zhishi”, “dignity can be a teacher”, here “dignity” means that a person has noble and majestic qualities, The first connection between the two characters “respect” and “strictness” appeared earlier in the sense, which can be found in the chapter “Bamboo Slips from the Chu Tomb of Guodian Five Elements” “No far away, no strictness, no strictness, no respect, In disrespect, disrespect, disrespect, in ancient Chinese society, the word “dignity” was mostly used to describe people with high social status or things with otherworldly significance, such as emperors, heaven and earth, big men, etc. For example, Zhu Xi said: “The human ruler is extremely dignified”; Cheng Hao once explained Confucius’ “fear of adults” as “so dignified and fearful.” Dignity, as a loan word, mainly comes from the idea of dignity since the European Enlightenment, represented by Kant’s concept of dignity.

The thoughts related to dignity in the early Confucian traditional classics are mainly closely related to external authority, social status, and glory achievements. This concept of dignity is similar to the understanding of dignity in ancient Greece and Rome. At that time, “dignity Refers to identity, status, wealth, honor, merit, etc., which belong to a small number of high-ranking people.” This classical Chinese and Western view of dignity can be called hierarchical dignity, emphasizing social hierarchy status and other external statuses and glorious achievements that make people have dignified status. Beginning with Cicero, the acknowledgement of the rationality of human beings as a whole and the expansion of the discussion of dignity from the position of individuals in a specific society to the status of human beings in a wider order of reality opened up a new understanding of human dignity called rational dignity, which emphasized that human beings are noble because of their rationality. This view of rational dignity was fully interpreted by Kant.

In modern Chinese Confucian scholarship, the emphasis on the thought of dignity is not only out of the need to clarify the concept, to trace the origin of the pre-modern thought of dignity, but also to reflect on or respond to the behavior of state power that violates the dignity of citizens. Either to deal with the new

problems of violation of human dignity brought about by emerging technologies, or to interpret the basic issues of human rights thinking to better protect people's basic rights, and to help build a fair and just legal system that effectively protects human rights. At the same time, Confucian scholars also try to retain the spiritual characteristics of Confucianism in the related issues of dignity thought, to provide more interpretation possibilities for enriching dignity thought. The understanding of the dignity of modern Chinese Confucian scholars generally adopts a theory of virtue dignity: the source and basis of human dignity are that everyone has moral potential, and the more fully this moral potential is realized in moral practice, the more human beings will be. The source and basis of human dignity is that everyone has moral potential. The more fully this moral potential is realized in moral practice, the more dignified a person is. The moral realm of sages is the highest value mark of this kind of moral pursuit. For example, Zhang Qianfan and Ni Peimin hold similar views (Qiao, 2013). Combined with the basic propositions of Confucianism, the Confucian theory of moral dignity has the following common features: emphasizing the importance of human moral cultivation or transformation of moral personality; emphasizing the growth of moral life; emphasizing that moral practice is social relations; emphasizing the importance of emotional or vital connection.

As far as the evaluation of the theory of moral dignity is concerned, the Confucian theory of moral dignity has advantages in solving the above two problems of the concept of "universal dignity". Professor Ni Peimin believes that the Confucian understanding of human dignity cannot be separated from the understanding of benevolence and righteousness. In the context of Confucianism, the dignity of a human being lies in the fact that a human being has "four-terminal minds", "People have energy, life, knowledge, and righteousness, so they are the noblest in the world", no matter how much difference there is between Mencius and Xunzi on the theory of human nature, the consensus lies in the recognition that people can become benevolent and recognize their moral potential. And they encourage the full realization of this moral potential, the fuller the realization, the more dignified a person is. In addition, if one fails to uphold the principles of benevolence and righteousness and does "inhuman" things, then one will lose one's qualifications as a "human being", just as Mencius advocated that "practice survives, and abandonment leads to perishing". Everyone has the freedom to choose between holding on and giving up. Confucianism encourages and requires us to uphold the way of benevolence and righteousness, which embodies the hope for humanity.

The theory of virtue dignity can solve the first problem of the concept of "universal dignity", the reason is that moral potential can be used as the value basis of each person's dignity, which can avoid disputes, which can avoid controversy, because moral potential is not a ready-made value or moral principle, rather it is embodied as a dynamic and procedural moral practice experience. Continuous self-cultivation can maintain a certain moral realm, maintain the essential content of a person as a human being, and avoid degenerating into an

“inhuman” state.

The advantage of the virtue dignity theory in solving the second problem of the concept of “universal dignity” is that it can be used as both a factual description and a value description, and even the organically combined. The Confucian theory of moral dignity bases human dignity on the “four ends” or the possibility of being good and admits that the more perfect a person is, the more dignified he is. Therefore, everyone’s dignity is inalienable. As a factual description, everyone has moral potential and can become a complete human being through acquired moral practice and moral self-discipline. Moral practice, which does not depend on the approval of external authorities, is a moral enterprise for benevolence and therefore no one else can take it away. In this sense, dignity first manifests itself in self-respect, and what can injure or deprive dignity lies in the “non-human” moral choices of people themselves. This factual description relies on empirical observation and cannot be regarded as a universal proposition. Only in the sense of value norms or value guidance can a universal proposition be realized. When the realization of moral potential is a moral requirement, that is, when a person should become a person himself as a moral command, it can be shown that the dignity of each person is an inalienable power with universal moral norms, which expresses a kind of prohibition. The value proposition of morality aims to protect human dignity from violation. As for the reason why human dignity is violated, scholars represented by Ni Peimin believe that what physical and mental harm and insult violated is not human dignity but the basic conditions for maintaining dignity.

3. The Interpretation Limits of the Theory of Virtuous Dignity

The theory of moral dignity emphasizes that human dignity comes from the continuous realization of each person’s moral potential in human relationships with their inherent benevolence and righteousness. Whether to have dignity is a question worth discussing. Confucian thinkers represented by Mencius did clearly emphasize that the “inhuman” state or behavior of people needs to be negated by value. If the reason why people have dignity depends on the realization of moral potential, then these “evil people” who have given up, lost, or covered the four-terminal heart will face the most severe denial in the moral sense. The moral evaluation of “non-human” is the denial of human qualifications as human beings, and human dignity is also denied. Scholar Luo Anxian holds this view and even believes that there is no “universal dignity” in the Confucian thought of dignity, and the possession of moral virtue is the prerequisite for human dignity, so he emphasizes that human dignity can be deprived and points out the difference between this view of the dignity and modern dignity thought (Luo, 2014).

It can be seen from this that the Confucian idea of moral dignity does not target all people since the realization of moral virtue is the premise. Although the

emphasis on everyone having moral potential seems to be the Confucian version of the existence of universal dignity. The possession of human dignity depends on the acquired moral practice of human beings, which leaves no basic space for the evil, guilty, and morally disabled people to enjoy dignity. This does not reflect the universality and equality that human dignity should have. This interpretation of dignity creates two basic dilemmas:

The first is the theoretical dilemma. If it is agreed that human dignity depends on the premise of the realization of virtue, or that human dignity can be deprived of similar “inhuman” behavior, then the dignity of Confucianism will lose its universality. There are some “privileges”, which violate the original intention of the theory of virtue dignity. Even though this theory emphasizes the freedom of people to be good, which appears as a moral requirement, it will divorce from reality as there leaves no theoretical space for discussing evilness.

The second is the practical dilemma. Whether the dignity of people who violate the moral bottom line or the law exists becomes a problem, which will make this group vulnerable to more serious discrimination and violations in addition to the implementation of legal corrections and justice, which is not conducive to their reform and regaining confidence in being a human being and cannot provide a valuable basis for proving that these people still enjoy basic human rights, affecting the development of practical activities such as judicial practice.

The core reason for the above predicament is that the understanding of human dignity is always inseparable from the basic theory of human nature, and the Confucian theory of moral dignity is based on the Confucian theory of good nature, which holds a religious belief that people can become morally good people. The understanding of people is linked to the growth of moral virtue, pointing to a higher moral realm. To implement or coordinate the Confucian theory of good human nature, the Confucian theory of moral dignity has to point to the moral practice that people can become saints and sages. In the interpretation of modern Confucian scholars, the general propositions of the Confucian theory of human nature all emphasize that human nature is constantly generated and grown in the process of moral transformation. The realization of the moral realm, but it is easy to ignore or obscure the affirmation of the existential meaning of the minimum value of human nature (as the minimum essential regulation of human beings). The minimum value of human nature is to remind everyone of the inalienable nature of humanity, and the concept of “universal dignity” depends on the understanding of the minimum value of human nature. Although Confucian virtue theory advocates that everyone has moral potential, which seems to be a reminder of the minimum value of human nature, the unrealized or distorted moral potential does not make people have dignity, which is also the claim of Confucianism. In addition, even though Confucian scholars emphasize that the life feelings of moral subjects such as compassion point to universal concerns, such moral feelings cannot provide a relia-

ble guarantee for institutional arrangements in the legal sense of “universal dignity”.

4. Rethinking the Value Basis of the Confucian Theory of Virtuous Dignity

The value foundation of the Confucian theory of moral dignity is based on the consideration of the basic philosophical proposition of “what is a human being”. Although there are different interpretations of the idea of good nature, but the basic consensus is to emphasize the growth or transformation of human moral life. This kind of prescriptive explanation of human nature is procedural, and the dynamic feature always focuses on the incompleteness of human beings. The main purpose is to pursue a higher moral realm. On the one hand, it is to maintain a sense of urgency and to encourage self-reflection. On the other hand, it is to maintain diligence and continuous moral practice. In this way, the value basis of the Confucian theory of moral dignity is to emphasize the moral potential of human beings and their realization. However, due to the sequence of hearing the truth and the level of the realm, each person’s virtue status is different, which reflects the inequality in virtue, and those moral evaluations about “inhuman” also reject the possibility of universalizing dignity. So can the understanding of the theory of human nature in Confucianism be compatible with the idea of “universal dignity”, to obtain a universal and equal understanding of dignity? The answer lies in a new understanding of the Confucian theory of human nature and moral dignity: “freedom” rather than “realization of moral potential” should be the value basis of the Confucian theory of dignity. This is a new interpretation of the Confucian theory of human nature in the context of modernity and has its reasonable ideological basis and practical significance.

The “freedom” here does not refer to “freedom” in the sense of political rights such as political freedom, freedom of thought, and freedom of speech, nor does it refer specifically to the independent spirit of subjectivity such as freedom of will and the moral ability or practical ability of free choice. From the perspective of existential philosophy, the original or primordial free sphere is an unprepared and pre-objectified concept. In the Confucian classics, freedom is not an original concept and needs to be interpreted from the classic texts. Taking the original Confucianism as an example, Confucius’s “benevolence is up to oneself” and Mencius’s “If you act, you will survive, if you give up, you will perish” are discourses of moral practice, but their meaning points to the realm of freedom in which people can make moral choices. Since Confucian philosophy was born in an era when rites collapsed and music was destroyed, what it had to face was the double collapse of political order and spiritual order, so its ideological narrative was strongly realistically critical and morally normative, and its expression was a practical view. Confucianism always expounds “Tao” from the perspective of moral practice.

Professor Li Chenyang believes that Confucian “freedom” is a concept bred in

real life, not a metaphysical concept, and it cannot be separated from the moral choice that people can choose the good and follow, and it cannot be separated from the realization of moral potential. This kind of argument still does not detach from the ready-made moral requirements contained in the thought of goodness, and always establishes moral realism with a certain kind of good purpose as a value guide. As far as the universality of human dignity is concerned, as well as the minimum value of human nature, the reason why the realization of moral potential cannot become the foundational metaphysical basis is that it is not original enough. Humans do have the desire to be good and to be good. Free choice, but at the same time there is also a free choice to be evil and do evil. To realize oneself, people must show themselves in specific life activities and then must abide by specific cultural norms, and in this process, people also have the freedom to violate the norms, choose inhuman life, or treat others inhumanly. Freedom marks an original realm of freedom, what kind of person to be and what kind of life to live is not a foreseeable fact, and the expectation of goodness is only the promise given by the meaning space of freedom. But even the wicked have the title of human beings. They are called human beings because even if they are not good, the wicked still have the original freedom. In this sense, he still has sufficient reasons to be treated as a human being. Under legal restraint or punishment, the dignity of the wicked as human beings will also be preserved, instead of being deprived of their qualifications as human beings because of their evil. This is the legal significance of the concept of universal dignity based on the minimum value of human nature, which is expressed as a prohibitive norm. Here, it can be said that human dignity is equal in the face of legal rights but unequal in the face of virtue. The former is universal dignity, and the latter can be called acquired dignity.

Even if the connotation of the concept of universal dignity cannot be clarified, it can become the highest ethical norm of many national constitutions, because it fundamentally affirms the nature of human beings to be free, and people enjoy the protection of human rights because of this original freedom. The paradox of the inalienable human dignity will be rationally clarified: it is a factual statement that human dignity cannot be deprived just because man's original freedom cannot be deprived, while human dignity is inalienable as a normative, which is the value statement that lies in the possibility that human beings may violate themselves and others because of freedom, so prohibitive precautions and norms are needed. This paradoxical conundrum is amply illustrated as freedom becomes the philosophical basis of human dignity.

The Confucian theory of moral dignity emphasizes the aspect of human dignity and neglects the understanding of dignity in the sense of legal rights. From the perspective of sympathy, this is the influence of Confucianism's narrative thinking. The Confucian moral theory was always present as "should be". From a critical point of view, this is the result of modern Confucian scholars making the original Confucian thoughts ready-made and conceptualizing them. Taking Mencius's "If you act, you will survive, if you give up, you will perish" as an ex-

ample, there is no fixed boundary between human and non-human beings, but always difference between ideological horizons, between sticking to or giving up the way of benevolence and righteousness. Mencius' moral theory points to the realm of human freedom. In the most negative sense, even if he abandons the way of benevolence and righteousness, so that he falls into the "inhuman" moral evaluation, based on the original freedom of human beings, he still has the possibility of re-embracing and sticking to the way of benevolence and righteousness, therefore, for human beings, it is the freedom that gives hope for goodness. But when Confucian scholars regard the former as the way of humanity and the latter as the way of "inhumanity", this kind of correspondence fixes the perspective of thinking and falls into the ready-made thinking. The claim that moral potential is dignified shows the limitations of ignoring the horizon of the "between".

5. Summary

In general, the modern interpretation of the Confucian theory of virtue and dignity helps to provide a Confucian perspective for the thought of human dignity. By focusing on people's moral potential and moral virtue, people can not only focus on their own moral growth, but also contribute to create the conditions necessary to promote the realization of human potential. However, in the broadest sense of legal rights, the reason why the dignity of every member of society will be properly protected, from the perspective of the philosophy of dignity, freedom is more persuasive in the philosophical sense than moral potential, because people It is still possible to continue to ask how human moral potential lays the foundation for human dignity, while freedom, as human nature or as a mode of existence, has more original explanatory significance.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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