



## Ecological Implications of Confucian Humanism

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As a spiritual humanism, Confucianism's project for human flourishing involves four dimensions: self, community, Earth, and Heaven. Character building, the primary purpose of Confucian moral education, begins with self-cultivation. But education is more than the mere acquisition of knowledge or the internationalization of skills. It is a holistic way of learning to be human. In Confucian terms, such learning is defined as "learning for the sake of the self," "the learning of the heart-mind and nature," or "learning to be a profound person."

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self," "the learning of the heart-mind and nature," or "learning to be a profound person." It is misleading, however, to assume that Confucian learning is a quest for individual happiness or inner spirituality. Rather, far from being "individualistic," Confucian learning is a communal act. The self is never an isolated individual but a center of relationships. As the center, the self is independent and autonomous. Such independence and autonomy are predicated on the dignity of the person as an internal value rather than as a socially constructed reality. At the same time, the self as a center of relationships is inevitably interconnected with an ever-expanding network of human-relatedness.

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Community is never separate from the self. To paraphrase William James, without the creativity of the centered self, community stagnates and without the sympathetic resonance of the community, true

selfhood fades away.<sup>37</sup> Community in Confucian humanism is variously understood as family, village, country, world, and cosmos. Self-realization as a communal act presupposes a personal commitment for harmonizing the family, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world. The full realization of personhood entails the real possibility of transcending selfishness, nepotism, parochialism, nationalism, and anthropocentrism. These underlying paradoxes are clues for understanding the subtleties of Confucian moral reasoning. An essential task of self-cultivation is to overcome selfishness. The maintenance of harmony in the family requires that we overcome nepotistic attachments that are pursued at the expense of being open to other relationships. Communal solidarity is based on our ability to recognize the meaningful existence of other communities. Thus, patriotism is at odds with chauvinistic nationalism. Indeed, further following the trajectory of this line of thinking, we must transcend anthropocentrism to bring the self-realization of humanity to fruition.<sup>38</sup> An obvious illustration of this style of moral reasoning in the Confucian classical text is found in the opening section of the Great Learning, declaring that self-cultivation, which is rooted in the inner experience of personal authenticity, is open to family, state, and all under Heaven.<sup>39</sup> This project of human flourishing definitely involves the human community as a whole. The interplay between the "inner self" and the "outer community" is essential to realize the true identity of personal authenticity and relationality. In other words, deep subjectivity is not only compatible with but also inseparable

<sup>37</sup> William James motto as prominently displayed in the lobby of William James Hall at Harvard University reads: "Without the impulse of the the individual community stagnates without the sympathy of the community Individual impulse fades away." I have yet to identify the quotation.

<sup>38</sup> For a fuller exploration of the interplay between individuality and sociality, see Tu Weiming, *Sociality, Individuality and anthropocosmic Vision in Confucian Humanism* in Tu Weiming, *The Gobar Significance of Concrete Humanity: Essays on the Confucian Discourse in cultural China* (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2010), pp. 325-341.

<sup>39</sup> Daxue (the Great Learning), see Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book of Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 87.

from broad sociality. Indeed, the assumptive reason for this is precisely because subjectivity and sociality are two constituent dimensions of human self-realization. This underscores the earlier reference to William James' assertion that individual creativity and communal sympathy are mutually dependent. Such a mode of thinking definitely rejects Richard Rorty's idiosyncratic insistence that the need for personal happiness and the demand for social services are not only in conflict but are also incompatible. Although Confucians recognize that there are always some tensions between self and society, they definitely reject the exclusive dichotomist claim that the attainment of genuine selfhood requires a conscious alienation from society.

Actually, the belief that deep subjectivity and broad sociality are coterminous is based on a much broader vision of human flourishing. Human beings are self-evidently social beings. However, if they are ontologically restricted in their social relations, they may be able to transcend selfishness, parochialism, nationalism, or racism, but they can never transcend anthropocentrism. The Confucian conception of the human is not merely anthropological but it is also anthropocosmic. In addition to self and society, a third dimension, namely "nature," must be included as well. Human beings are both naturalistic and socialistic. Implicit in the declaration of the Great Learning that self-cultivation involves regulation of the family, governance of the state, and peace of the world is the message of cosmic harmony.

This idea is fully enunciated in another of the other Four Books, *Centrality and Commonality* (the Doctrine of the Mean).<sup>40</sup> Strictly speaking, the Way of the Great Learning is anthropocosmic rather than anthropological, not to mention anthropocentric. As clearly stated, the purpose of this kind of learning is "to illuminate the illuminating virtue." The illuminating virtue is the virtue that emanates

<sup>40</sup> Zhongyong (Doctrine of the Mean). See Tu Wei-ming, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness* (State University of New York Press, 1989).

from the Heavenly-endowed human nature. To use an expedient Christian analogy, the divinity in the human as endowed by God entails self-illumination. Yet, contrary to Christian theology, in Confucian philosophy this self-illuminating virtue, although endowed by God, is distinctively human to the extent that its further illumination to enable the inner divinity to be a sustained presence in the lifeworld cannot depend on God's continuous grace. It must be maintained by persistent human effort.

Surely, it is painfully difficult to regulate the family, govern the state, and bring perpetual peace to the world. The harsh reality of dysfunctional families, failed states, and world disorder makes it abundantly clear that the state of the human is in crisis. Yet, Confucians insist that the underlying reason for this deplorable situation is the human incapacity to rise above a myopic anthropocentric point of view. Self-cultivation, the root of individual and communal efforts to enable a good life both for us and for future generations, is a dynamic process rather than a static structure. It is a process of deepening subjectivity. Because selfhood and sociality are coterminous, deepening subjectivity entails broadening sociality. The deepened subjectivity and the broadened sociality depend on a transcendent vision that sees them as integral parts of ultimate human flourishing. Subjectivity, no matter how deep, and sociality, no matter how broad, if they are confined to the limited and limiting lifeworld or to the secular world, are insufficient to accommodate the full-realization of humanity. The Confucian idea of the "unity of Heaven and Man" (referring to ren in a gender-neutral sense of the human) demonstrates precisely that the highest ideal of learning to be human must go beyond the anthropological world and embrace the universe as a whole.

The line of reasoning in the aforementioned Centrality and Commonality is straightforward: human beings can take part in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, thereby

forming a trinity with Heaven and Earth.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, human beings are observers, appreciators, participants, and co-creators of the cosmic process. Strictly speaking, they are neither creatures nor the outcomes of evolution. To be sure, human nature is endowed by Heaven and human beings have evolved genetically from vital energy (qi), life (sheng), and consciousness (zhi)<sup>42</sup>, but the transformation of human nature cannot be attributed to Heaven's will and the uniqueness of being human cannot be reduced to the characteristics of animals, plants, and rocks. Indeed, the advent of the human is significant, both anthropologically and cosmologically. Heaven so conceived is omnipresent and omniscient, but it definitely is not omnipotent. Heaven is creativity in itself. Human beings should emulate Heaven to enhance their own creativity.

Implicit in human creativity is the human potential for destructiveness. For Confucians, human beings are thoroughly responsible for both their creativity and their destructiveness. Hence, human beings must not blame Heaven for dysfunctional families, failed states, or world disorder. Human beings cannot find an excuse in their Heavenly-endowed nature for man-made disasters. As Confucians make explicit, human beings can survive virtually all natural calamities. The ability of the Sage-King Yu to transform the Flood into an elaborate transportation and irrigation system amply demonstrates that effective leadership enriched by scientific knowledge, rationality, compassion, and the spirit of sacrifice can mobilize human beings to construct awe-inspiring economic institutions, political structures, social organizations, and semiotic systems. At the same time, human beings are also capable of destroying not only themselves, but also the animal world, life forms, and the earth. Understandably, the Confucians warned

41. Ibid., p. 77.

42. This evolutionary insight is from the great Confucian thinker Xunzi. It is predicated on the assumption that the most basic qi "stuff" that constitutes the universe is neither matter or spirit but the vital energy which is by definition both materialistic and spiritual. The idea of zhi, rendered here as consciousness, also conveys sensations, sentiments and feelings.

that human beings can survive all calamities except those that are manmade.

The time is ripe for us to rethink the human in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We are in need of a comprehensive spiritual humanism that is capable of integrating the four inseparable dimensions of human flourishing: self, community, Earth, and Heaven. As Ewert Cousins wisely remarked, the Earth is our prophet. Those who are musical to the sound of the Earth will guide us on to a new path of survival. Furthermore, there is a great deal that humans seasoned in a modernistic mentality can learn from indigenous traditions.

Actually, all spiritual traditions must undergo a profound transformation to respond to the new human condition occasioned by the contemporary ecological crisis. No religious leader can afford to focus on the sacredness of the Kingdom of God at the expense of the secular world or the loftiness of the Pure Land at the expense of This Shore, the “red dust.” The cultivation of a spirit of caring for the earth is widely recognized as a universal principle of global citizenship. Therefore, it is imperative that all citizens of the world take part in an ongoing dialogue among civilizations to facilitate this vision.