THE REFLECTIONS OF UNIVERSAL ETHICAL RULES IN EAST ASIAN THOUGHT[*]

Evrensel Ahlak İlkelerinin Hindistan Kültür Havzasındaki Yansımaları

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will survey the ethical rules in Abrahamic religions and their reflections on the East Asian thought. Afterwards a discussion of their significance in the contemporary thought will be held. Ten commandments are the first flourishing of ethical rules in the Abrahamic religions. This set of rules kept progressing into a whole system of ethics first in Christianity and then in Islam. Our first observation will be that a major part of the ethical rules in Abrahamic faiths are continuous with those of the East Asian thought. For instance, ethical rules that one can derive from the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path in Buddhism are mostly compatible with the basic universal ethical rules in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is thus the aim of our paper to shed some light on the interaction and similarity of ethical rules the in Abrahamic religions and the major religious and philosophical movements in the East Asia.

Keywords: *Ethics, Religion, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism*

ÖZET

Bu makalede İbrahimî dinlerin ahlaki yapılarını ve bu yapıların Doğu Asya düşüncesine yansımasını araştıracağız. Ardından bu konuların çağdaş düşüncedeki önemi tartışacağız. On Emir İbrahimî dinlerde ortaya çıkan ilk ahlaki kurallar bütünüdür. Bu kurallar bütünü tekamülünü sürdürerek ilk olarak Hristiyanlık, daha sonra ise İslam'da bir sisteme dönüşmüştür. İlk gözlemimiz İbrahimi dinlerdeki ahlakî kuralların büyük bir kısmının Doğu Asya düşüncesindekiler ile tutarlılık arz ettiğidir. Örneğin Budizm'deki Dört Yüce Gerçek ve Sekiz Aşamalı Asil Yol'dan türetilen ahlakî kurallar Yahudilik, Hristiyanlık ve İslam'ın temel evrensel etik kuralları ile örtüşür. Buradan hareketle, bu makalenin gayesi İbrahimî dinlerin etik kuralları ile Doğu Asya'nın büyük dini ve felsefi hareketlerinin ahlak kuralları arasındaki benzerlik ve etkileşimi ortaya koymaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Ahlak, Din, İslam, Hıristiyanlık, Budizm, Yahudilik*

Introduction

What is the source of Ethics? Are there any universal ethical rules? These questions are as old as the history of the world. However in modern times, especially the popularity of religion, independent philosophical and moral conceptions have compelled us to reconsider the question of how our perception of religion affects our thoughts and moral values.

We know that there are two main approaches about the source of ethics. One of them is the religious source and the other is the worldly source. The adherents of Abrahamic Religions believe that the source of ethics is religious, but generally, in secular systems, people accept that the source of it is worldly and humanly necessities. Even though some people accept that the source of ethics is religion, and the others believe that it is worldly things, it is possible to say that both of these sources are important and influential. Modern people have been using religious ideas for worldly goals in daily social environment. In such an environment, civilizations had agreed on some universal ethical rules, especially on what is good and bad. It is possible that some of these universal ethical rules may have originated from a religious source. However it also may have originated in regard to establishing a good and ethical community, which may arise from the concern of maintaining the community order.

There aren't any definitive conclusions about or consensus on the numbers of universal ethical rules. However, civilized communities have some universal ethical rules, despite the fact that some of them are approved by tacit. Similarly, these rules have also been in Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Some of these rules and some of the new ones can also be seen in East Asian religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism). The aim of this paper is to address some of these common universal ethical rules and conduct a short analysis about their importance.

The first source of universal ethical rules in Abrahamic Religions can be found in Judaic tradition. These rules that are well known as Ten Commandments can be found in Torah, the books of Exodus and Deutronomy.[1] Even though these rules are called as Ten Commandments, only six of them are directly related to the ethical rules. These rules are: (a) honor your father and your mother, (b) you shall not murder (c) you shall not commit adultery (d) you shall not steal (e) you shall not bear false witness against your neighbors (f) You shall not covet your neighbor's house and neighbor's wife or his male and female servant, or ox and his donkey or anything that is your neighbor's. A virtuous and ethical community for humanity underlies the basics of these rules. There is an aim to create a profile of an ethical individual who does not harms other persons, respects his/her

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1   See for all commandments, Exodus, 20:1-17, Deutronomy, 5:4:21

mother and father and establishes good relationships with those around him/her.

There are three main keys that were settled for all people. The first of them is the protection of life that is stated , as "you shall not murder". The second of them is the protection of chastity and purity of humans. This rule is further expressed as "you shall not commit adultery". The third of them is courage that includes the right of others around us especially those that are close by. This rule is included in the principle "You shall not covet your neighbor's house and neighbor's wife or his male and female servant, or ox and his donkey or anything that is your neighbor's".

Christianity, which is one of the important circles of Abrahamic Religions, has also adapted all the ethical rules stated in Ten Commandments.

As a matter of fact, the part that features Ten Commandments is also included in the Old Testatment. Compared to Islam and Judaism, ethical rules are dominant in Christianity, whereas the fundamental religious rules are more important in Islam and Judaism. Christianity added some other important ethical rules to the universal ethical rules apart from Ten Commandments. The most important of them is love. The love of rule is called as "agape" in the holy book. This word was used 116 times in the holy book, a signifier of the great emphasis put. There are two principles of Christianity that differentiates it from Judaism. These two principles contain religious and ethical elements. When it was asked Jesus Christ what the biggest rule in religion is, he said that firstly it is the love of God and secondly it is the love of neighbors. As for Christianity, all religions and prophets are bound up with these two rules. These rules are expressed in the Holy Book, in the Matthew[2] as such: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And second is: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself." The love is the greatest virtue in Christianity that surrounds not only Christian people but also all humanity including the enemies. There are other verses in holy books about the significance of love: "You have heard what was said, you must love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

But, I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who harass you too. Therefore be the children of your Father, who is now in the heaven. He makes the sun rise on both the evil and the good and sends rain on both righteous and unrighteous."[3] There is not any difference between believing in God or not, to be good and bad. These verses show us that all people are equal before God. God sends blessings to all people without making any discrimination. This vast love of culture in Christianity has been named as the golden rule of ethic. The same was held in Islam throughout its history.

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2   Matthew, 22:37-40

3   Matthew, 5:43-46.

The golden rule of ethics depends on this verse in Christianity: "Therefore, you should treat people in the same way that you want people to treat you; this is the Law of Prophets." This verse/principle is called the golden rule of ethics in Christianity, yet a conditional proposal. There is a conditional and balanced situation about making any behavior against to others except us. The same rule, the golden rule of ethics, is expressed in Islam many times and in many styles. However, this rule is expressed totally in a positive way in Islam unlike in Christianity where it is expressed in a conditional and negative way. This rule is expressed in the tradition of hadith, the book of faith in Muslim, as such: "one amongst you believes (truly) till one likes for his brother or for his neighbor that which he loves for himself"[4]. This rule teaches us that in order to be a good Muslim and a believer you should love other believers. The meaning of this hadith implies a positive form of ethics. Actually positive form of ethics is 'one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself'. The golden rule of ethics is actually a concurrence of Abrahamic religions and East Asian religions and thoughts. It is a common ethical rule that is obeyed by all humanity. We know that Aristotle had proposed four main ethical elements in Nicomachean Ethics. These four main elements are known as four main virtues that are wisdom, courage, purity and justice. With Aristo, the love of virtue is added to these four main elements of ethics of Aristotle. Thomas Aquinas has also mentioned that one of the main ethical rules is love. Islam has inherited the ethical framework from the previous Abrahamic religions. Besides all traditional customs of ethics, Islam has tried to establish a new brotherhood law. As per this brotherhood law, all Muslim people are responsible for protecting the rigth of each other. Islamic ethic is not only a virtual ethic but also a deontological ethic. He had added lots of ethical rules to the tradition of Abrahamic ethical system. One of them is the concept of ihsan (beneficence) which is expressed in the 90th verse of Sura of Nahl: "Allah enjoins to do justice and to adopt good behavior and to give relative (their due rights), and forbids shameful acts, evil deeds and oppressive attitude. He exhorts you, so that you may be mindful."[5] As we see, the verse instructs all Muslim people to be generous towards their relatives and brothers and try to abstain from all bad attitudes against them. This principle includes both material and humanitarian aspects of ethics. The other important ethical principle in Islam is to be merciful towards all people. There are some other ethical rules in Islam but when we think about them in total and use them in a systematic way, it will flourish the value of them.

There are lots of religious and philosophical movements in the East Asian thought. However, we will threat only three religious movements that flourished before AD 500 which are Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. When we observe

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4   Sahih Muslim, the book of faith, 72.

5   Quran, Sura of Nahl, verse:90.

these three religious movements roughly, it is easy to understand that there are lots of ethical rules that are similar to Abrahamic Religions. However apart from these similar rules, there are also other ethical rules that only belong to East Asia religions. Actually, East Asian religions' life style is totally different from the Abrahamic Religious ones. When we analyze Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism from a modern perspective, we can see that the life style of them is full of ethical rules. For example, when we analyze Hinduism, there are five important principles about ethical life style: (a) purity (b) restrain of self (c) don't steal (d) accuracy (e) nonviolence (ahimsa).[6] The life in Hinduism has a strict connection with bad and good karma. This karma keeps us in this world to attain at the ultimate salvation. Buddhism carries on in the same way as Hinduism. On the way to salvation, gaining an ethical life style is not only a religious practice but also a philosophy of life in Buddhism. Any people in Buddhism can attain the five main ethical rules after gaining the famous four noble truths and the noble eightfold path. There are the five main ethical rules of Buddhism: (a) don't kill anyone (b) don't lie to any people (c) don't steal (d) don't commit adultery (e) don't drink any alcoholic drinks.[7] All Buddhist people have to obey these ethical rules. Actually, as we see in most of East Asian, religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism have some ethical rules that regulate our daily life according to the religious faith in question. There are similar ethical principles but when we analyze the system of these, Abrahamic religious attitude is a bit different from that of the East Asian religions. Almost all East Asian religious systems aim to achieve a personal purification and a perfect life style. Anyone who obeys these ethical rules can purify himself and contribute to a good community. For all Buddhist people, there are ten important principles that makes humanly perfection possible. These are: (a) Obey the five basic ethical rules which are told before (b) generosity (c) can walk away from this world (d) to act wisely (e) to make an afford for goodness (f) patience (g) truthfulness (h) determination j) loving-kindness (k) equanimity.

Besides all these ethical rules in the East Asian religions, there is one principle that is more important than the others. This principle is called 'ahimsa' that exists in most of the East Asian religions. *Ahimsa* is an important term that means 'do not injure any creature in this world' which is the most important ethical principle of East Asian religions.

There is another important religious movement in East Asia besides Hinduism and Buddhism, which is called Jainism. Jainism basically comes from the same religious traditions and has some similar ethical principles with those of Buddhism and Hinduism. The ethical life style is the center of the life in Jainism. Jainism comes with the principle of *ahimsa* as well expect its application is more

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6   Cafer Sadık Yaran, İslam Ahlak Felsefesi, s.187.

7   Cafer Sadık Yaran, İslam Ahlak Felsefesi, s.191.

strict than the other East Asian religions. There are also sub-principles of *ahimsa*. There are five important ethical rules in Jainism as in Buddhism which are: (a) *ahimsa*: no harm to living any beings (b) *Satya*: Truthfulness, to speak only truth (c) *asteya*: don't take anything that belongs to others (d) *brahmacarya*: to control our non-ethical senses, don't commit adultery (e) *aparigraha*: detach from people, places, material things or anything connected to this world.

Conclusion

When compared to Abrahamic Religions and East Asian religions including Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism; it is easy to understand that all these religions emphasize 'virtue' in all their ethical principles. Although one of them has a celestial source and the other a worldly source, they both adopt similar principles at some points. This is very important. Because, when we remember the questions that are asked at the beginning of this text, 'What is the source of ethics?' 'Does it come from a worldly source or heavenly source?', we can understand the importance of this point/conclusion. The important thing is that both of them try to attain similar conclusions about the ethical daily life. Especially some principles are almost the same and have the same meaning. Especially one of the four ethical principles of classical ethical philosophy is 'chastity' or 'don't commit adultery' and these are included in every group mentioned in this text. Admittedly, it is the most important principle in social and religious values. It is the primary principle for a virtuous community. As well as the principle of chastity, there are lots of principles in Abrahamic Religions and East Asia Religions that belong to all humanity. These principles are: 'don't kill anyone', 'don't steal anything', 'to be respectful to others possession's', 'love' and 'respect'. Every religious, non-religious and philosophical community tries to establish these ethical principles for creating decent man and perfect community in this world. Certainly, these have influenced each other; however it is not easy to infer which one influenced the other. The important matter in this point is to gain common/universal ethical rules in this world. The principles that are stated in Ten Commandments have expanded and started to appear in Christianity and Islam as well as in the Far Eastern religions in different forms.

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