LESSONS FROM LI: A CONFUCIAN INSPIRED APPROACH TO GLOBAL BIOETHICS

CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG, CENTRE FOR BIOETHICS
10TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION
FEBRUARY 21, 2025

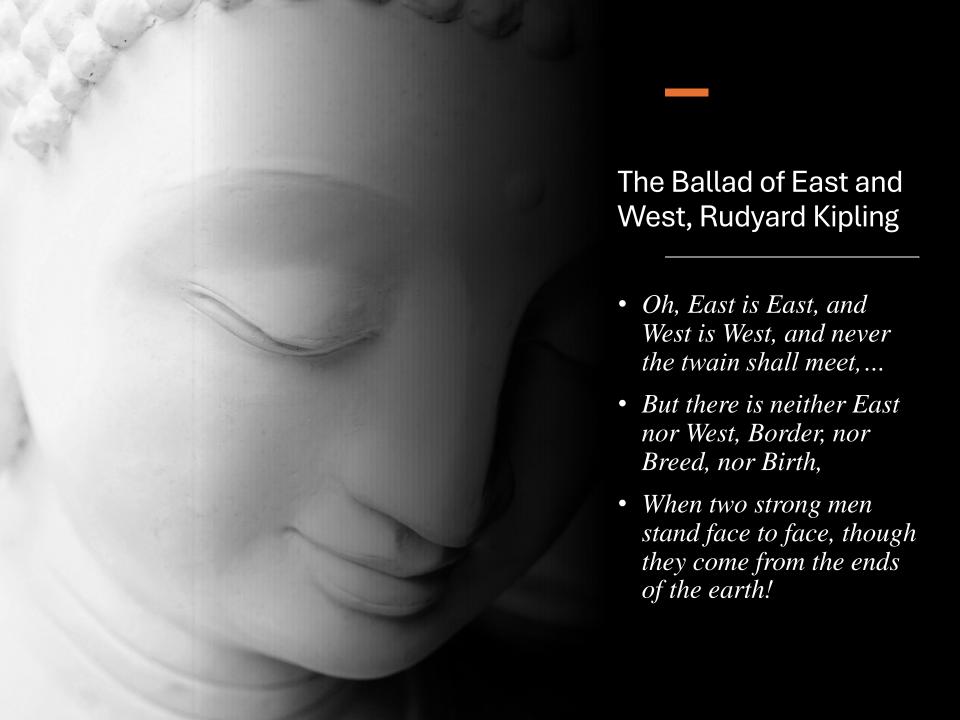
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Acknowledgments

 This presentation is based on a paper coauthored with Prof. Roger Chung and forthcoming in BMJ Journal of Medical Ethics







Standing together

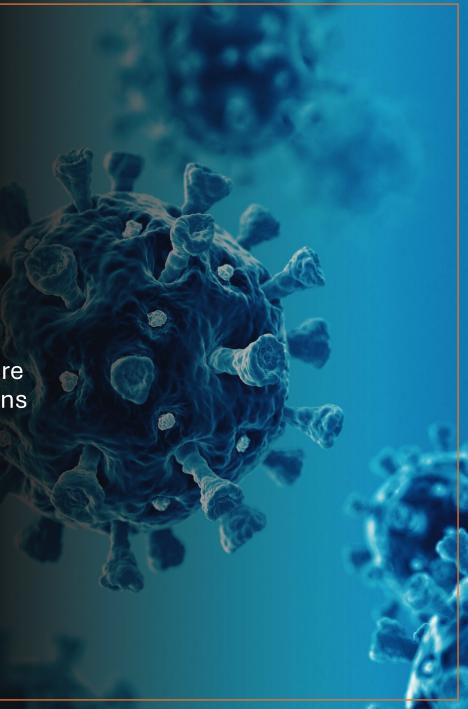
- Historically, geographically distant bioethicists had little contact and 'never the twain shall meet'
- Today, bioethicists from faraway places more often stand 'face-to-face' in both virtual and in-person spaces



- Globalization, or "increased cross-border flows of goods, services, money, people, information, technology, and culture"
- We are, "more tightly linked than ever before, and the connections are more complex, more frequent, and more central to our lives and our economies."

The COVID-19 pandemic

- Today, with international flights common, someone waking up in Wuhan may find themself falling asleep in London
- Beyond pandemics, bioethicists are increasingly engaging with concerns affecting people everywhere (e.g., climate change, Al, gene editing, access to care for migrants and internally displaced persons)



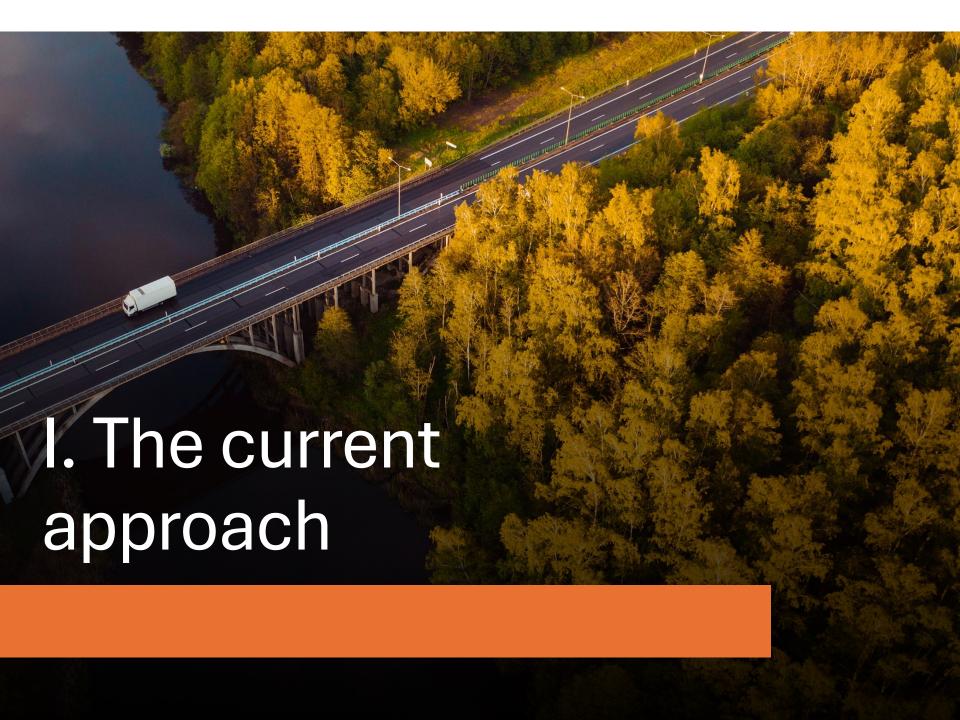
Standing Apart

- Western bioethicists are "like the Christian missionaries ...that preceded them...intent on bringing the gospel — the "good news" — to those in the developing world." (De Vries & Rott)
- Western-style bioethics often becomes "a process of integrating people around the world into a single society," emphasizing 'Americanization' and 'Westernization' (Bhakumi)





- What is the current approach in global bioethics and what concerns might it raise?
- What might a broader, more inclusive approach look like?
- Lessons from *li* (禮)







- Whiter and more educated than the overall U.S. population
- More liberal and less religious
- Nearly 80% identify as white, compared with 64% of American adults do (Pierson et al.).

Top cited articles in bioethics journals: 1975-2014, Jin & Hakkarinen

Authors from high-income countries produce a disproportionate share of the bioethics literature

Of 800 top-cited articles between 1975 and 2014, the majority (81.5%) came from the USA, UK, or Canada



Countries	Articles n	%
United States	2390	59.3
United Kingdom	544	13.5
Canada	160	4
Australia	154	3.8
Netherlands	109	2.7
Sweden	76	1.9
Germany	65	1.6
New Zealand	56	1.4
srael	47	1.2
Finland	46	1.1
apan	40	1
Denmark	37	0.9
Norway	27	0.7
Italy	25	0.6
China	24	0.6
Belgium	20	0.5
Turkey	18	0.4
South Africa	17	0.4
France	13	0.3
Spain	12	0.3
Switzerland	12	0.3
Rest of the World	137	3.4

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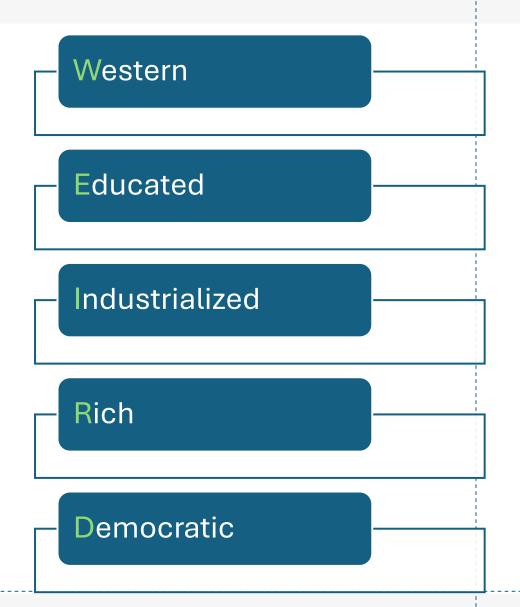
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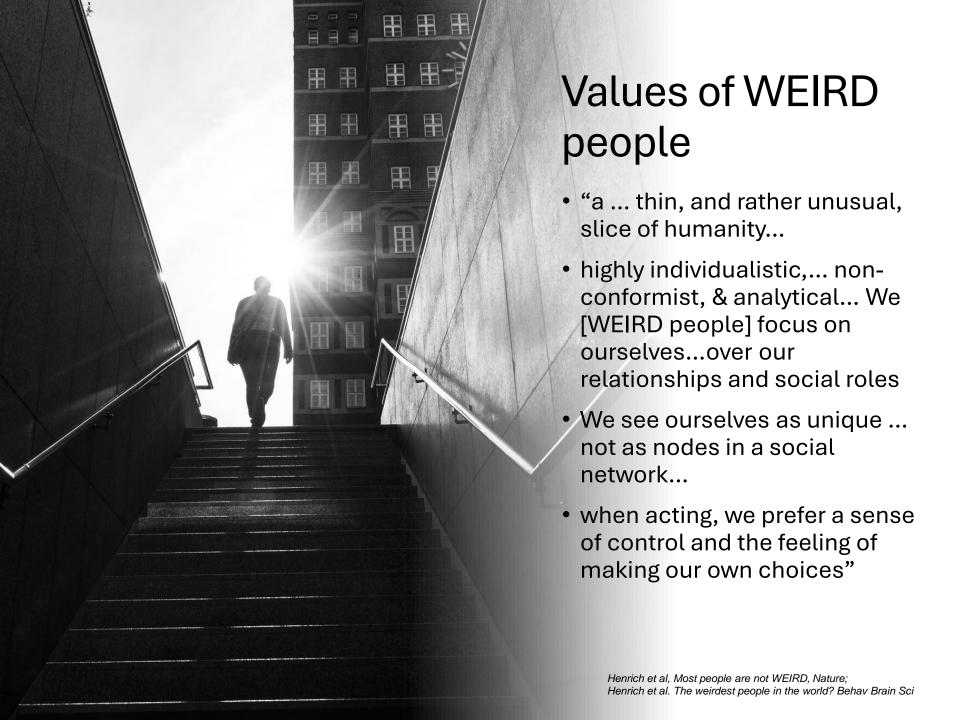


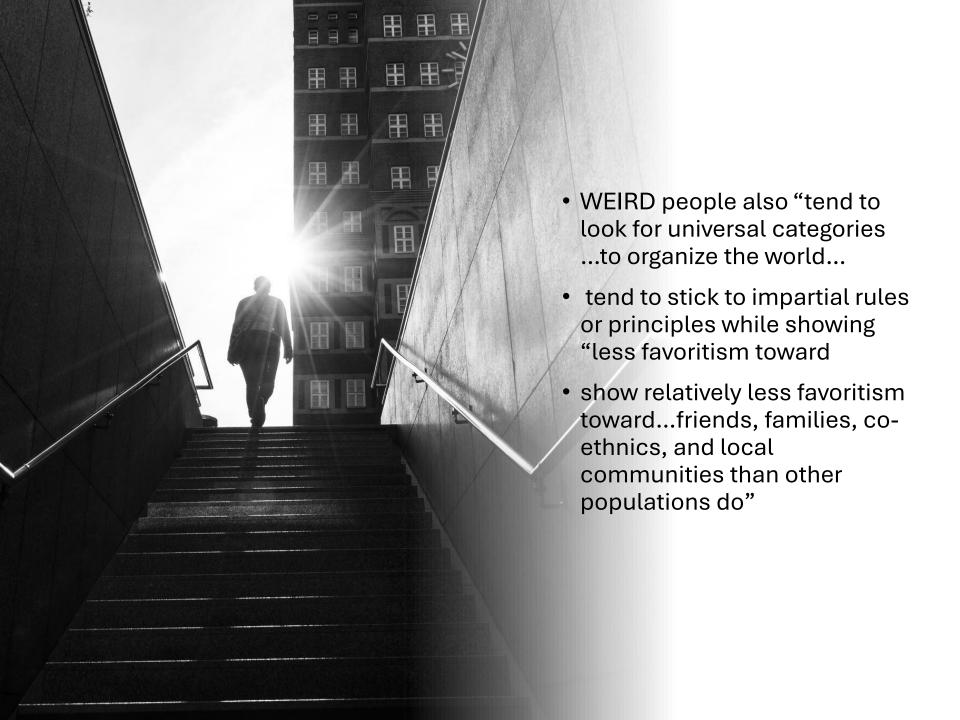
International Bioethics Conferencing

 At the 2022 World Congress of Bioethics, held in Basel, Switzerland, participation rates were 42% from high-income countries, 12% from middleincome countries, and 4% from low-income countries

Bioethics is WEIRD









Fox & Swazey, 1984, "Medical morality is not bioethics"

- In 1984, Fox & Swazey reported differences between America bioethics & Chinese medical morality
- Chinese medical morality is "rooted in a conception of the individual in relation to statuses and roles, enmeshed in the network of human relationships...
- Every individual "strives to meet responsibilities... ever more totally and perfectly inspired by ...exemplars, and in conformity with concrete rules"

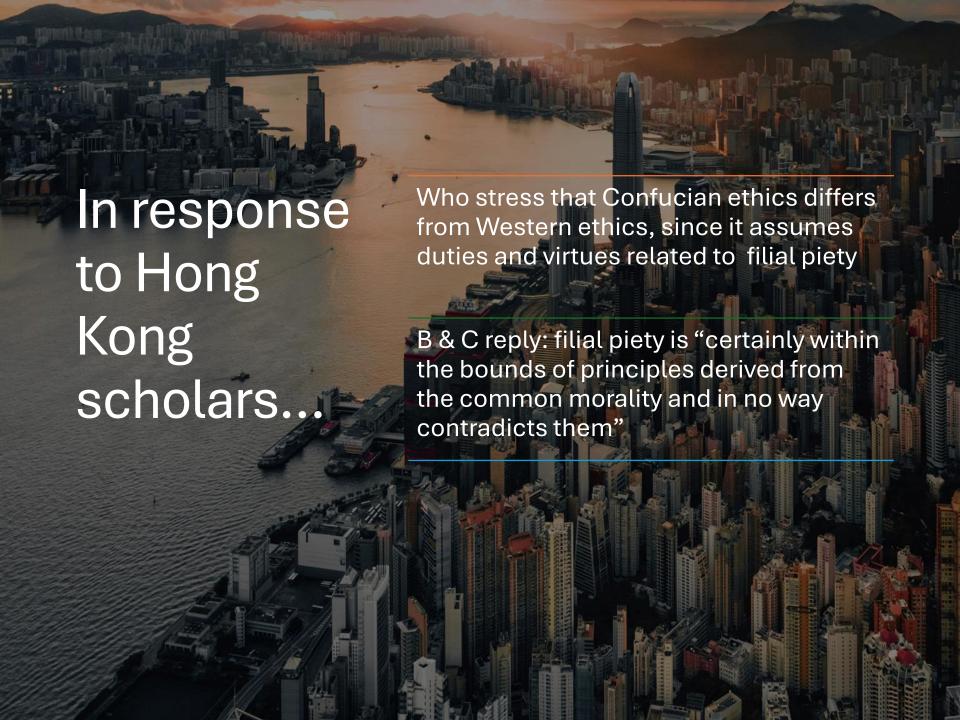
Devries & Pratt, 2023, "Medical morality is not bioethics"

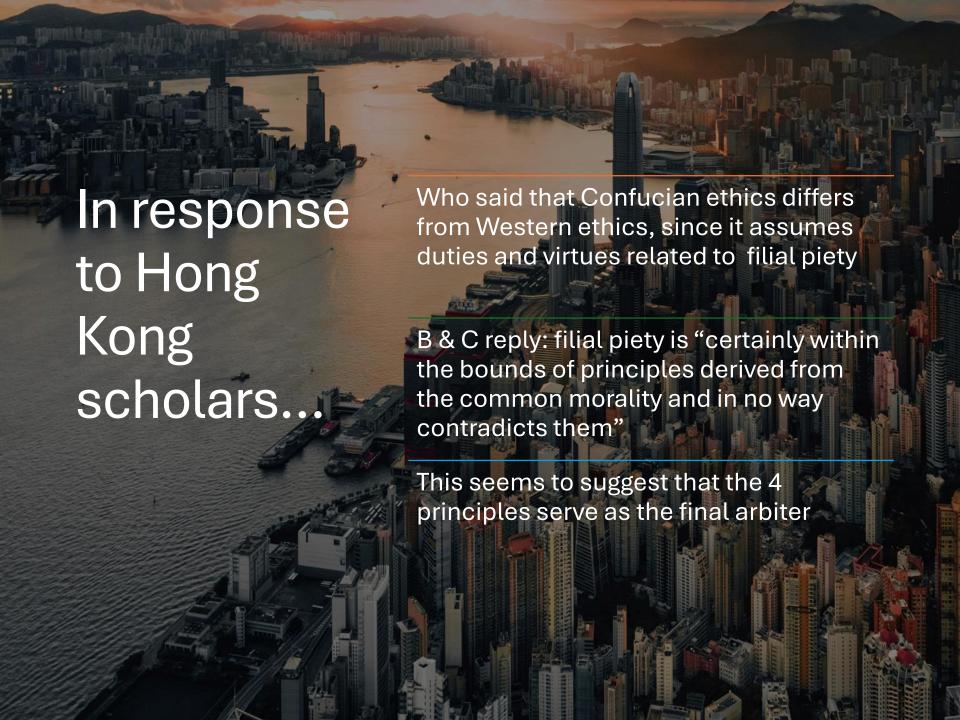
- Difference persist there is an "epistemic hegemony of Eurocentrism, which originated during the era of colonialization and continues today."
- Manifest in "presentation of the works of a few European philosophers as 'universal truths,"
- which leads to "denying the possibility that these philosophical accounts were themselves located in ... historical moments and lived experiences."



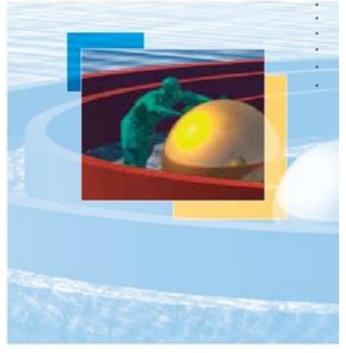
Beauchamp & Childress, 2022, "Common morality principles in biomedical ethics"

 The 4 principles are "universal norms shared by persons committed to morality, and describe them as "broad abstract and contentthin"









Universal Declaration

Universal Declaration on Human Rights and Bioethics

Aims "to provide a universal framework of principles and procedures" and affirms

- "The interests and welfare of the individual should have priority over the sole interest of science or society.
- In no case should a collective community agreement or the consent of a community leader or other authority substitute for an individual's informed consent."

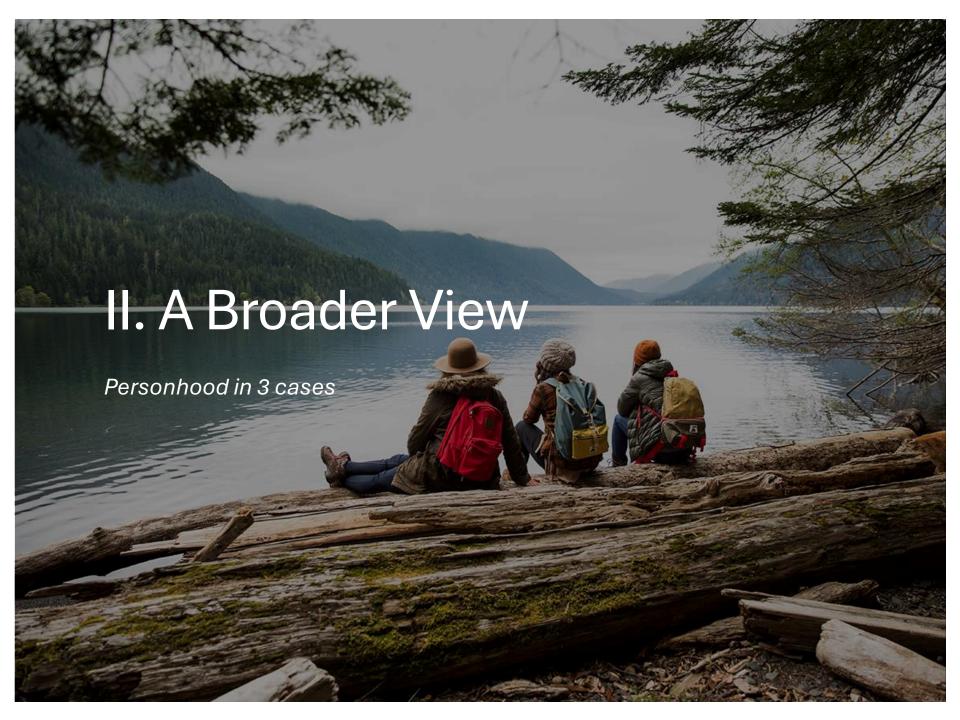


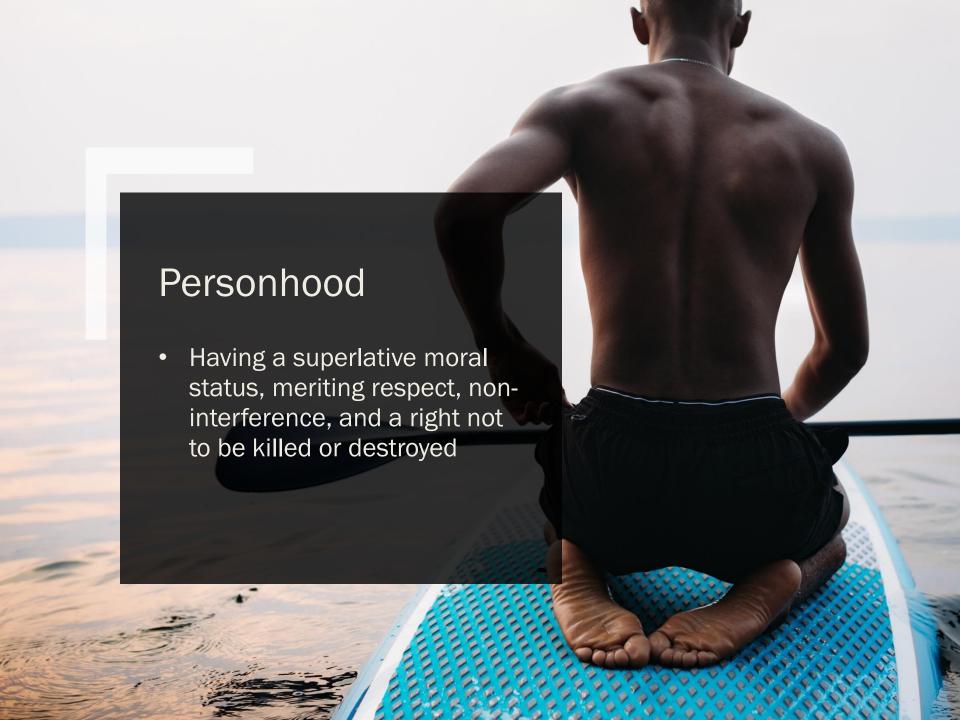
Rosemont, 1999, Rules, Rituals & Responsibility

- A "bedrock presupposition" of the Declaration is that human beings have rights, an idea rooted in Western thought
- Bioethics often draws from the culture of the West and regards it as the standard toward which all people should strive



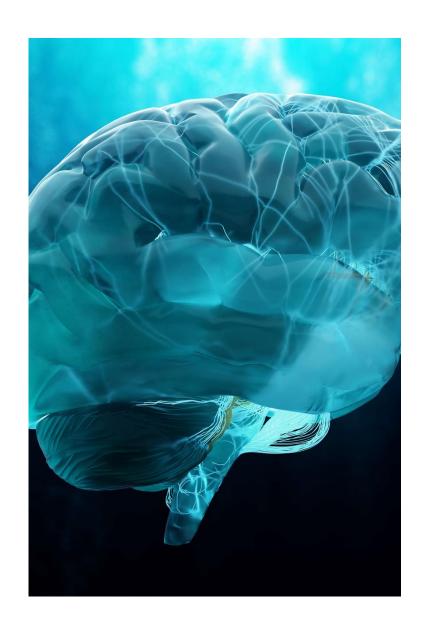
 A broader point these analysis bring to light is that social, cultural and historical contexts shape our moral vision





Leading Western Views

- Specify personhood vis-à-vis a set of sophisticated cognitive capacities
- Personhood is "neither a relation the individual stands in...nor a capacity whose exercise requires... participation of another ... The qualities that underpin personhood are intrinsic to individuals"
- Examples: Kantian and utilitarian ethics



Leading Eastern views

- "a person is ... always conceived of as a part of a network of relations...a person is always a 'person-inrelations.'" (Hui)
- In Confucian ethics, "Ren (loving kindness) is expressed as an activity that, when practiced authentically, establishes one as a person ..." (Bockover)
- "People must develop and actualize their potential...to... mark themselves [off] from other animals" (Yu & Fan)



Hui, 2004, Personhood and Bioethics, in Bioethics: Asian Perspectives (Kluwer); Bockover, 2012, Confucia Ritual... (Sophia); Yu & Fan, Confucian View of Personhood and Bioethics (J Bioethics Inquiry)

Personhood: Eastern & Western Views

Adapted from Jecker, Atuire, 2024, Personhood: An emergent view...

	Eastern	Western
Intrinsic or extrinsic?	Extrinsic	Intrinsic
Earned or unearned?	Earned	Unearned
Scalar or binary?	Scalar	Binary
Stable or changing?	Changing	Stable/mostly stable
Derivative or non-derivative?	Derivative/partially derivative	Non-derivative



Social Robots: Western views

- Robots lack sophisticated cognitive capacities required for personhood
- "There is nothing in principle that prevents a machine from having a moral status (from being considered morally important in its own right). But it would need to have an inner life that gave rise to a genuine interest in not being harmed." (Curtis & Savulescu)

Social Robots: East Asian views

- Perhaps, social robots are not persons, since they lack the ability to act as intentional agents with sincerity and good faith
- Or perhaps, social robots are persons within robot-human relationships in which people enact cardinal virtuous (Jecker & Fan)



International Guidelines: AI Governance

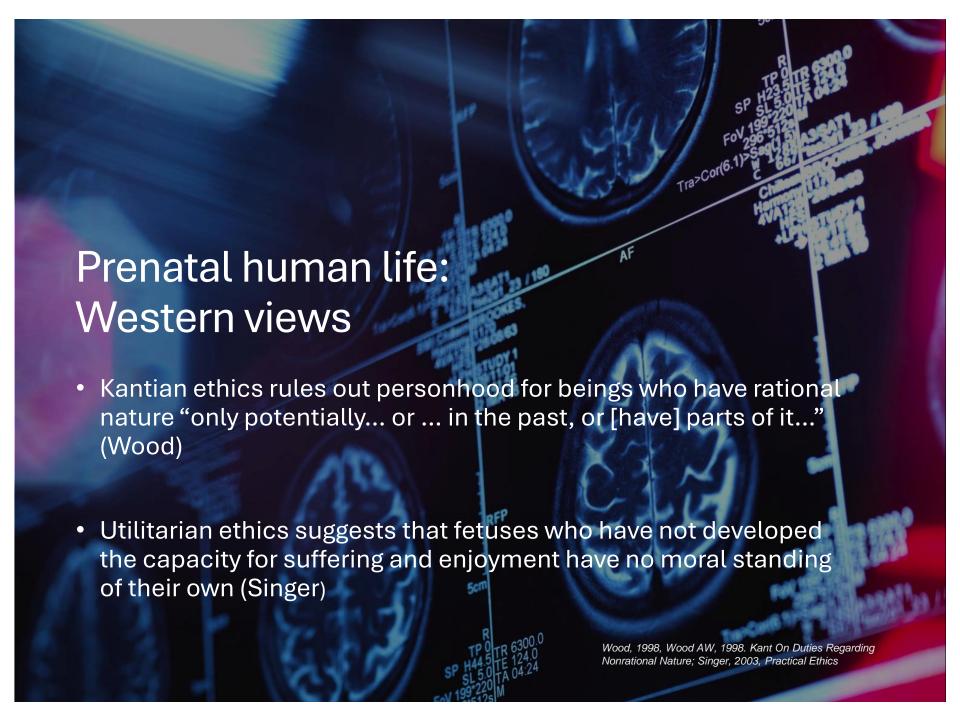
- WHO's Ethics and Governance of Artificial Intelligence (2021) for Health identifies protecting human autonomy as the first of six key ethical principles for the use of Al in health
- The WHO expresses concern that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which protects individual dignity, privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent, might be "dramatically redefined or undermined" by AI advances

INCLUDE: the relational context in which AI is deployed and the value of AI-human relationships

2. Prenatal life: East Asian views

- "Human life is not valuable in itself but rather acquires a value in the context of relationships." (Kwon)
- 4 of 5 relationships in Confucian ethics are family relationships; perhaps, the fetus's status as a future family member matters (Wong)
- "it is not enough to be conceived," one must form relationships and "become a participant in the rites" (Fan)





International guidance:
Abortion care

 WHO (2022) Abortion Care Guidelines the WHO discusses the ethics of abortion services solely in terms of individual rights, emphasizing, for example, that unsafe abortion practices around the globe jeopardize the pregnant person's rights to health, non-discrimination, and life

INCLUDE: the relational features of prenatal human life

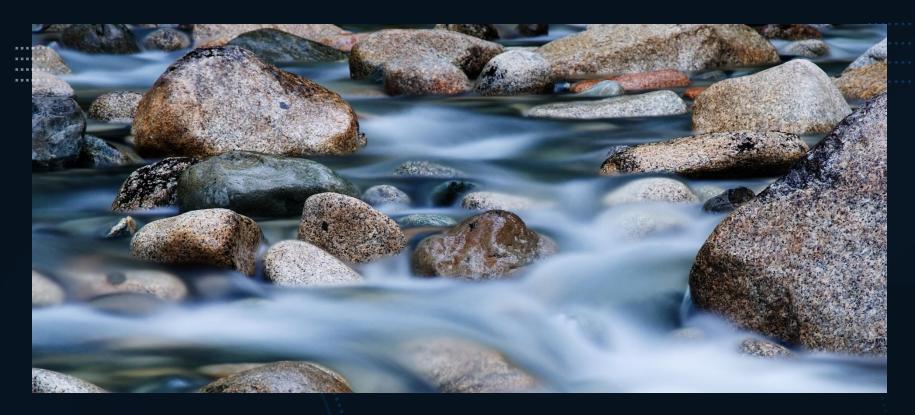






3. Nature: East Asian views

- "Neither individual humans nor other natural objects have a standing that can be appropriately appreciated in isolation" (Fan)
- "We love both human beings and birds and animals, but it is bearable for us to kill birds and animals to feed parents, to sacrifice for rituals, and to entertain guests." (Wang)



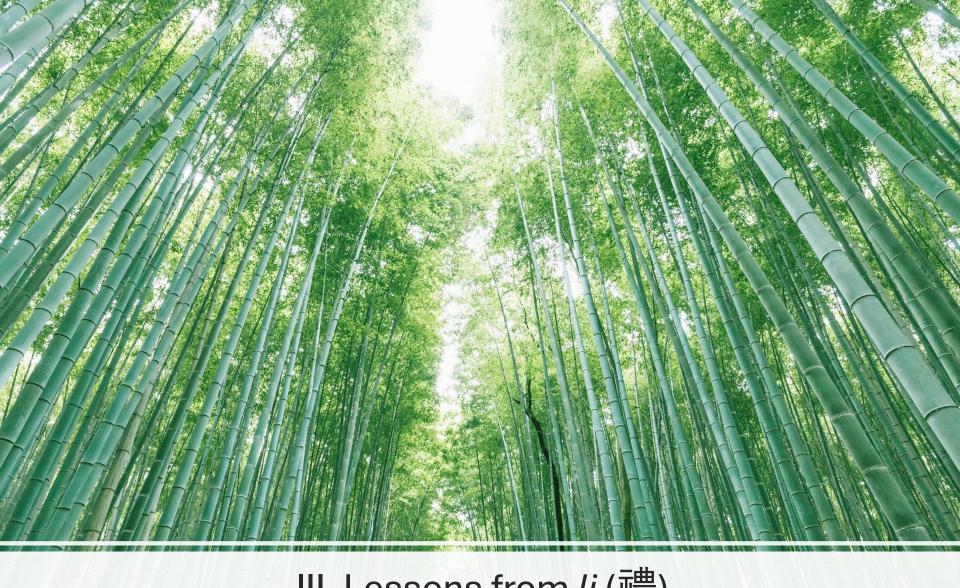
Nature: Western views

- Kantian ethics: nature lacks dignity and worth since it lacks rational capacity
- Utilitarian ethics: natural objects (waters and lands) lack moral standing because they lack the capacity for suffering or enjoyment

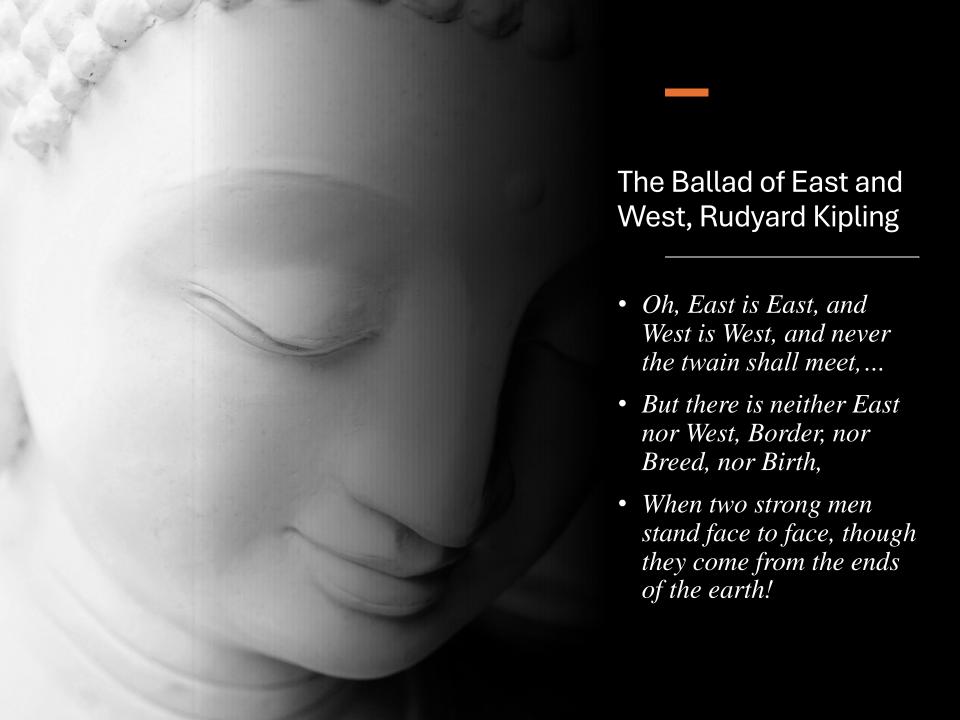
International guidance: Climate change

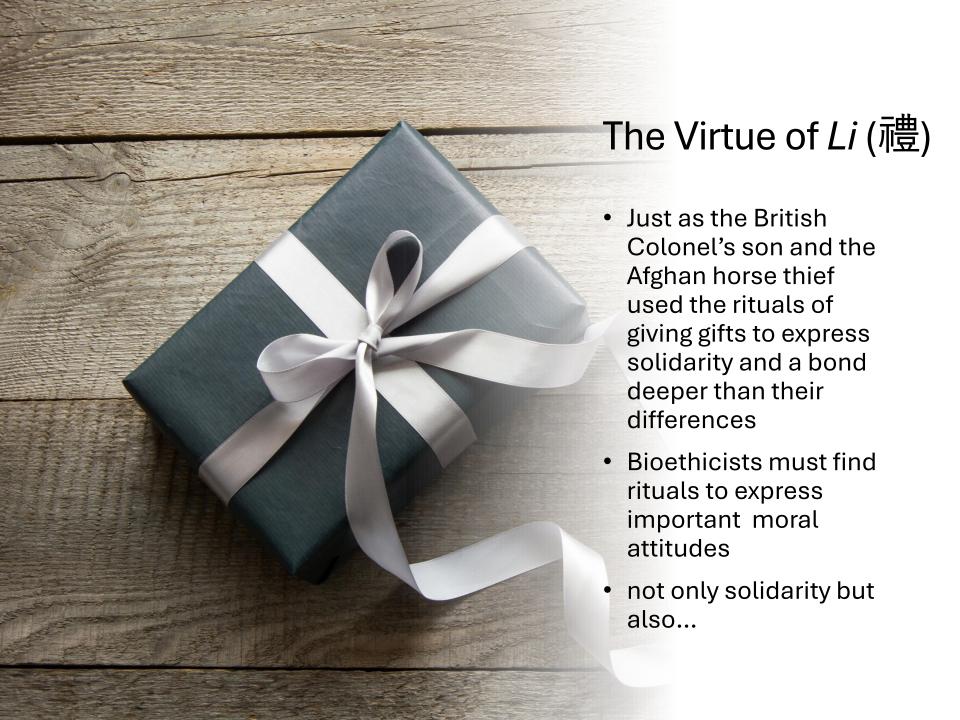
- The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (2023) urges staying within planetary boundaries required to ensure a safe operating space for humanity
- In support of respecting planetary boundaries, the Panel cites "nature's contributions to people" such as food, medicine, and materials that promote human wellbeing

INCLUDE: the planet's relational value to us



III. Lessons from li (禮)





Lessons from li (禮)

Moral attitudes	Ritual practices
Tolerance	Dialoguing with bioethicists who hold deeply different beliefs; not shouting down, interrupting, boycotting, dismissing, ridiculing, or otherwise deflating the testimony of others
Mutual respect	Being curious and open to learning; actively listening; being responsive in conversation
Epistemic justice	Including diverse bioethics voices in bioethics conferences, publishing, funding, and training programs
Cultural humility	Signaling openness to changing one's mind and hearing new evidence or arguments
Civility	Not dominating or overpowering the voices of those one disagrees with; showing politeness and amiability

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