

Book Review: Rošker, Jana S. *Confucian Relationism and Global Ethics: Alternative Models of Ethics and Axiology in Times of Global Crises*, Brill, 2023, 181 pp.

Mao Xin

Rošker, Jana S. *Confucian Relationism and Global Ethics: Alternative Models of Ethics and Axiology in Times of Global Crises*, Brill, 2023, 181 pp.

In her book *Confucian Relationism and Global Ethics*, Jana S. Rošker explores global ethics from a reconstructed Confucian relationism perspective. For Rošker, the current global axiology takes a Western-centric point of view, which often bases its social and political analysis on a certain individualism. Rošker argues that the present monopoly of this Western-centric point of view fails to address global crises, and hence we are in need of a new global ethos that encourages cooperation and solidarity beyond national borders. In order to allocate “new way of sharing knowledge and ideas,” alternative ethical systems need to be introduced into the debate of global ethics.¹ As a Sinologist, she takes the Confucian relational ethics as a serious dialogue partner in search of new global ethics. Based upon a close reading of new Confucianists such as Lizehou, Mouzongsan, and the contemporary Confucianist philosophers who engage Confucianism with present-day ethical questions, such as Lee Ming-huei and Hong Chun-chieh, Rošker both puts the individualism centred western mainstream thinking in a critical aspect, and proposes a Confucian relational alternative, which can give today’s global ethical discourse a transcultural potential.

According to Rošker, facing global crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and global environmental catastrophes, necessitates a rethink of global ethics. She stresses that the emergence of global crises is both a challenge and an opportunity: a crisis is not just a problem to be solved but a chance for us to take a critical perspective of our own cognitive inertia. Without crises, we would go forward with our “habitual flow of life,” and do not realise how strong the inertia controls us.² And in the current global dialogues, this cognitive inertia is most evident in the Euro-American intellectual traditions’ lack of knowledge of the Sinic tradition. In other words, the current global crises reveal that, due to historical ground, the western-originated framework of conception is dominating the global discourse, and this dominance leads to an indifference to alternative conceptual frameworks, for instance, the Confucian tradition. And for Rošker, these crises remind the Euro-American traditions that “the Chinese thought deserves special attention.”³

¹ Jana S. Rošker, *Confucian Relationism and Global Ethics: Alternative Models of Ethics and Axiology in Times of Global Crises*. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2023, p 8.

² Ibid, p. 9.

³ Ibid, p. 14.

To be exact, Rošker explores Confucian relationism compared to the Western-originated “individualism-based social orders.”⁴ For Rošker, individualism here is not just an emphasis on individuals, their values, or interests. Rather, it is more of a way to organise societies based on individual interests, according to which “anything that opposes or impedes individual development is explicitly negative.”⁵ In contrast to such a way of societal organization, the Confucianists emphasize social relations, in which the individual is seen as a self embedded in his/her relations. For the Confucianists, people cannot “abstract their lives from their relationships with their fellow human beings.”⁶ The society is hence organised through “self” lives his/her life through their relations to others.

From an individualist perspective, an individual's uniqueness is defined by his/her independence. However, from the relational perspective, the self(s) are also unique yet in the sense of being “unrepeatable” in their relationships with the others. According to Rošker, relationships in Confucian relationism can be “characterized by multiplicity, mutuality, and complementarity.”⁷ This is to emphasize that the relationships in which individuals find themselves are multiple in nature and in continuous change and development. For example, a person can be both a parent and a child, depending on the specific relationships under consideration. And this person's role changes when the relationship to others changes. Again, in family relations, the children one day may become parents themselves and live through different roles in relation to their parents and their children. This latter scenario can also be described as a relation of mutuality, in the sense that, in one's relation to one's children when they are young, care and education are implied in such a role and relation. But one day, when the children become adults, they will need to perform the duty of care and remonstrance (giving advice) toward their parents.

Confucianism stresses the inter-dependency of individuals on their social network, their community, and society. This is to say the duty and right implied in one's role are not the same for everyone, but complement each other in the network of relations. For Confucianists, one cannot be a good teacher without having good students, and contribution to one's neighbours' welfare entails one's own. Confucian relationism confirms a codetermination in our communities, in the sense that people have a shared responsibility to the degree that one cannot achieve moral goodness independently. One's fulfilment of the requirement of one's role is not only an individual achievement, but also an important “social influence” in itself to benefit society, which in turn can be dedicated to helping others achieve their moral development.⁸

Rošker points out that the perspectives of individualism and relationism lead to different political and social consequences. The important social elements produced by individualism are, for example, individual rights and the principle of equality for all. Rošker claims that the dominating human rights discourse is based upon individualism, where the individuals are abstract, having “no face, no particular, concrete personhood or identity.”⁹ The Confucian relationism, on the other hand, focuses on the concrete individuals, who have multiple identities and whose rights cannot be separated from the

⁴ Ibid, p. 4.

⁵ Ibid, p. 34.

⁶ Ibid, p. 51.

⁷ Ibid, p. 68.

⁸ Ibid, p. 46.

⁹ Ibid, p. 53.

rights of groups and communities, in which their relations to others play out. Protection of human rights is important, but the discourse of human rights also needs to be able to include human rights understood from the perspective of “interdependent relational self.” And hence Rošker maintains that protection of human rights cannot be associated exclusively with one specific type of “institutional order.”

For Rošker, individualism, with certain inflexibility, becomes an ideological construction, which results in a potential antagonistic relation between the individual and society. The negative effects of such antagonistic relations are: an increase in egoism, “lack of skills and opportunities for participation,” and curbing the development of “mutual solidarity.”¹⁰ Indeed, it is not the emphasis of human rights that hinders social solidarity but the overemphasis of the individualistic social institution implied in Western human rights ideas. Especially when we search for global ethos in order to face the global crises together, the overemphasis on individualistic social institutions does not offer us enough insight to find ways to bind the global community. From Rošker’s observation, there is an “erosion of social cohesion, traditional norms and standards within local societies” currently worldwide.¹¹ And the Confucian relationism can contribute to counter such a trend.

Rošker gives similar comments on the principle of equality of all people, which, for her, from the Western-originated system, is based upon an individualism that artificially separates one from the other. This system emphasizes the realisation of the principle of equality, rather than real equality. This is to say, equality is pursued as a direction of social institutions, not as “equal evaluation of deeds, practices, and works of individuals.” In this sense, she deems the liberal democratic notion of equality “hypocritical in its essence”.¹² Confucian relationism does not pursue principles of equality and has been seen by others as a philosophy of inequality. Rošker disagrees with such claims. She points out that equality, as a general principle based on the sameness of all, is alien to the Confucians. For Confucianists, everyone has a specific role that guides their relations to others, and as one’s roles are various in their relations to others, differentiation is more important in this system than generalization of sameness.

Yet Rošker maintains that we can still locate a certain notion of equality in Confucianism, which, though, is different compared to the Western equality concept. The Confucian equality can be understood as embedded in the net of relations. Rošker points out that both parties in a specific relation are in “complementary and equal to one another, both in the metaphysical and the moral sense”.¹³ Taking an example to explain such an idea, “I” am sacrificing A for you in our relationship, and “I” may get B back in my relationship with someone else. Everyone takes the duties implied in their roles seriously, which guarantees equal respect when we consider all aspects in the social interactions. We can say that the Confucian equality does not happen when we face an external force - God, law, or death; it happens when we face each other. This complementary equality requires a public conscience that regulates people’s commitment to such equality. Confucianism promotes such a public conscience through its teachings.

Compared to human rights and equality, the social ethical system of Confucian relationism is driven by harmony (He). Rošker points out, “(T)he harmony that the original

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 134.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 134.

¹² Ibid, p. 78.

¹³ Ibid, p. 46.

Confucianism stood for was the harmony of pluralism, not an equalizing alignment of all individuals in a society.¹⁴ In other words, harmony in Confucianism is not about eliminating difference, but respecting others' differences, balancing our roles and duties out of such respect. As we have discussed above, Confucianism emphasizes interdependency between individuals. And the relations are seen as dynamic, ever-changing, and therefore harmony is not a principle, but a value that guides social roles and their interactions. And individuals' moral habits in these interactions can be seen as their virtues. Many scholars consider that Confucian ethics is a "virtue ethics". Rošker emphasizes that it is more of a "relational virtue ethics," which is essential to social harmony. The Confucianists place great value on social cultivation of moral emotions, which can lead to the possibility of relation-based virtues really influencing people's lives. A fundamental Confucian virtue is humanness, which is often also translated into benevolence. Following philosophical discussions from contemporary Confucianists such as Lee Ming-huei, Rošker continues to explore Confucian humanism based upon Confucian humanness.

To be precise, Confucian humanism is closely associated with a core Confucian concept: humanness, benevolence. The original meaning of humanness in Confucian tradition is duality or plurality of human, which is to say, "human can only exist in dual or plural."¹⁵ Contemporary Confucian scholars consider that Confucianism places human beings (human relations) at the forefront of their thinking, which is similar to some of the Western humanistic tradition, especially the Kantian tradition, and can be counted also as a classic example of humanism. Lee stresses, Confucian humanism is not an ideology, nor "any kind of a state religion," but rather constitutes "a main resource for cultural Bildung, that is, for education, formation, and cultivation of self and society,"¹⁶ In a comparative reading of Confucian humanism and Kantian humanism, Lee finds a transcultural possibility in connecting the two, and hence, claims that looking at Confucian tradition as a tradition of humanism, offers the western philosophers a lens to understand and position Confucianism referring back to their own ethical systems.

As a book written during a global crisis- the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring global ethics that can address global crises, Rošker applies some of the important ethical ideas from Confucianism to the global challenge at hand. For example, she discerns how the Western tradition and the Confucian tradition understand privacy, intimacy, and autonomy, and the impact of their different understandings on their dealings with the pandemic. She points out that, in Chinese tradition, privacy (Si) has been associated with a meaning of egoistic interest, which is often seen as ethically negative. There is yet also a neutral meaning of privacy, which is not private interests, but how one keeps one's morality when they are alone. In this sense, privacy is a condition for autonomy, which is to say, if one can carry out moral actions in privacy-without external observation and coercion, we can confirm moral autonomy in this person. Autonomy in Confucian tradition is relational, since this autonomy requires the moral person to fulfil one's moral duty to others, even in cases of privacy.

Differences in understanding of privacy and autonomy result in different attitudes to personal data integrity in the digitalization of COVID-19 controls, which is a reason why people have less sensitivity about personal data integrity in Sinic regions. The COVID-19

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 30.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 58.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 73.

pandemic tracking app in Taiwan during the covid-19 pandemic helped to meet the challenges of controlling the spread of the disease. The app is likely to expose personal data and hence expose privacy, but it is also a method to create mutual benefits and solidarity in facing and combating the pandemic together. So, the population, from their different social ethical commitment, act differently concerning whether they allow their personal data to be monitored. At the same time, as Rošker correctly points out, in the digitalized age, data becomes extended memory, which makes the very border of privacy more ambiguous.

Rošker ends her discussions in the book with an attempt to create a new methodology towards global ethics, which is referred to by her as “method of transcultural philosophical sublation.”¹⁷ When we are facing different ethical traditions, how do we proceed forward to reach a transcultural dimension? Her method includes four steps. The first step is to search for similarities between the two different culturally constructed ethical traditions. For example, during the pandemic, most cultures share the desire to protect the vulnerable groups. For the second step, Rošker suggests that we continue to locate differences not only among single concepts, but the “main paradigms of the frames of reference to which they belong.”¹⁸ This can be, for example, the difference between individualism and relationism.

The third step is about eliminating some aspects of the individual tradition and preserving some valuable aspects that are suitable for the transcultural perspective. The overemphasis on individualism or the ideologization of individualism can be eliminated, but the respect for individual dignity can be kept. The fourth step is about sublation, which is more exactly a “cognitive shift” that can lead to a new insight. For example, the new insight can be about the importance of rethinking human rights based on a relational perspective. With this new insight, we can proceed in step five to generate new principles and ideas from this new insight. This method not only shows us the importance of contextualizing philosophical conceptions, but it also introduces ways to address the limited contexts that each tradition needs to break through.

Rošker’s book has made an important theoretical contribution to introducing essential aspects of Confucian relationism into the global ethical dialogues. But there are still some ambiguities in the book that call for further discussion. For example, she argues that Confucian humanism could “contribute in many ways to new, alternative forms of democracy”.¹⁹ But what is this democracy like? How different is it compared to the liberal democracy? She has not given us a clear picture.

Another question that calls for additional discussion is how Rošker understands the association between Confucian folk psychology and Confucian ethics. Rošker rightly discerns between Ruism political institution and Confucianism philosophy. But on another front, in her discussion of so-called “general Chinese preference,” she has not clearly defined such Confucianism-influenced folk psychology. What does it mean to refer to something as the “general attitude” of the people from a Confucian perspective? What is the proper way to establish a connection between observation of people’s attitude with Confucian ethics? These questions call for further explanations.

Lastly, Rošker critically discussed the system of social credit in China. She claims:

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 132.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 143.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 65.

It (the system of social credit) aims to assess the creditworthiness, reliability, and performance of individual citizens by ranking and evaluating their “moral integrity,” which is manifested in various behaviours, from the frequency of visits to parents to trustworthiness, work habits, and adherence to traffic rules. Moreover, the consequences of such evaluations are revealed in the concrete punishments and rewards of the observed individual.²⁰

Yet she has not cited any study or even the official documents concerning the social credit system in China, which makes her critique of the social credit system constrained by Western media representation. From the Chinese governments document on the topics related to such a system, the primary aim of introducing the system is to reduce “serious production safety accidents and food and drug safety incidents occur from time to time; commercial fraud, counterfeiting and selling fake goods, tax evasion and fraud, false claims, and academic misconduct.”²¹ We can certainly criticise the effect of such a system, but she has not explained and analysed the system itself with original sources.

Mao Xin, Uppsala University
xin.mao@teol.uu.se

²⁰ Ibid, p. 125.

²¹ https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2014-06/27/content_8913.htm “重特大生产安全事故、食品药品安全事件时有发生，商业欺诈、制假售假、偷逃骗税、虚报冒领、学术不端等现象屡禁不止”。