

# Two Cautions for a Common Morality Debate: Investigating the Argument from Empirical Evidence Through the Comparative Cultural Study Between Western Liberal Individualist Culture and East Asian Neo-Confucian Culture

Marvin J. H. Lee  
Philadelphia,  
USA

## 1. Introduction

What I aim at in this essay is to give a guideline to contemporary common morality debate, as I point out what I see as two common problems that occur in the field of comparative cultural studies related to the common morality debate. Since the issues about common morality become increasingly important in today's medical ethics, this paper would help, I hope, particularly medical professionals, medical ethicists, hospital lawyers, etc. The thesis of this paper is as follows. In the field of contemporary comparative cultural studies with regard to common-morality theses<sup>1</sup> and to opposing theses of common morality<sup>2</sup>, so-called the

---

<sup>1</sup> Common morality can be viewed broadly in two ways. One is the descriptive sense of common morality, which takes morality broadly as the "morality commonly practised by rational people." The earliest use of this sense may be John Stuart Mill's "customary morality" in Ch. 3 *Utilitarianism*. In the contemporary bioethical discussion, the plainest version of the descriptive sense of common morality simply affirms the phenomenon that a vast majority of, not all, people agree about a set of moral precepts or codes. The other is the prescriptive or normative sense of common morality. Taken in this sense, it argues that people *ought to* obey a set of moral precepts or codes. However, in the contemporary bioethics field, not only the descriptive but also the prescriptive senses of common morality are discussed without being conceived necessarily as universal or absolute, in the sense that common morality does not need to apply to all people and all times. (Carson Strong, "Exploring Questions about Common Morality," *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 30, no. 1 [January 2009]: 3). Therefore, in the common morality debate, the "grouping issue" – that is, drawing the line by a region, a timeline, a religion, a country, etc., to group people common morality applies to – is one of the most important topics. In this essay, I use the term "common-morality" to include the both the descriptive and prescriptive senses. Also, it should be noted that the argument by empirical evidence can be used either to affirm or to deny the both senses of common morality.

<sup>2</sup> A variety of opposing theories or theses of common morality are available. Some examples are as follows. Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism, though it is a metaethical rather than normative theory, argues that certain moral values are equally valid and fundamental but incompatible with each other ("incompatible" in the sense that they can be in conflict with each other) and however that there cannot be a lexical ordering of these incompatible values (thereby making themselves "incommensurable" to

“argument from empirical evidence” has been the most popular argument. The opponents of common morality have presented the examples that show how the cultures in question differ from each other in their respective moral judgments or evaluations. On the other hand, the defenders of common morality have stressed homogeneity between different cultures by adducing some selected examples of their own. However, I find both dissenting parties’ arguments careless, if not misleading, for two reasons. I lay out the reasons under the title of “two cautions” the both parties need to have when they argue. First, the advocates of and the opponents of common morality, I observe, consciously or unconsciously, fabricate the definitions of moral terms that would naturally lead to the outcomes they desire. To elaborate it in detail, I use two levels of understanding moral terms, that is, “formal level” and “material-content level.” The formal level of understanding is to define the terms in a thin manner. The concept is thin in the sense that the meaning of the term is broad and general. On the other hand, the material-content level of understanding is to conceive the terms in a thick manner. The thick meaning is attained when people try to understand the terms against concrete situational contexts which involves rich cultural elements. The same moral term can be defined in the thin, formal level, as well as in the thick, material-content level. For example, “autonomy” can be understood in the formal level as “self-governed act,” and in the material-content level as “the act of making their own informed decisions on their own life and death.” The researchers of comparative cultural studies, of course, give at times a definition thinner than the former and thicker than the latter. The researchers devise the formal or material-content meanings of the moral terms in their own thickness or thinness level, the fact of which predetermines what examples they would select for their comparative cultural investigations and how they would interpret the examples to support their differing theoretical positions, either *pro* or *contra* common morality. However, given that the formal and material-content levels of understanding the terms are both theoretically valid and philosophically important, the backbone of their arguments from empirical evidences, i.e., that a set of neutral examples the researchers impartially discover in different cultures supports their theoretical conclusions, is defeated.

Second, the examples chosen to be the empirical evidences may not be as simple and clear-cut as the researchers think they are, mainly because the situational contexts where the cases are located between two different cultures vastly differ. Accordingly, the examples may not be proper to be “evidences.” However, this does not support the opposing theses of common morality. Rather, it just shows that there are hardly “proper data”, based on which two cultures can be compared.

To elaborate the thesis so far in organized details and to flesh it out in actual cases of comparative cultural studies, this paper has the following arrangement. The first two

---

each other). Religious-moral pluralism, a corollary of John Hick’s religious pluralism, many see, argues that religious-moral diversities in the world point to metaphysical reality. Moral relativism (an orthodox kind) makes the prescriptive claim that there are no fixed “moral absolutes.” Moral subjectivism typically starts with the claim (owing to David Hume) that moral evaluation/decision or the existence of moral concepts is merely the product of human mind; nevertheless, this position can depart from here to argue that the morality as what human mind creates embraces the fact that the fundamental moral structure of human beings is the same thereby producing similar, if not same, moral codes. However, when this subjectivism delimits its claim purely as descriptive, it can be an opposing view of the prescriptive sense of common morality.

following sections will be devoted to setting out the meanings of some key terms used in this paper. First, “culture” and “tradition” are defined. Second, the “formal level” of and “material-content level” of understanding moral terms are spelled out. In the following section, I provide general background of and some detailed content of two different cultures. I select Western liberal individualist culture and East Asian neo-Confucian culture. Since this paper intends to be presented to the audiences familiar with the liberal individualist culture, introducing its basic content and background is deemed unnecessary. Thus, neo-Confucian culture is only introduced. In the next section, against the backdrop of the knowledge provided so far, I show a set of examples of comparative culture between the Western and the East Asian culture. The cases will show how the different cultures respectively understand “beneficence” and “autonomy,” the two concepts widely used in the field of medical ethics. Meanwhile, under the title of “two cautions,” I attempt to show how different choices of defining the same moral terms by the researchers would influence their interpretations of the moral structure of the two cultures compared. In the conclusion section, I make my own suggestion where the current scholarly investigation of comparative cultural studies vis-à-vis common morality should be directed to, particularly from the perspective of contemporary medical ethics.

## 2. A traditon and a culture

Following Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift’s usage, I define the term “tradition” as the medium by which “a set of practices” “are shaped and transmitted across generations.” It refers primarily to “religious or moral (e.g., Anabaptist or humanist), economic (e.g., a particular craft or profession, trade union or manufacturer), aesthetic (e.g., modes of literature or painting), or geographical (e.g., crystallizing around the history and culture of a particular house, village or region).”<sup>3</sup> I consider what is referred to as “culture” to hold the same meaning as the tradition, though the geographical boundary of the former should be broader than that of the latter. Along with the definitions above, I also propose “complimentary definitions”<sup>4</sup> of culture and tradition. That is, tradition and culture are essentially psycho-epistemic phenomena. Given that culture has a larger geographic boundary than tradition, the former can be said a macro psycho-epistemic phenomenon while the latter a micro one. And readers should note that what I want to treat in this paper is culture rather than tradition, i.e., Western liberal individualist culture and East Asian neo-Confucian culture.

A culture influences a tradition and vice versa. The former is the case, as the culture influences how people within its boundary should think and behave by determining social and ethical values in it. Thus, traditions that exist within the culture (if they are not extremely isolated ones like that of the Amish community) cannot be intact from the influence of the culture. On the other hand, the tradition can influence the culture. Traditions are destined to play by the rule of survival of the fittest within the boundary of the culture the traditions belong to, so the strong or powerful traditions continue to survive and thrive while participating in re-shaping of the culture. Having said so, I focus, in this essay, on power of culture, not tradition. Readers should note culture’s power on the

---

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 90.

<sup>4</sup> Note that two complementary meanings are two different, yet legitimate, ways of interpreting one and the same state of affair.

tradition. A good example of this can be to compare how Christian churches (or Christian traditions) within the contemporary Western liberal individualist culture, such as Britain and North America, celebrate St. Patrick's Day and Christmas, with how they did in the Medieval Europe.

### 3. Two different levels of understanding moral terms

The set of concepts like "form" and "material content" is widely used in ethics debates today. If the value, "do not lie", is a "formal" ethical injunction, its "material content" stipulates how to carry out the injunction in a concrete situational context. The material contents come in different shapes and sizes depending on the situational context. The formal principle, "do not lie", has various material contents, one of which can be "physicians must not withhold from their patients the information related to the patients' health condition." Some material contents are more specific than others. In many cases, the material content gets more specified as the scope and range of the value gets further elaborated. For instance, the material content introduced above can be further specified to "physicians must not withhold from their cancer patients the information that the patients will die soon." And a greatly specified material content appears, as the ethicist uses the "metaphor of specification" to solve moral dilemmas, particularly by using except- and unless-clauses.<sup>5</sup> E.g., the conflict or tension between "do not lie" and "save others" can be specified away by forming the following specified rule, "physicians must not withhold from their cancer patients the information that they will die *except-that* (or *unless*) it seems greatly obvious that the information revealed will harm the patients like increasing distress or shortening life significantly by shock."

To make clear how the form and material content are used as two different levels of understanding moral terms, another popular set of concepts used in contemporary ethics and bioethics should be introduced, that is, "thick" and "thin," the concepts known to be coined by Bernard Williams. In my expansion of Williams' terms, the "thick" and "thin" have at least two different sets of meanings. The first set is to understand the concepts in terms of a *theoretical status*. E.g., an ethical theory or principle or concept is "thick" in the sense that it treats practical moral life or is concerned with concrete/substantive level of morality; whereas "thin" in that it covers the abstract or speculative realm of morality. The other set is to conceive the thick and thin from the standpoint of *content*. E.g., the theory or principle or concept is "thick" in that it utilizes the values or norms or virtues that a particular culture or tradition holds, while "thin" in that it handles moral values or norms or virtues in a minimal sense.<sup>6</sup> In this essay, I shall focus only on the latter set, the "thick" and "thin" viewed in the light of content.

A moral term can have thick and thin definitions. To speak from the standpoint of comparative cultural studies, the thick definition of the term is the meaning attained as a particular society understands the term against its rich cultural backdrop. In other words, the thick definition has a culture-specific meaning. On the other hand, the thin definition of

<sup>5</sup> For the except- and unless-clauses, see Paul Ramsey, "The Case of the Curious Exception" in *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics* (1968), 74-93.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that the two ways of using the terms sometimes overlap.

the term is minimal in that its meaning is attained when people try to understand the term in a broad and general sense. Thus, the thin definition is mostly cross-cultural. However, the thick and thin definitions are not absolute or in isolation; they are in gradation and relative to each other. That is, the less thick the definition is, the thinner it is.

These definitions are not obtained through a neutral scholarly observation. How thinner or thicker the definition can be is determined based on how detailed the researchers go down to define the word in terms of including culture-specific materials. For example, defining the Korean moral term, *han*, has been one of the most interesting projects in the community of East Asian Christian theologians. Some scholars claim that *han* is so unique that it cannot be translated into the term which Westerners can grasp. For example, the Korean theologian, Jae Hoon Lee defines *han* to be something like “frustrated wish,” “depressed anxiety,” “envy,” etc. stored deep in Korean mind through their unique cultural history as oppressed people.<sup>7</sup> He finds the uniqueness of *han* to lie in the Korean culture shown in “art, music, dance, and paintings . . . and literature (like poetry, folktales, myths, legends, novels, and theater).”<sup>8</sup> In sum, he views *han* in the thick definition. On the other hand, some theologians, like Andrew Sung Park, argue that the meaning of *han* is accessible to all cultures. For Park, the meaning of *han* is rather cross-cultural, in the sense that all cultures can understand it in a universal theological program. For him, *han* is “anger and bitterness of victims,” while sin is “willful harm done to others.” Hoping to improve what he believes to be one sidedness of the traditional Western doctrine that focuses on “sin,” Park argues that the concept of *han* should be accepted as parallel to sin in the Christian theology. If sin is the problem on the side of the oppressor, *han* is that on the side of the oppressed, he claims. In short, Park sees the meaning of *han* in the thin definition.<sup>9</sup>

To return to the discussion of form and material content, the thin definition, as readers may already have noticed it, concerns the formal understanding of the term, while the thick definition largely bears the material content of the formal conception of the term. To put alternatively, inasmuch as comparative cultural study is concerned, the formal level of understanding of the moral term is to conceive the term to be thin, that is, minimal, general, and cross-cultural; while the material-content level of understanding is to view the term as thick, that is, culture-specific. If so, for instance, to conceive “honesty” and “beneficence” as thin definitions (respectively to be the “act of telling truth” and to be a “charitable act”) is to understand the terms in the formal level. However, two different cultures may differ when their respective members understand what the acts are in terms of material content. E.g., North Koreans may apprehend the charitable act as related to obeying the will of their beloved leader, Kim Jōng-il, whereas many North Americans and Western Europeans understand the charitable act to include endorsing women’s right on abortion and gay marriage. To define autonomy and beneficence while being sensitive to cultural variation is to understand the terms to be thick as well as be in the material-content level. I believe I can turn now to comparative cultural studies.

---

<sup>7</sup> Jae Hoon Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds – Han* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press: 1994) 14, 33, 52. Note that *han* is not always a collective term. It can be for a group or an individual.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2. For understanding of *han* in terms of its cultural uniqueness, see chapter 5, “The Han in the Symbolism of Korean Shamanism.”

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Park, *The Wounded Heart of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 10.

#### 4. A short introduction to neo-Confucian ethics in Korean society

I begin with the general background and content of neo-Confucianism in Korea (South Korea). Initially, Confucianism as a fragmented set of Confucian tenets may have reached the Korean peninsula through the Chinese officials who dominated the northern part of Korea during the first three centuries A.D. It is reportedly said that in A.D. 372 a Confucian academy was established in the ancient Korean kingdom, Koguryŏ (B.C.37-A.D.668). However, it was not until the rise of the Chosŏn dynasty in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that Korea officially transformed itself into a Confucian kingdom. The new dynasty set out by adopting the Chinese philosopher, Zhu Xi's version of Confucianism (which we usually call "neo-Confucianism") as the nation's ethico-political ideology as well as practical governing principles.<sup>10</sup> Since then, neo-Confucianism has been one of the most powerful intellectual elements consisting of Korea's social and ethical milieu.

To discuss the practical ethical ethos of neo-Confucian East Asia (particularly Korea), it seems apt to introduce the ethical codes of the "Three Bonds and Five Relations" (三綱五倫) – note that the "bond" here means not merely a relationship but a standard. The Three Bonds state that the cosmic, *a priori* moral bonds are hierarchically set as 1) the son loves and serves his father (父爲子綱), 2) the subject loves and serves his king (君爲臣綱), and 3) the wife loves and serves her husband (夫爲婦綱). In accordance of the cosmic statutes, the Five Relations stipulate the presence of 1) trust and faith or *yi* (義) between king and subject (君臣有義), 2) filial-parental affection or *qin/chin* (親)<sup>11</sup> between father and son (父子有親), 3) a distinction or *bie/byul* (別) between husband and wife (夫婦有別), 4) an order or *xu/suh* (序) between the older and the younger (長幼有序), and 5) loyalty or *xin/shin* (信) between friends (朋友有信).<sup>12</sup> As shown, the first four relations hold hierarchical structures and the last non-hierarchical one.

Many scholars believe that the Three Bonds and Five Relations were propagated by the Chinese philosopher and politician, Tung Chung-chu. Tung, as a chief minister to the emperor Wu (c. 140-87) of the Chinese Han dynasty, was responsible for the dismissal of all non-Confucian scholars from government and merging the Confucian and Yin-Yang schools of thought. Due to him, Confucianism (or neo-Confucianism) became the unifying ideology of the Han dynasty.<sup>13</sup> In fact, this endeavor of Master Tung reflects one of the core features of neo-Confucianism. No matter how speculative and theoretical issues Confucian scholars engage in, and though the scholars different metaphysical stances sometimes lead to the formation of unpleasant political factions, the ultimate philosophical aim they must pursue

<sup>10</sup> Martina Deuchler, *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 14-27. Cf. for a rather detailed account of how the Chosŏn dynasty set out as a Confucian nation, see "The Ideology of Reform," chapter 6 of John B. Duncan, *The Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), and also Chai-sik Chung, "Chŏng Tojŏn: 'Architect' of Yi Dynasty Government and Ideology," in *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, ed. Bloom, Chan and de Bary, *Neo-Confucian Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> *Qin* is how 親 pronounced in Chinese and *chin* is in Korean; and this order of Chinese/Korean pronunciation is henceforth maintained.

<sup>12</sup> All translations so far are mine.

<sup>13</sup> Wing-tsit Chan, "Yin Yang Confucianism: Tung Chung-Chu," in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Wing-tsit Chan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963, 1973), 271-273, 277.

is “to promote good character, dispositions, and consequent good actions.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, in neo-Confucianism, *metaphysics is in service of ethics*. Accordingly, the Confucian governments naturally have had the perennial interest of inculcating moral virtues to the unlettered masses. For this reason, the Three Bonds and Five Relations, as the government’s politico-ethical project, were constantly preached and upheld to moralize the members of the society in the Moral Way, which they believed is the (neo-) Confucian way.<sup>15</sup>

In Korea, the spreading of the Three Bonds and Five Relations, many scholars find, largely has to do with the work of Chŏng Yakyong (pen name Tasan, 1762-1834). As a high government official and an influential scholar in the late Chosŏn dynasty, Tasan proposed the most practical interpretation of the theory of Zhu Xi, the founder of neo-Confucianism. Tasan as leader of *Silhak* movement (the movement of practical scholarship) understood human nature not from the metaphysical but from the psychological sphere and observed the nature itself to be neither good nor evil but to be “potentially good” in that the exercise of free will in a right way makes the human nature better.<sup>16</sup> For him, the right moral path of exercising the free will is to develop the only true virtue, which he identifies as benevolence or love or humanity or *jen/in* (仁).<sup>17</sup> For him, *jen* is the collective or generic name for the three essential virtues that sustain right human relationship, i.e., filial piety or *xiao/hyo* (孝), fraternal respect or *ti/che* (悌), and compassion or *ci/cha* (慈).<sup>18</sup> The supreme virtue of *jen*, he asserts, is “symbol for the number two” because it is “the association for two people.”<sup>19</sup> E.g., one meets another or others in a two-people relation. If I treat my elder brother with fraternal respect or *ti*, it is *jen*. If I serve my king with loyalty, it is *jen*. Also, “the fulfillment of respective duties in relationship between all pairs of people, including spouses and friends, is *jen*.” With all these, Tasan could argue that the three virtues are equated with the Five Relations.<sup>20</sup> In other words, for him, the Five Relations are normative ethical directives inherently laden with the three virtues.

Neo-Confucian ethics presupposes the *a priori* moral path, based upon which all human beings are closely and rightly related to one another, and sees the society as a grand family where all members in it are bonded to one another as fathers/mothers, sons/daughters, older brothers/sisters, younger brothers/sisters, etc. Thus, maintaining and strengthening the “right kind of interpersonal relationship” – e.g., caring-parents and obeying children, caring husbands and respecting wives, caring teachers and submissive students, caring physicians and the patients that put great trust and respect in the physicians, etc. – is the

<sup>14</sup> John Berthrong, "Dead Riders and Living Horses: The Problem of Principle/Li 理," in *International Conference on the Development of the Worldviews in Early Modern Asia* (Center for the Study of East Asian Civilizations at National Taiwan University: 2005), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Peter H. Lee, "Versions of the Self," in *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, ed. Irene Bloom, Wing-tsit Chan, and Wm Theodore de Bary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 484.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Setton, "Tasan's 'Practical Learning'," *Philosophy of East and West* 39, no. 4 (Oct. 1989): 380.

<sup>17</sup> “仁” is pronounced *jen* in Chinese and *in* in Korean. This order of marking is maintained throughout this essay.

<sup>18</sup> Setton, "Tasan's 'Practical Learning,'" 382-386.

<sup>19</sup> In fact, the Chinese character “仁” *jen/chen* pictographically represents the relationship between “two people.” For further discussion, see Judith A. Berling, "Confucianism," *Asian Religions* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1996), p.5.

<sup>20</sup> Setton, "Tasan's 'Practical Learning'."

center of neo-Confucian practical ethics. In this sense, neo-Confucian ethics is in some way a more developed variation of the Western care ethics and some postmodern ethics. In Korean context, Tasan's unique rendering of the Three Bonds and Five Relations as the practical ethical codes in which the ideals of cosmic Confucian moral virtues are embodied is one important example that shows how serious Korean scholar-politicians were when they attempted to shape the practical moral mentality of their countrymen in accordance with the Confucian Path.

Over the last century until now, as part of modernization, the Western power has caused ideological, political, and economic shifts in Korea, particularly in urban areas. Nevertheless, many scholars find contemporary South Korea to be the model in which the most successful settlement of Confucian/neo-Confucian ideology is found. In South Korea, it is fairly easy to see the Confucian influence in every corner of the country. Older people are greatly respected. Even slight differences in ages are acknowledged. The proper sense of "friendship" exists only between the same age people. Even a one-year difference in age makes two people in a hierarchical relationship; the younger person is expected to call the older person "older brother/sister," not by his/her first name. Among a group of friends or co-workers, the oldest person is expected to pay in a restaurant or bar and the youngest is expected to pour wine or beer and serve the food. Differences in social ranks are also recognized; the relationship between juniors and seniors (in the order of rank) in social institutions (e.g., private companies, militaries, government offices, etc.) is highly important. The juniors are supposed to obey the seniors with the same kind of respect they give to their older brothers and sisters and their parents, and the seniors are to take care of the juniors with the same sort of affection they give to their younger brothers and sisters and their children. A family plays a very special role in the society. For Koreans, family is not only the bond that the Heaven ties in an individual level but also the conservatory of social morality. The family feels corporate responsibility for its member when the member violates social norms. Also, defying one's own parents, particularly the father, is considered a hideous act, the act blamable by the entire society.

## 5. Two cautions

I have so far, in a brief fashion, tried to account for what neo-Confucianism is, largely from the standpoint of practical/social ethics, and show how the Confucian ethical ideology appears in everyday life of contemporary South Korea. In this section, I want to focus on two particular moral values, "autonomy" and "beneficence," and attempt to show how the researchers' different choices of interpreting the same moral terms influence their own understandings of the moral structure of different cultures compared, insofar as common morality is concerned.

First, let us say that "beneficence" is defined as "charitable act or state," and "autonomy" "self-governed act or state." Defining the terms in this thin manner is a way of understanding them in a formal level. Both members of the liberal individualist and neo-Confucian cultures should feel the definitions valid. The lexical definitions of the words in standard Korean language dictionaries, "자선 (beneficence)" and "자율 (autonomy)," also confirm the soundness of this formal way of understanding the terms. If so, it turns out that neo-Confucian and the liberal individualist cultures share the meanings of "beneficence"

and “autonomy.” Then, could the moral values be in tension or in conflict with each other in certain situations?

To begin, it is interesting to note that neo-Confucianism’s emphasis on “the senior’s care for juniors”<sup>21</sup> and “the junior’s respect for seniors” has resulted coincidentally in uplifting the Hippocratic paternalism as a great moral value in hospitals in Korea – it is to be reminded that the terms “senior” and “junior” here are used in reference to both age and rank in social institutions. For Koreans, the doctor’s beneficence that the Hippocratic paternalism stresses is regarded as the value of the senior’s care for juniors that the Confucianism promotes, given that the medical doctors in Korea is treated like a Confucian elder due to their respected social position. Accordingly, in Korea, patients in general are not likely to challenge what their doctors recommend the patients should do. It is the fact that the Korean doctors’ medical advises carry more weights to their patients than those of the Western doctors to their patients, and that the patients’ trust and respect for their doctors are greater in Korea than in North American and Western Europe. In Korean soap-operas, movies, documentaries, the oft-used “moving scenes” are that the spouses or parents of terminally ill patients literally bow their heads down to the feet of their doctors, asking for help.<sup>22</sup> In this cultural atmosphere, “beneficence” as the doctor’s charitable act is taken into much more serious consideration than “autonomy” as the patient’s self-governed act. This contrasts with the fact that the Hippocratic paternalism has largely been evicted from many Western countries and is sometimes considered even a moral disvalue or a form of patronization, as liberal individualism has dominated the Western cultural ethos.<sup>23</sup> Note that Daniel Callahan observes and says that, due to the cultural/traditional dominance of liberal individualism in the West, moral solution of many Western ethicists, like the principlists, Tom Beauchamp and James Childress, always ends in giving priority to autonomy over beneficence.<sup>24</sup>

Despite all these, however, it is highly difficult to say that beneficence is prioritized over autonomy in Korea. If we ask any Koreans whether the doctor’s charitable act is considered weightier than the patient’s self-governed will or vice versa, without raising a particular case of conflict or tension between the two values in detail, most of them may answer that the patient’s will should be considered first because, bluntly put, “decisions on your own health, or on your own life or death are ultimately your own business, though doctors’ words should be respected.” Besides, as it is the case in the Western countries as well as in Korea, actual moral verdicts in hospital seem de-facto legal ones, in that the cases are solved in the way that the doctors, nurses, and hospital lawyers may not legally be liable for the final agreements they come to with the patients and their families. Because of that, the actual

---

<sup>21</sup> Unlike in the Western societies, the “care for senior citizens” is a derogatory term in the Confucian East; it must be (the younger people’s) “respect to senior citizens.”

<sup>22</sup> This is more prevalent in the working class than the upper class people and in suburban than urban areas. In urban areas and for the upper-high class, individualism alongside the Western capitalistic lifestyle has been expanding.

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps, the majority of people in both cultures are short of the proper understandings of the Hippocratic texts. To read the texts properly, we may need an appreciation of the nuances of social relations and expectations.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Callahan, “Principlism and Communitarianism,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 29, no. 5 (2003): 288-289.

cases in Korean hospitals turn out in the way that the will of the patients is granted through their own expressions, advance directives, or surrogate autonomy.

Here, the advocates of common morality can argue as follows. The denizens of neo-Confucian and the liberal individualist cultures both recognize and share the meanings of "beneficence" and "autonomy" respectively as the "charitable act" and as the "self-governed will." Also, both cultures prioritize autonomy over beneficence, they may emphasize, *in general*, in the sense that both cultures agree with the prioritization without getting involved with particular cases in detail. If so, they can argue, it can be said that, at least in a weak sense, both cultures consider autonomy weightier than beneficence, whereby giving to the validity of the existence of common, universal morality.

However, there is a way that the opponents of common morality can turn around the whole case in their favor. It is to investigate the cultures in a concrete, situational context. First of all, pointing out that the moral verdicts of actual cases in hospital may be all legal *de facto*, they can ask to put them aside and say that we need to discuss what is clearly moral in a hand-on level. Then, they can suggest that we better focus on how people in two different cultures understand moral terms on a concrete level. They may give beneficence and autonomy respectively the meanings of the "act of concealing from the terminally ill patients the information that they will die soon because it is likely that the information revealed will harm the patients like increasing distress or shortening life significantly by shock" and of "the act of making their own informed decisions on their own life and death."

I believe that the thick definitions like above are extremely proper in the Western hospital setting and well explain how people in the Western world (not only the Western liberal individualist world) think. From Judao-Christian Europe through modern and post-modern eras to contemporary liberal individualist period, the "human person" as a moral agent has been portrayed as a lonely being destined to seek one's own moral perfection, thereby being responsible for success or failure in one's own ethical journey. In short, a human person is an independent, if not isolated, being. Due to that, autonomy is the act of *my own* and beneficence that of *others*. Thus, it is natural that the meanings of beneficence and autonomy, whether thick or thin, are to be in conflict or in tension with each other.

However, that is not the case in neo-Confucian culture. Although thin, formal definitions of beneficence and autonomy may be in conflict or tension, the terms understood in a thick, material-content level are not to be in conflict or in tension. As mentioned earlier, the Confucian culture binds every individual in the society to be a member of the grand family. Thus, the neo-Confucian conception of a human person as an individual being is very different from the liberal individualist understanding of it. For Confucians, the human person is not an independent being but the one inherently dependent upon and personal to others within the web of society-family. Thus, in contrast to the liberal individualist view that "caring others" is my own act done to others whose ethical existence is ultimately independent from me, the Confucians regard "caring others" as my brotherly or sisterly act done to my own family members in a larger scale. In Korea it is customary that the terms like "father" "brother" "grandmother" "uncle" are used when complete strangers speak to one another. In retail stores, a female customer calls a female sales attendant "sister." A doctor in hospital calls his elderly patient "father" or "grandfather." A little schoolboy in the street calls an adult passerby "uncle" when he asks for direction. In this social atmosphere,

proper interpretations of beneficence and autonomy in a concrete context must be in conjunction with an interpersonal relationship between a particular patient and the patient's doctor. If so, the two terms conceived in the thick level cannot have neat and isolated meanings to be compared, and thus not in conflict or in tension. The account so far will be more intelligent when rephrased through some particular cases.

Suppose that in Korea a 5-year-old child is terminally ill, her parents are about 30 years old, and the doctor in charge is about 50 years old. The parents feel morally bound to respect the doctor's decision. Even though the doctor's decision turns out later seriously mistaken, the parents would feel morally wrong to take a legal action against him (unless the doctor's decision is found to be out of his negligence or malintent). In analysis, the doctor's beneficence will be something like "the act of taking care of his young patient as if the patient were his own grandson, while incorporating the wishes of the child's biological parents as though they were the words of his own son or nephew or niece"; and that of the patient's autonomy is "the act of showing the patients' own wishes though his surrogate authority while taking into serious consideration of the doctor's advices as if they were their own father or uncle's words."

To give another example, suppose that a 60-year-old terminally ill patient's primary doctor is about 40 years old. Then, it is considered morally right that the doctor's beneficence must be expressed in the manner of filial piety towards the father-like patient. Note that in Korea it is very much common in hospitals that younger doctors and nurses call elderly patients "father," "mother," "grandfather," "grandmother," "uncle," "aunt," etc. Thus, the doctor's beneficence will be "the act of caring for his patient as if he were his own father or uncle." On the other hand, the patient cannot treat the doctor like his own child based on his seniority by age. As mentioned above, in neo-Confucianism, the authority of seniority is recognized by age and also by social rank. The medical doctors in Korea are treated like Confucian elders due to their respected social position. Hence, the patient's autonomy here will be like "the act of showing his own opinions while respecting the doctor's advices like his own father or uncle's words (by social rank)."

Due to the cultural atmosphere where everyone is considered a member of society-family, the meanings of two terms are laid out in conjunction or mixture with other moral values (e.g., care, respect, trust, etc.). Accordingly, their meanings are viewed organically intertwined rather than in conflict or tension.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is not only that beneficence and autonomy defined in the thick level cannot be in conflict or in tension, but also that the question whether beneficence is prioritized over autonomy does not arise – this fact, I believe, is one of the major reasons that normative practical ethics cannot come out of the Confucian East Asia.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Note the contrast with the Western liberal individualist culture where the meanings of beneficence and autonomy, thick or thick, are conceived mostly independently of other values.

<sup>26</sup> Despite my presentation has treated the cases of comparative cultures so far, the problem of language is not less serious within one culture. For example, beneficence and autonomy are not always in tension with each other, even in the Western liberal individualist ethics. E.g., the doctor's telling the patient about his terminally ill condition, in many cases, is taken to respect the patient's autonomy, which is in harmony with beneficence (allowing the patient to have relatively quality time without the fear of his

The great cultural difference exhibited, so far, through the cases of how the moral terms, beneficence and autonomy, are interpreted and used in the two different cultures, can give the opponents of common morality a firm ground to deny common-morality theses.

So far, I have tried to present the cases of comparative cultural studies in favor respectively of the advocates and the opponents of common morality, and to show that the forces of their arguments depend on how they define the moral terms they would like to use to investigate the cultures in question. The thinner definitions they use, it turns out, the more likely the defenders of common morality are to successfully argue for the validity of their thesis. And the thicker meanings they adopt, the more easily the opponents of common morality are to win the fight. Then, our question is which level of defining the terms, thick or thin, is valid or philosophically more important. I would say both levels are equally valid and important. The thin, formal level is almost identical to the usage of a standard language dictionary. As one of the important purposes of dictionary is, this broad way of understanding terms helps us conceptualize aspects of morality in an orderly manner. It's like filing data in our mind to understand what morality is. And what is amazing is that, regardless of cultural and traditional differences, we all understand and share this universal way of filing things and recognize its importance. On the other hand, the thick, material-content level of understanding moral terms is important in the way that we can understand how the terms are actually used in a particular context. As a result, it can be said that the arguments of both dissenting parties, the advocates and opponents of common morality, are consistent in their own constructs. However, given that the way they define the terms predetermines what they are going to argue, the kernel of their arguments from empirical evidence, that is, that a set of neutral examples the researchers impartially discover in different cultures supports their theoretical conclusions, is defeated.

The second caution I want to call for, though related to the first caution, is that the situational contexts where the cases of comparative culture are located are different, sometimes vastly different. In reality, the cases I presented above are usually entangled with more complicated interpersonal relationship. In the former case, for example, the 5-year-old patient might have 60-year-old grandparents and they might insist on their opinions on the child's condition against the doctor's will. Then, the case becomes the one we need to consider the values of the grandparents' beneficence/care for the child along with their senior authority, of the doctor's competing beneficence for the child with senior authority, and of the child's parents' respect for the two opposing wills between their parents and the doctor. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to locate any examples to be what the researchers call the "evidences." The evidences to be compared should be relatively simple and straightforward in the sense that the two cases compared have similitude in a large part and dissimilitude in some minor part. E.g., there can be good comparisons between baseball and softball, but not between baseball and canoeing. In other words, the example they find in one culture may not have its proper counterpart-example to be compared in another culture. However, this is not to say that the complexity that makes two cultures incomparable is a

---

soon-to-be-coming death). For many patients who put the value of autonomous decisions on their own lives over that of not having the fear of death, beneficence and autonomy collapse. I am grateful for Prof. Michael Langford at Cambridge for his comment here in the footnote.

premise in favor of the opposing thesis of common morality. It is just that there can hardly be “proper data”, based on which two cultures can be compared, in order either to support or to deny common-morality theses.

## 6. Conclusion

The researchers of comparative cultural studies, I suggest, should be mindful of two things. First, there are two different levels of conceiving moral terms, i.e., formal and material-content levels, though the levels can only be understood in gradation from being thin to thick. And the researchers’ pre-choice of how much thin or thick the meanings of the moral terms should be determines the conclusions they desire to support. This fact belies their held position of the argument from empirical evidences, namely, that a set of impartial discoveries as neutral evidences yields a conclusion, either *pro* or *contra* common-morality theses. Second, the complexity constituted out of the variety of situational contexts that different cultural ideologies produce is so great that the examples the researchers find in one culture may be unique to that particular culture, the fact of which makes comparative cultural investigation itself extremely difficult.

The argument from empirical evidences may be a myth. In comparative cultural study with regard to common morality, there should be a discussion whether or not the researchers can agree on or concede to a particular level of defining moral terms before delving into sets of examples to be found in different cultures. The agreement or concession can be philosophical (theoretical) or practical. The philosophical agreement on or concession to the particular level naturally yields to that of the position either of advocating or denying common-morality theses, while the practical agreement or concession does not. The practical agreement or concession has freedom of not binding itself to any one theoretical position. For this, critics may say that the agreement or concession out of practical reasons is making its validity based not on the higher standard of truths but on usefulness or practicality.<sup>27</sup> They may call the practical agreement or concession “utilitarian” in a nefarious sense. The critics are right that the practical reasons are not the higher standard of truths. However, I believe in as much as the reasons are balanced and in service of public good (good of a particular culture or tradition), they are good enough for us, particularly in the field of medical ethics.<sup>28</sup>

## 7. References

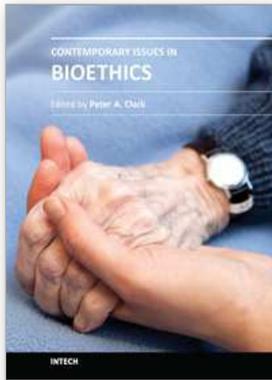
- Beauchamp, Tom and James Childress. *Principles of Biomedical Ethics* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). New York: Oxford University, 2009.
- Berling, Judith A. "Confucianism." *Asian Religions* 2, no. 1 (Fall 1996): 5-7.

---

<sup>27</sup>Ana Iltis criticizes contemporary bioethics for being groundless or for making its validity based not on the higher standard of truths but on usefulness or practicality, etc. (Ana Iltis, “Bioethics as Methodological Case Resolution,” *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 25 no. 3 [2000]: 278).

<sup>28</sup>As common morality advocates, Beauchamp and Childress argue that a good practical method based on common morality cannot buy into a full-blown theory primarily because there would not be a theory that can fully explain our common and diverse moral experiences. (Beauchamp and Childress, *Principles of Bioethical Medicine* 6<sup>th</sup> ed. [Oxford: New York 2009], 363-363)

- Berthrong, John. "Dead Riders and Living Horses: The Problem of Principle/Li 理." In *International Conference on the Development of the Worldviews in Early Modern Asia*, 1-17. Center for the Study of East Asian Civilizations at National Taiwan University, 2005.
- Callahan, Daniel. "Principlism and Communitarianism." *Journal of Medical Ethics* 29, no. 5 (2003).
- Chan, Wing-tsit. "Yin Yang Confucianism: Tung Chung-Chu." In *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Wing-Tsit Chan. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963, 1973.
- Chung, Chai-sik. "Chǒng Tojǒn: 'Architect' of Yi Dynasty Government and Ideology." In *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, edited by Irene Bloom, Wing-tsit Chan and Wm Theodore de Bary, 59-88. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Copi, Irving M., and Carl Cohen. *Introduction to Logic*. Edited by the 9th Edition. Englewood, New Jersey: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990.
- Deuchler, Martina. *The Confucian Transformation of Korea: A Study of Society and Ideology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Duncan, John B. *The Origins of the Chosǒn Dynasty*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000.
- Iltis, Ana. "Bioethics as Methodological Case Resolution," *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 25 no. 3 (2000): 271-284.
- Lee, Jae Hoon. *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds – Han*. Scholars Press: 1994, Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1994.
- Lee, Peter H. "Versions of the Self." In *The Rise of Neo-Confucianism in Korea*, edited by Irene Bloom, Wing-tsit Chan and Wm Theodore de Bary. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. "Theology, Ethics, and the Ethics of Medicine and Health Care." *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 4, no. 4 (December 1979): 435-43.
- Mulhall, Stephen, and Adam Swift. *Liberals and Communitarians*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- Park, Andrew Sung. *The Wounded Heart of God*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993.
- Ramsey, Paul. "The Case of the Curious Exception." In *Norm and Context in Christian Ethics*, ed. by Gene Outka and Paul Ramsey. London, UK: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968.
- Setton, Mark. "Tasan's 'Practical Learning'." *Philosophy of East and West* 39, no. 4 (Oct. 1989): 377-92.
- Strong, Carson. "Exploring Questions about Common Morality." *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 30, no. 1 (January 2009): 1-9.



## **Contemporary Issues in Bioethics**

Edited by Dr. Peter A. Clark

ISBN 978-953-51-0169-7

Hard cover, 162 pages

**Publisher** InTech

**Published online** 07, March, 2012

**Published in print edition** March, 2012

The main strength of this book is the international exchange of ideas that will not only highlight many of these crucial bioethical issues but will strengthen the discipline of bioethics both nationally and globally. A critical exchange of ideas allows everyone to learn and benefit from the insights gained through others experiences. Analyzing and understanding real medical-ethical issues and cases and how they are resolved is the basis of education in bioethics for those who will have to make these decisions in the future. The more we examine, analyze, and debate these bioethical issues and cases, the more knowledge will be gained and hopefully, we will all gain more practical wisdom.

### **How to reference**

In order to correctly reference this scholarly work, feel free to copy and paste the following:

Marvin J. H. Lee (2012). Two Cautions for a Common Morality Debate: Investigating the Argument from Empirical Evidence Through the Comparative Cultural Study Between Western Liberal Individualist Culture and East Asian Neo-Confucian Culture, *Contemporary Issues in Bioethics*, Dr. Peter A. Clark (Ed.), ISBN: 978-953-51-0169-7, InTech, Available from: <http://www.intechopen.com/books/contemporary-issues-in-bioethics/two-cautions-for-a-common-morality-debate-investigating-the-argument-from-empirical-evidence-through>

**INTECH**  
open science | open minds

### **InTech Europe**

University Campus STeP Ri  
Slavka Krautzeka 83/A  
51000 Rijeka, Croatia  
Phone: +385 (51) 770 447  
Fax: +385 (51) 686 166  
[www.intechopen.com](http://www.intechopen.com)

### **InTech China**

Unit 405, Office Block, Hotel Equatorial Shanghai  
No.65, Yan An Road (West), Shanghai, 200040, China  
中国上海市延安西路65号上海国际贵都大饭店办公楼405单元  
Phone: +86-21-62489820  
Fax: +86-21-62489821

© 2012 The Author(s). Licensee IntechOpen. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.