

A Dialogue between Confucianism and Liberalism

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Korea's Premodern, Modern, and Postmodern Condition, and the Need for a Confucian-Liberal Dialogue

Today's Korean society is a **dynamic melting pot** in which premodern, modern, and postmodern elements coexist without order. In the West, modernization proceeded gradually over a span of three centuries, but Korea has rushed to catch up with Western modernization in a mere four decades, with the result that rapid cultural change has brought confusion over values and a marked generation gap. One part of Korean society still harbors premodern values such as patriarchal authority, family-centrism, and the preference for male offspring, while other parts are increasingly embracing modern values of sexual equality, individualism, and liberalism. Not only do premodern and modern elements coexist, but postmodern voices are also appearing through various channels speaking up for the environment, nature, spirituality, and community.

Amid this whirlwind of frenzied modernization, Koreans have had no time to dispassionately reflect on their future direction, and the result has been a confusion of values and unprincipled selfishness. This current confusion of values felt among Korean people can be attributed to two interrelated processes. On the one hand, under the sweeping tide of modernization, traditional values have been altered, distorted, or applied for purely pragmatic ends. On the other, modern values introduced from the West have

taken root in unhealthy ways. For instance, the value of the family as emphasized in the Confucian tradition, has been transformed under modernization into practices of nepotism and reliance on personal connections. We can no longer find the true communal values of devotion to neighbors and society. Meanwhile, the adoption of modern values from the West, within the context of Korean conditions of **vulgar capitalism** has occurred only in a narrow-minded form emphasizing possessive individualism, and the true ideal of liberalism (the creation of autonomous, rational individuals) is nowhere to be found.

Among all the values of tradition and modernity, Koreans have chosen only those aspects calculated to promote personal gain and applied them without principle. In this way, Korean society falls into an ambiguous position of being neither traditional nor modern. Accordingly, it is now important that Korean society leave behind its tangled strands of distorted tradition and modernity, and be reborn through a creative fusion of strong points drawn from both the traditional and the modern. Only through this reflexive process can Korean society achieve modernity while preserving cultural identity, and accept the benefits of Western civilization while overcoming the limitations of modernity. In this paper, I formulate a blueprint for a new social philosophy suited to the Korean society of the future, by drawing a social-philosophical comparison and mutual critique between the mainstay of the Korean traditional value system—Confucianism—and the central tenet of modern values—liberalism.

Positive Liberty and Negative Liberty

The most important ideal pursued by liberalism is liberty. From the standpoint of a social philosopher, liberty is that condition in which the individual is able to determine her/his own actions autonomously, without the unjust interference of others or of the state. In the liberal tradition, individual liberty is set above any other normative value, to the extent that laws and norms are founded on a principle of noninterference: so long as an individual's actions do not violate the liberty or wellbeing of others, no one has the right to prevent or interfere with her/his actions.

The grounds for the imposition of limits upon the liberty of an individual by law are known as “liberty-limiting principles,” and classical (or radical) liberals admit no such grounds except the “harm principle.”¹ Less radical (or more moderate) liberals hold that, in addition to the “harm principle,” the “offense principle” can also be a legitimate basis for restricting liberty.²

The ultimate objective of this pursuit of liberty is that the individual(s) should be free from the unjust interference of the other(s) and maximize the scope for autonomous choice. Thus, the liberty pursued by liberalism is not a positive liberty that seeks to achieve a particular end, but a negative liberty that seeks only to avoid unjust external interference. In this context, Charles Taylor defines the liberty sought by liberalism as an “opportunity concept,” in the sense that it promises increased opportunities for autonomous choice.³

Liberalism stresses individual liberty over other normative values. In this respect, it can be clearly distinguished from perfectionism, which takes individual self-perfection as its ultimate goal, and from utilitarianism, where the highest value is given to maximum efficiency. Liberals recognize the “presumption in favor of liberty,” which holds that unless there is a sufficient rational basis for limiting the liberty of the individual, the law and the state should always leave the individual to make a free choice. It is from this principle that liberals deduce the principle of noninterference.

Liberals emphasize liberty as it provides greater scope for autonomous choice on the part of the individual, without the unjust interference or coercion of others (including the law and the state). John Stuart Mill considered individual liberty and autonomy so important that he believed the only valid reason for the law or the state to limit individual liberty was to prevent individuals from violating each other’s freedom and interests, and that in no other case should the liberty of the individual be restricted. Mill argued that,

¹ According to the harm principle (the only liberty-limiting principle accepted by classical liberals), the state may restrict the liberty of an individual only if that individual harms the liberty or benefit of another individual, and in no other case may the state interfere with individual liberty. See John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Norton, 1975), pp. 10-11.

² An example is Joel Feinberg: see his *Harm to Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 9. In addition, the whole of Feinberg’s *Offense to Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985) is devoted to debating the validity of the offense principle.

³ Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty,” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

even with the intention of producing better and happier individuals, the law and the state must not intervene upon individuals without their consent. Taken to the extreme, Mill states that an individual is free to choose to go even to hell by his/her own decision, and there is no justification for any paternalistic interference that might prevent this.

The liberty sought by Confucianism, unlike that of the liberal tradition, is positive liberty. The Confucian utopia is not a society in which everyone is free from the interference of others, but one in which the moral norms prevailing objectively in a given ethical community are in perfect accord with the inner moral sense of the individual, without the slightest alienation between the two. Thus, in contrast to the political liberty that liberalism takes as its objective, Confucianism pursues what might be called moral liberty. In describing the attainment of perfect harmony between the inner ethical sense and the objective moral norms of society, Confucius confessed, “By the time I reached the age of seventy, I could follow every impulse of my heart, knowing that it would not depart from the dictates of morality.”⁴

The Confucian theory of self-cultivation also aims ultimately at mastering one’s own heart to bring it into line with objective moral standards. Confucianism does not demand that the “rights” of the individual be defended or protected from the interference of others, rather it stresses a positive liberty that seeks to align the individual’s inner being with the surrounding society and its ethical norms. This Confucian concern with positive liberty is aptly expressed in many passages from the Confucian writings: for instance, “I neither complain to heaven nor blame my fellow man,”⁵ and “Morality means overcoming selfishness and restoring propriety.”⁶

As Confucianism values positive liberty above negative or passive liberty, it focuses more on internal than external constraints, when addressing the issue of removing the constraints that constitute barriers to liberty. For instance, Confucius praised his follower, Yenhuei, for preserving a sense of inner peace and comfort despite the poverty of his housing, food, clothing, and other living conditions: “Yenhuei is a great man! Few people could bear to live on a ball of rice and a ladle of soup in a dirty back alley, but he

⁴ *Analects of Confucius*, II/7.

⁵ *Analects of Confucius*, XIV/37.

⁶ *Analects of Confucius*, XII/1.

remains as cheerful as ever. Yen-huei's merit is truly great!"⁷ Of course, Confucius did not imply a rejection of the basic necessities of life. Rather, he meant that true liberty was to be attained by liberating oneself from internal constraints, not from external ones. The *Zhongyong* (Book of the Doctrine of the Mean) illustrates this with an example from archery: "In archery we can see the ways of the **exemplary man**. When a great archer misses the target, he steps back and looks for the weakness within himself; he does not blame external circumstances."⁸

Thus, the liberty sought by Confucianism is not the political liberty attained when the individual is free from the interference of others, but the inner liberty attained by overcoming one's own uncontrolled and unfiltered "first-order" desires. From the viewpoint of the Confucian theory of self-cultivation, liberalism's "freedom from the interference of others" does not guarantee true freedom at all. No matter how free from external interference, as long as the individual remains a slave to his own inner desires, he is not truly free.

Conversely, from a Confucian perspective, a person who correctly understands her/his own character and manages her/his "first-order" desires is free regardless of external interference and constraints. Mencius says, "A man has a noble side and a base side, a greater part and a lesser part, and he must not allow the lesser part to detract from the greater, nor the base side from the noble. A man who cultivates the lesser part is a **small man**, and a man who cultivates the greater part is a **great man**."⁹ The "lesser part" or "base side" of which Mencius speaks is "first-order" desire unfiltered by "second-order" reflection, and to follow these "first-order" desires alone is to be reduced to become a slave to one's own desires. Reflection on "first-order" desire makes us aware of the objectives and motives of our own actions and enables us to discriminate between them. Accordingly, methods of cultivation, including self-examination, self-reflection, and self-control, can be considered as a prerequisite to the attainment of positive liberty.

According to this Confucian concept of liberty, human liberty is not attained when one is free from the interference of others, but in the condition of unity without alienation between the inner moral sense and objective moral norms, attained when the

⁷ *Analects of Confucius*, VI/9.

⁸ *Book of the Doctrine of the Mean*, XIV.

individual correctly understands her/his own inner nature and controls her/his primary desires. From this we can see why, in the Confucian tradition, there has been less emphasis on demanding one's "rights" or "portion" than on such ethical principles as selflessness, benevolent charity, and harmony.

Human Dignity, Rights and Virtue

In the liberal tradition, all human beings possess equal dignity from birth, but only when individuals respect each other's rights is the dignity of each person assured. Kant spelled out our "duty regarding the dignity of the humanity in us" when he instructed, "Do not suffer your rights to be trampled underfoot by others with impunity."¹⁰ This notion of human dignity is founded on "rational autonomy," the unique ability of human beings to become, in Kant's famous phrase, "free and rational sovereigns in the kingdom of ends." Like Kant, the University of Chicago human rights philosopher Alan Gewirth also finds the basis of human dignity and equality in the rational and autonomous capacities of human beings as goal-pursuing agents.¹¹

In the liberal tradition, as set forth by J. S. Mill in *On Liberty*,¹² the concept of human dignity is directly related to the rational and autonomous ability of each individual, as a goal-directed being, to control his/her own life.

In Confucianism, on the other hand, the basis of human dignity is not found in the rationality or autonomy of the individual, but in each individual's potential to become a more ethically perfect person through self-cultivation.¹³ Confucianism seeks to dissolve the status distinctions between [high and low](#) prevailing in the [class society](#) through the principle of moral equality. Confucius and Mencius replaced [the class society's hierarchic distinction between noble and base](#) with the ethical distinction between moral

⁹ *Mencius*, VI/A/14.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue* (1797), tr. By J.W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), pp. 98-99.

¹¹ See Alan Gewirth, "The Basis and Content of Human Rights," in *Human Rights* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹² J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London: Norton, 1975), pp. 10-11.

¹³ *Mencius*, IV/B/32.

and the amoral people. Mencius also taught that everyone was equal in her/his inherent possession of the potential to achieve moral self-perfection.

In the liberal tradition, all human beings are regarded as equal from birth, regardless of social class. Therefore, regardless of social and personal distinctions, all human beings possess the same basic rights. According to liberalism, [high or low](#) character, elevated or vulgar personality and taste, are purely private matters in which no one has the right to interfere. Thus, a liberal like Feinberg can insist that if a couple choose to have sex in a bar, or even commit incest (providing both parties are consenting and the act is not committed in public), unless their behavior violates the liberty of others, there are no grounds for preventing it.¹⁴ If the state attempts to prevent this behavior, it is violating the rights of the individual.

In contrast to this liberal principle of “non-moral equality,” Confucianism grants each individual different rights according to the quality of their character. Just as a sword should not be put in the hand of a man of bad character, the moral weapon of rights should not be given to someone whose character is unworthy. Mencius, commenting on the ancient story of Emperor Wu murdering Emperor Zhou, supported Wu’s coup d’état, explaining, “Although I understood that King Wu had punished a wicked villain, I did not consider him to have assassinated an emperor.” This meant that the existence of a tyrant like Zhou had little value, and that he should not be granted even the right to live. Although in Confucianism human beings possess dignity and equality due to their inherent potential to achieve moral self-perfection, they are not granted equal rights in [actual society](#).

The difference between Confucianism and liberalism in their view of human dignity produces a concomitant difference in the assertion of the means by which human dignity is to be ensured. In the liberal tradition, the device for ensuring human dignity is rights. Only when all individuals respect each other’s rights can human dignity be firmly ensured. As long as no one violates the rights of another, no national body or powerful person may obstruct the right of the individual to think and act freely.

While liberalism relies on rights as a guarantor of human dignity, Confucianism focuses on providing the conditions of welfare that make it possible for each individual to

¹⁴ See Joel Feinberg, *Harmless Wrongdoing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 166.

achieve moral self-perfection within the community to which s/he belongs. Confucius clearly expressed this concern with welfare when he said that the privilege of education should be extended to everyone regardless of birth, and that the wealth of a nation was less important than the equitable distribution of that wealth. Mencius also stated that “Only when the basic means of subsistence have been secured can morals and mores be taught.”¹⁵ In other words, to promote character training and moral self-perfection, basic conditions of welfare must first be satisfied.

In some cases, the Confucian concept of welfare appears in the form of paternalism. In many Confucian writings, a ruler’s concern for the welfare of his people is compared with parents’ love for their children. For instance, the *Shujing* (Book of Documents) states that “A ruler should always treat the populace like a newborn baby.” This concept of welfare with its emphasis on care for the people is a positive expression of the rule of virtue, but when the people are compared with a newborn baby, incapable of autonomous judgment, there is a risk of losing all checks on the power of despotic rulers. When the people are treated as children, their free will is denied and those in power may use virtue as a disguise for tyranny. Due to this danger liberals hold that paternalism, no matter how benevolent its motives, cannot be justified unless accompanied by respect for the rights of others. As Feinberg explains, “If adults are treated as children they will come in time to be like children. Deprived of the right to choose for themselves, they will soon lose the power of rational judgment and decision.”¹⁶

Confucian “welfarism,” which finds the highest responsibility of the state in welfare and wellbeing founded on benevolence, stands in marked contrast to the liberal view of the state as responsible primarily for respecting the rights of the individual. From an impartial point of view, there are both good and bad aspects to both the liberal social philosophy’s exclusive stress on the respect for rights, and in the Confucian ideology’s exclusive stress on “caring.” By respecting the rights and freedoms of individuals, their liberty may be ensured, but this can have such undesirable consequences as economic injustices, rampant materialism, and moral decay. In contrast, when the principle of

¹⁵ *Mencius*, III/A/4.

caring is the sole focus, the welfare of individuals may be improved, but their free will and capacity for autonomous judgment may well be neglected. From this perspective, a social philosophy that respects nothing but freedom is liable to neglect the equitable distribution of wealth, while one which stresses welfare alone runs the risk of leading to despotism.¹⁷

Self-Interest and the Common Good

While liberalism cannot be equated with individualism, the condition in which a liberal ideology is fostered and can flourish is sure to be a society in which individualism prevails. Society as imagined by liberals is a gathering of individuals autonomously and independently pursuing their own profit free from each other's interference. Thus, liberalism perceives human nature as fundamentally selfish, interested only in personal benefit and indifferent to the welfare of neighbors and community. (This view of humanity as selfish does not necessarily imply selfishness in an ethical sense.) Inevitably, in a society of individuals indifferent to each other and concerned only with their own self-interest, the ethical norms most in demand are fairness, procedural justice, noninterference, and the respect of rights. [John Locke](#) argues that in order for these selfish beings to live together without conflict, they establish and grant their provisional assent to the institution known as the state, using it to prevent clashes of interest or to provide mediation and compensation when such clashes do arise. [Robert Nozick](#), similarly, insists that in a society in a state of nature, a proxy institution is necessary to prevent the violation of the rights of the weaker by the stronger, or to compensate for such a violation when it does occur, and that the state is **nothing but** a proxy institution. Thus Nozick, like Locke, conceives of the state, not as a natural entity that should exist for its own sake, but simply as a functional device for protecting the rights of the individual. Hobbes goes even further than Locke in viewing the society in a state of

¹⁶ Joel Feinberg, "Legal Paternalism," in *Paternalism*, ed. by Rolf Satorius (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1983), p. 3.

¹⁷ John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* may be read as an attempt to overcome the drawbacks of both extremes (classical liberalism and welfarism) and combine their strong points into a single consistent system.

nature, considering it to be not just an assembly of selfish individuals, but a battleground in which everyone is at war with each other. Rawls differs from the classical liberals in his emphasis on equitable distribution and search for a solution to the problem of the cleavages between the wealthy and the poor, but still assumes a view of human nature and society little different from that of traditional liberalism. For Rawls, the original condition of this society in need of social justice is a gathering of rational individuals each pursuing her/his own self-interest without regard for others.

Following the development of capitalism and the spread of political and religious freedom, the pursuit of individual self-interest ceased to be considered bad in modern Western society, and on the contrary, came to be regarded as only right and proper. In particular, [with the change of social conditions](#), the notion of “negative liberty,” which had served as a starting point for protecting the individual from the tyranny of unjust rulers (whether they be monarchs and aristocrats or the clergy), gradually drifted away from communal concerns such as the pursuit of common good or the improved welfare of society as a whole.

In contrast to the atomistic view of self and society portrayed by the liberals, Confucianism envisages humans as organic beings inseparable from the society to which they belong. In Confucianism, self-identity [of an individual](#) is not to be found by separating and isolating the self from others, but by understanding one’s position in relation to others. From a Confucian point of view, the abstract, atomistic, and solipsistic self imagined by Western philosophy (particularly in the Cartesian tradition) is a phantasmagoric being that could never exist in this world. In the Confucian tradition, an individual is always understood through human relationships, as someone’s father, someone’s husband, or someone’s neighbor. The “rectification of name” that Confucius speaks of can also be more clearly understood from this point of view. Confucius taught that “An emperor should act as befits an emperor, and a subject should act as befits a subject. A father should act as befits a father, and a son should act as befits a son.” The standard by which an emperor should act as befits an emperor is not to be found in an abstract moral principle existing on a transcendent level like Plato’s idea of the “good,” but in the actual concrete relationships existing between emperor and subject, or emperor and populace. Similarly, the “five [basic human relationships](#)” (*wu-lun*) that form the

backbone of Confucian relationship-based morality derive their ethical basis from the meeting of “the self within relationships” and “the other within relationships.” This relationship-based view of humans within the Confucian tradition contrasts sharply with liberalism’s individualistic view of human kind.

Within the liberal moral system with its atomistic and independent view of humans, it is accepted as only natural that each individual should pursue his own interest and profit alone. But in Confucianism, which [discredits an individual existence isolated from other human beings](#) and the community to which an individual belongs, the exclusive pursuit of one’s own self-interest can never be justified. The ideal society sought by Confucianism is a loving community comprised of moral people who care for one another and support each other’s welfare. As we can see from many Confucian writings, the main model for this selflessly caring community is found in the loving family. In Confucianism, the loving and well-ordered family (which at that time referred to the extended relations of a clan society rather than the modern nuclear family) is the ideal collective body, and the state should model itself on this kind of family. The social model of “self-cultivation, loving family, governed country, peaceful world” that appears in the *Daxue* (Book of the Great Learning) also supports the Confucian concept of communitarian society [regarding the country and society as an outward expansion of the family relationship](#). Also, among the “five human relationships” at the core of the Confucian relationship-based ethics, the ethical norms of family relationships (father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger) are central, while those outside the family (ruler and subject, friend and friend) are modeled on family relationships. Mencius described the ideal society pursued by Confucianism as follows:

Farmers share the same well harmoniously, come and go to each other freely, pool their strength to ward off thieves or misfortunes, and when their neighbor is sick, they help and nurse each other kindly. Moreover, only after tilling the communal land dare they work in their own fields.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Mencius*, III/A/3.

In the ideal village community described by Mencius, distinctions between “mine” and “yours” are ambiguous, and any behavior that deviates from the ethical norms collectively embraced by the community is unacceptable. In a communal society like this, a man who pursues his own self-interest alone will become an object of scorn, while [someone who cares for other’s misery before asserting his own due](#) and supports the interest of others before himself will be admired as a moral person.

This also explains the negative view, within the Confucian tradition, of mercantile activity that seeks to advance private interests. The *Li Chi* (Book of Rites) states that “So long as the parents are living, the children should not possess their own savings or their own livestock,” effectively prohibiting the pursuit of individual self-interest within the family community.¹⁹ The distinction made by Confucius and Mencius between the [virtuous person \(or great man\) and the mean person \(or small person\)](#) can be understood from a social-philosophical angle as a contrast between two human types: one that pursues the common good and one that pursues profit alone. Confucius explained the difference between these two types as follows:

[An exemplary person](#) considers what is right, [while a mean person](#) concerns himself only with what will bring profit.²⁰

[An exemplary person](#) devotes himself to accumulating virtue, while [a mean person’s](#) eyes are ablaze with the desire to get hold of a patch of land.²¹

Mencius adds that “If a person thinks only of his own self-interest, he cannot be benevolent, and if a person cares about benevolence, he cannot become rich.”²² Confucius also states, “The kind of village that is good to live in is a benevolent village. If someone does not choose to live in a benevolent village, how can he be called wise?”²³ A benevolent village is a community of magnanimous people living together. From a Confucian perspective, any individual solely in the pursuit of self-interest without caring

¹⁹ See *Book of Rites*.

²⁰ *Analects of Confucius*, IV/16.

²¹ *Analects of Confucius*, IV/11.

²² *Mencius*, II/A/3.

for others, or who sticks to his own way of living without regard for the norms of the community, is not an ideal human type.

The idea that one must restrain self-interest for the sake of the common good leads naturally to the view that an individual's rights must also be yielded to the common good when necessary. This community-based view of ethics explains clearly why the concept of "rights" has not taken root in Confucian soil. In the Confucian tradition, which puts the common good above self-interest, when a conflict of interests arises, it is not to be resolved through the rational assessment of each individual's rights, but through a yielding of self-interest by the parties concerned, for the sake of their reconciliation and the harmony of the community. Thus the history of Chinese law is characterized by an effort to resolve conflict, not through an in-court system of justice administered by trials, but through an extra-court system of justice that is dependent upon negotiation and mediation.

Ethics of Harmony and Ethics of Self-Assertion

From a historical point of view, human rights are a protective shield won by the blood of the people in their struggle against the despotic rulers and privileged classes of the feudal system. Feinberg speaks of rights in connection with valid claims that the individual may make "against" other individuals who have a duty to satisfy those claims.²⁴ As the use of the word "against" suggests, the structure of rights and duties will not arise unless two individuals or groups stand in confrontation. For instance, between a couple in love, as long as their love lasts, there is no need for the structure of rights and duties. Only when they cease to love each other and compete for limited pool of assets, or stand in confrontation over the cost of raising their children, does the structure of rights and duties become necessary.

Relationships of right and duty are necessarily founded on confrontation between two or more individuals or groups. Marx argued that "rights-talk" about "basic rights"

²³ *Analects of Confucius*, IV/1.

²⁴ See Joel Feinberg, *Social Philosophy* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 66-67.

and “rights of possession” made people hostile toward each other and alienated the individual from the community to which s/he belonged. He attacked “rights” as the exclusive and selfish possession of the bourgeoisie.²⁵ To Marx, “rights” in capitalist society were nothing but self-justification on the part of the “haves,” a necessary evil that is bound to exist within the capitalist social order. Marx criticized the liberal watchwords of “rights” and “liberty” for reducing warm and concrete human relationships to crass and undifferentiated “exchange values.”²⁶ By converting what should be warm human relationships into bourgeois exchange value, “rights-talk” committed the error of converting human character and individuality into monetary value. Finally, Marx condemned “rights-talk” for being based on a principle of isolation that seeks to separate people from each other, instead of a principle of harmony that seeks to unite them.

The Confucian emphasis on placing the common good before self-interest, and communal harmony before individual rights, has much in common with Marx’s criticism of “rights-talk.” The ideal of a loving community that Confucianism pursues advocates yielding and reconciliation as a way of resolving conflicts of interests, and takes a dim view of greedy demands for one’s own portion. The root of this Confucian strategy of conflict resolution through yielding and compromise can be traced back to the spirit of harmony emphasized throughout all Asian philosophy. Harmony is regarded as an important ideal to aspire to in every sphere of human life. Within each person, the emphasis is on harmony between thought and action, and between primary desires and moral conscience. In family relationships, great importance is attached to harmony between parent and child, between husband and wife, and between siblings. Beyond the family, harmony between neighbor and neighbor, and between the individual and the community, is seen as the key to creating a beautiful community. Even the relationship between man and nature should be one of harmony and coexistence without excessive [human chauvinism](#). Preoccupied with harmony, philosophies attributed to Asian culture have regarded self-righteous individual self-assertion as an obstacle to communal harmony, and have advocated yielding and humility instead of self-assertion, and the

²⁵ Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), p. 162..

²⁶ “Grundrisse,” in *ibid*, p. 42.

overcoming of selfishness instead of the pursuit of self-interest. [The disapproval of rapacious self-assertion](#) was expressed by Confucius as follows:

A virtuous person, even when confronted by another, does not fight back.²⁷

A virtuous person has strong self-respect but does not argue; he lives harmoniously in his community but does not form factions.²⁸

A virtuous person never squabbles.²⁹

As we can see from these passages, the Confucian tradition disapproves of aggressive claims of self-interest or one's own portion. In contrast to this Confucian attitude, the representative twentieth-century liberal theorist Feinberg asserts that "Not to claim in the appropriate circumstances that one has a right is to be spiritless or foolish," and refers to "the customary rhetoric about what it is to be a human being. Having rights enables us to 'stand up like men'."³⁰ While the liberal camp, to which Feinberg belongs, sees individual rights as a minimum condition for securing human dignity, Confucianism holds that the assertion of rights and one's own portion should be restrained in the interest of communal harmony. Of course, the negative attitude toward self-assertion in the Confucian tradition is not to be rigidly applied across all cases. While Confucianism has always looked askance at self-righteous self-assertion in the pursuit of individual self-interest, it also teaches that when faced with injustice, one may achieve virtue by taking one's own life. Thus, the Confucian value of harmony is emphasized as a way of promoting the common good by overcoming self-interest, and does not mean that one should cooperate with unjust powers in conditions of injustice and oppression.

²⁷ *Analects of Confucius*, VIII/5.

²⁸ *Analects of Confucius*, XV/21.

²⁹ *Analects of Confucius*, III/7.

³⁰ Joel Feinberg, "The Nature and Value of Rights," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 4 (1970), p. 252.

Toward a Creative Reconciliation of Liberal and Confucian Social Philosophies

The foregoing comparison between the social philosophies of Confucianism and liberalism can be summarized as follows. First, while liberalism aims to secure a space for autonomous choice through mutual noninterference, Confucianism emphasizes the achievement of perfect accord and assimilation by the individual with the moral norms of the community to which one belongs by overcoming selfishness. As a result, Confucianism accentuates positive rather than negative liberty, and embraces a communitarian ethic that is more concerned with “caring” and harmony, rather than any claim to one’s rights and portion. Second, the liberal concept of human dignity is founded on the rational capacity of human beings as autonomous and independent individuals, in contrast to the Confucian view as human beings relationship-oriented, interdependent, and mutually benefiting. In terms of ethical norms, the Confucian belief in the ability of human beings to become more virtuous by overcoming selfishness leads to a stress on self-reflection and restraint rather than the justification of self-interest. Accordingly, it is the cultivation of virtue that is considered essential, not an assertion of rights, in the interest of individual moral perfection and the organic coexistence of the members of a community. Third, the Confucian ideal of harmony leads naturally to a virtue-centered morality that emphasizes yielding and humility rather than claiming one’s own portion.

If liberalism seeks to secure the maximum scope for autonomous choice through mutual noninterference and respect of rights, while Confucianism seeks to achieve an ideal community through the overcoming of selfishness and the cultivation of virtue, each social philosophy has its own historical and cultural background. Within the traditional social context of the extended family system, agricultural mode of production, and absolute monarchy, Confucianism held its position in thought and politics as a double-edged sword that served both to uphold the existing order and to restrain the power of the monarch and the ruling class. Admittedly, criticisms of Confucianism as a [government-patronized ideology](#) that served the interest of feudal lords and aristocrats are not without foundation from a macro-historical viewpoint, but the contribution of Confucians in their consistent effort to educate and restrain the ruling class should not be neglected either. The historical significance of Confucian thought can be found in this effort to prevent

excessive tyranny and pursuit of class interest by presenting the ruling class with a blueprint for becoming more virtuous people.

The society in which Koreans live today no longer resembles the historical conditions in which traditional Confucianism prevailed. The transition from predominantly extended family to nuclear family structure, from agricultural society to industrial capitalist society, and from an absolute monarchy to a free democracy, has created a wide gulf between tradition and modernity. Conspicuous among the phenomena brought about by these changes is the advent of individualism, the rejection of tradition and authority, justification of the pursuit of self-interest, and the assertion of autonomy, liberty, and one's own portion. These new values have clashed with the traditional values that Koreans have inherited from the past, creating confusion over values. The current situation in Korea is reminiscent of the times of turmoil and disorder when liberalism was born in the West. As human liberty and rationality came to be valued, people abandoned the many forms of authority and belief (whether moral, customary, religious, or political) that they had blindly accepted and followed in the past, and under the banner of "rights," individuals secured their own space free from interference. The historical achievement of liberalism was to free people from religious constraints, political oppression, and the chains of feudal morality. However, by taking noninterference as its ideological foundation, liberalism left itself ill-equipped to deal with issues such as economic equality, the pursuit of the common good, and the perfection of individual's character.

In contemporary Korea, where Western liberalism and capitalism have been grafted onto a 500-year tradition of Confucianism, contrasting values are jumbled together in confusion: virtue and rights, individual and community, self-interest and the common good. Koreans now appear to be faced with a choice between two paths. Their dilemma is whether to choose the liberal ethic with its stress on respect for rights, or revive the traditional Confucian ethic with its focus on virtue. Or might there not be a third solution that avoids both extremes? We have already seen that both ethical systems have their strong and weak points. If we opt for negative liberty, we can secure our own autonomous sphere free from interference, but we are liable to neglect the welfare of those in need and the establishment of a desirable community. On the other hand, if we opt for positive liberty, we can pursue the improvement of our character and the unity of

our community, but we run the risk of lapsing into totalitarianism or a new authoritarian rule. If we insist on rights alone, we are apt to become overnight millionaires full of selfishness and lacking in human kindness, while if we emphasize virtue alone, we can easily sink into spineless compliance and obedient slavery. Is there no way to discard the weak points in both ethical systems and combine their strong points into a new system of values?

Liberty, in the ideal sense, is total freedom comprising both positive and negative liberty. No matter how free an individual may be from external interference, so long as s/he remains a slave to her/his own internal primary desires, s/he is not free. Conversely, no matter how well an individual may control her/his internal desires, so long as s/he is bound by chains or suffers from hunger, s/he is not free. Thus, true liberty is that state in which one may autonomously determine one's own will and actions, free not only from external interference but also from internal restraints. When we define the ideal sense of liberty in this way, we are one step closer to relieving the anomie of value confusion and lack of norms that currently envelops Korea. Just as liberty in the full sense requires both positive and negative liberty, true human liberation means not only economic and political liberation to deliver us from the tyranny of unjust rulers or exploitation under an unjust economic structure, but also moral liberation to deliver us from unbridled internal desires and inward constraints.

The moral ideal of complete virtue cannot be attained solely through the liberal insistence on "rights" or negative liberty. Rights perform a necessary social function, protecting the weak from the strong and ensuring that they receive a just share. But at times, rights can also become a powerful defensive measure bolstering the "right of possession" for the "haves." Rights serve as a normative device for defining the "minimal morality" by forcibly extracting a minimum of duty from an opponent. But minimal morality will not be enough to create a desirable society. We will have to assert justice and rights to correct cases of injustice, but we also require caring and benevolence for the weaker members of in society.: When we discriminate wisely between these two kinds of ethical cases--a case for virtue and a case for rights--and pursue virtue or rights according to the specific case, we will be able to create a desirable society founded on the coexistence of benevolence and justice, of virtue and rights.

Glossary

Zhongyong 中庸

Shujing 書經

wu-lun 五倫

Daxue 大學

Li Chi 禮記

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