

Session 10

Environmental Ethics

Session outline

- Environmental philosophy
- Confucian Eco-principles
- Heaven-based Ethical Norms
- Eco-norms as Human Virtue
- Eco-human Unity
- Question for Discussion: how did Confucians derive respecting nature from their reverence for Heaven?
- Reading:
 - Wei-ming Tu: 'The Ecological Turn in New Confucian Humanism: Implications for China and the World', *Daedalus* (Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences), 130: 4, 2001, 243-264. [B]
 - Li Tianchen: 'Confucian ethics and the Environment' [B]

I. Modern Environmental Philosophy

- It contains a variety of philosophical, ethical and religious claims and arguments essentially concerning the relationship between humans and eco-environment.
- Two fundamental principles dominate the discussion of 20th century environmental issues, one anthropocentric and the other eco-centric.
- **Anthropocentrism** represents the mainstream of traditional as well as modern philosophy in the West, claiming that all environmental problems must be understood and solved in light of humanity's own interests and for human benefits
- **Eco-centrism**, represented by such theories as earth ethics and animal rights, protests against the anthropocentric paradigm, insisting that eco-system has its own rights and value, and therefore commands moral respect

Criticism of anthropocentrism

- Contemporary environmental ethics starts with criticism of anthropocentrism.
- Anthropocentrism is held responsible for the most profound environmental problems:
 - It sees and values everything from the human point of view
 - It leads humans to look after our own interests in any circumstance, frequently at the expenses of environment
 - It allows the care and concern for environment only if and when⁴ this does good to humans.

Eco-centric ethics

- Developed along with this criticism, an eco-philosophy called ‘deep ecology’ emerges to displace the human being from the centre of the universe.
 - The whole natural configurations of animals and plants, namely ecosystems, have their intrinsic values independent of human existence and employment.
- The moral respect that ‘deep ecology’ and other ‘new’ philosophies require for Nature or natural environment lays the foundation for an eco-ethics known as eco-centric ethics
- Arne Naess *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle* (Cambridge, 1989, CUP). Bill Devall, George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City, 1985, Peregrine Smith Books).

Seeking a new orientation

- Seemingly diametrically opposing to each other, these two principles are in constant interaction, driving environmental awareness and eco-friendly policies in western countries.
- The artificial opposition between anthropocentrism and eco-centrism is a typical reflection of the dualistic thinking and is no more than a revision of the traditional object-subject dualism.
- This opposition and dualism is not necessarily the sole content of an environmental ethics.
- Alternatives have existed that may shed light on our rethinking of human-nature relationship
- Confucianism is one of them for reconstructing an environmental philosophy in which anthropocentric understandings and eco-centric theories are juxtaposed to expatiate on the interrelatedness and interdependence of humanity and nature.

2. Confucian Eco-principle

- Confucian anthropo-cosmic interrelationship gives humans prime responsibilities.
- A holistic reconstruction of the organic universe is made both morally (through a moral principle called *li*) and materially (in terms of material force *qi*).
- Underlying this reconstruction is an understanding that humans and their natural circumstances or Nature (represented by 'tian', translated as 'Heaven') must be harmonised rather than opposed to each other.
- Hence, 'the unity or harmonised oneness of humanity and Heaven', *tian ren he yi*.

Human-centred?

- Is this fundamental Confucian commitment anthropocentric?
- Two answers to this question.
- One suggests that the Confucian unity of Heaven and humans is essentially human-centred, because
 - Confucians place the greatest emphasis on human matters and human responsibility,
 - the Confucian ideal is to establish the great unity (*da tong*) in human society.
- Confucian masters primarily considered human own interests in their metaphysical and cosmological understandings, but at the same time they also contributed human success to the following of the Way (cosmic norm).
- This in one sense can be said nature-centric.

Anthropo-nature unity

- The second view regarding the Confucian principle: neither anthropocentric nor nature-centric, but anthropo-natural unity.
- Confucians seek the meaning and value in the unity and harmony of humans and nature, rather than in their dichotomy or opposition.
- Interpreted as such the Confucian understanding of anthropo-cosmic relationship stimulates so much imagination among modern environmental activists and thinkers who believe that it outlines a new philosophy and new action-guideline for dealing with environmental problems.

Heaven and Humans

- This unity is based on the understanding that humans and Heaven are different entities and yet closely related and inseparable.
- The emphasis on Heaven establishes a metaphysical and religious framework for Confucian eco-ethical norms, in which ecological prohibitions and policies are built into the political structure
- The emphasis on humans provides Confucians with a practical value and meaning for protecting environment.
- The former is the core or foundation, while the latter is the application or superstructure.

3. Heaven-based ethical norms

- Different interpretations of *tian* lead to different understandings of heaven-human relationship, which in turn results in different positions of humans in this relationship.
- In the metaphysical and religious realm, tian or Heaven is always at the centre of its relation with humans.
- Either as the supreme agent (or Lord) who generates human beings as well as ten thousand things, or as the ultimate power that guarantees the universe runs its own course, tian, spiritual Heaven or natural entity, dominates, and its/his disciplines humans must follow.
- The value and meaning humans may gain from their relationship with Heaven come from obedience of the heavenly law or mandate.
- In this 'uneven' relationship ethical norms derived from Heaven have significant implications for Confucian understanding of eco-philosophical issues.

Book of Changes

- ‘When in early antiquity Pao His ruled the world, he looked upward and contemplated the images in the heavens; he looked downward and contemplated the markings of birds and beasts and the adaptations to the region.
- He proceeded directly from himself and indirectly from objects. Thus he invented the eight trigrams in order to enter into connection with the virtues of the light of the gods and to regulate the conditions of all beings’
- (I Ching or Book of Changes, tr. by Richard Wilhelm, 328-9)
- 《周易·系辞下》有言：“古者包牺氏之王天下也，仰则观象于天，俯则观法于地，观鸟兽之文与地之宜，近取诸身，远取诸物，于是始作八卦，以通神明之德，以类万物之情。”

Taking Heaven as our origin

- Firstly *tian* is taken as the cause or reason of the world and human beings. It is believed that *tian* produces all the people and establishes laws for them; *tian* initiates and sustains the generation and regeneration of the universe.
- Based on these understandings it is suggested that as products of Heaven all existences and beings have a sacred nature, and that humans must treat them with respect and reverence, and have no right to abuse them.
- Therefore the Confucian prohibitions with regard to environment are not simply political policies and for human benefits. Rather they arise from a belief in the creative power of *tian* and its spiritual values.

Following Natural Law

- Secondly, tian is believed to produce ten thousand things by its own laws and to endow changes with a rhythm.
- These laws are manifested in the succession of four seasons and in the process of cosmic evolution, which Confucius described as: 'There are the four seasons going round and there are the hundred things coming into being'. Therefore humans must adjust their behaviour according to the same regularity. As far as environment is concerned, **'in conformation with seasons'** is a fundamental Confucian norm against which an action is judged.
- This norm is articulated throughout Confucian classics and leads to a system of regulations in the *Book of Rites*.
- These regulations should be seen as a response to the supreme authority of tian, and as part of the interaction between spiritual and ultimate Heaven and humans.

Loving things

- ▣ Thirdly *tian* is the source of moral power or virtue (*de*), which humans must extend to other people as well as to natural beings and things.
- ▣ Confucius claimed that *Tian* had begot 'virtue' in him.
- ▣ The core of the moral power or virtue is *ren* or benevolence. We humans should treat other people in 'benevolence'. In the same token we should also treat animals and plants with benevolence. This is what Mencius called for 'being benevolent towards the people and taking care of (*ai*, love) all things'.
- ▣ Loving things is an eco-norm, but this norm is not a political design. It is a logic extension of being benevolent to the people.
- ▣ If 'being benevolent to the people' is what *tian* has bestowed to everyone and is humans' innate nature, then 'loving things' is also what *tian* has imparted to us and is our innate nature.
- ▣ In this sense all Confucian eco-norms are extended from Heaven.

Standing in awe of Heaven

- Fourthly, as the supreme authority Tian commands respect both in religious and in ethical terms.
- Confucians in fact take the respect of the laws or mandate of Heaven as one of the criteria by which a gentleman is differentiated from a xiaoren (小人) or morally underdeveloped person
- A gentleman stand in awe of three things: the mandate of Heaven, the great men and the words of the sage' (17:8)
- The people who stand in awe of the heavenly mandate would conscientiously respect what natural laws command and would be in harmony with all creatures and things, while those who do not would mostly likely behave against natural laws and therefore damage environment.

Serving Heaven

- Fifthly, Heaven is the ultimate end of human cultivation and services. Only after humans have understood their own nature thoroughly can they understand Heaven and serve Heaven. (Mencius, 7A:1)
- Aimed at being part of Heaven, humans are required to cultivate their own nature, which underlies all the prime motives of Confucian action plans.
- Humans are required to extend their own nature, by which they can extend the nature of other beings and things, which in turn enables them to be able to participate the transformation and generation of Heaven and Earth, and therefore to be able to stand with them in a trinity (the *Doctrine of the Mean*).

4. Eco-norms as human virtue

- Heaven-based principles lay foundation for Confucian eco-perspective, enabling Confucians to think of human-nature relationship in metaphysical terms.
- Fundamentally ethical by nature, however, Confucian philosophy comes to speculate on the concrete matters that arise from the human interaction with the variety of natural phenomena.
- This brings us to the ethical and political level on which Confucian eco-perspective is constructed.

Humanistic Ethics

- Confucianism is humanistic, concerning the solution of human problems and searches for the ideal way of life.
- Tu Wei-ming draws a diagram in which the self is at the centre, and is then extended to family, community, society, state and the universe.
- This applies both to individual human beings and to the human race as a whole. As individuals, each human is born with a value and a responsibility, for which he/she must fulfil, while as the human race, humanity has a value higher than that of an animal or thing.
- When hearing that the stable was burnt down, Confucius first cared about the people who worked at the stable, rather than about horses .
- This humanistic ethics is presented in all Confucian classics, and leads to a conviction that humans are the spirit of ten thousand things (The Book of History); and that benevolence is the summit of the virtues of Heaven and earth, the combination of yin and yang, and the finest force of the Five Elements (The Book of Rites)。

The Confucian World centred on the self



Protecting environment to benefit humans

- On the top of the creature ladder, humans are by logic endowed with the ability and capability to influence the process of social as well as natural evolution.
- This influence is both to respect the natural law and movements, and to protect it.
- Respecting and protecting are primarily for the benefits of humans, and are therefore utilitarian in function.

Mencius' Viewpoints

- For Mencius all measures for protecting environment are for the interests of human community and society
- The eco-concern is in essence a concern of human own benefits:
 - 'As you do not interfere with the busy seasons in the fields, then there will be more grain than the people can eat; if you do not allow nets with too fine a mesh to be used in large ponds, then there will be more fish and turtles than they can eat; if hatchets and axes are permitted in the forests on the hills only in the proper seasons, then there will be more timber than they can use' (IA:3)

Ethical values of Eco-norms

- Eco-norms:
 - to protect rather than disrupt the natural growth of natural things;
 - not to end the lives of plants prematurely
 - not to interrupt the maturation of aquatic animals
- They are ethical because they follow the natural laws: By plowing in spring, weeding in summer, harvesting in autumn and storing up in winter, the four activities are not out of the proper seasons(Xunzi, 9).
- Social and political activities should also follow the same law: spring is the season of growth while autumn is the season of killing, so no execution or killing should be made in spring (Dong Zhongshu)
- Following natural law is ethical because they bring benefits to human life: 'the production of the five grains is not interrupted, and the people have more than enough to eat' (Xunzi)

Danger of Humanism

- Humanism can lead to an anthropocentric world view.
- Confucian eco-protective measures for human benefits suggests that **Confucians would support environmental protection only if it is useful and good for the people**, but they could potentially be dangerous.
- They could support the abuse or exploitation of natural resources if this was required to feed the people and to provide them with sufficient, for example, firewood and timber.
- This might be one of the reasons why in Chinese history there were no consistent policies with regard to environment protection, and natural resources were subject to overexploitation.

Moral Humanism

- Confucian humanism is profoundly moralised.
- Western anthropocentric philosophy: humans become mighty and superior because of reason (early Greek philosophy), soul (Christian philosophy) or knowledge (modern empiricist philosophy),
- Confucians believe that humans are superior to natural beings such as animals only because of their moral senses.
- Mencius: there is little by which humans are differentiated from beasts, which those of virtues retain while the morally underdeveloped have lost.
- How can each of us preserve this distinguishing feature of humans as humans? This question leads them to place a great emphasis on self-cultivation.

5. Eco-Human Unity

- Moral cultivation not only nurtures human virtues towards other humans, but also towards all beings and things.
- Starting from humans at the centre, Confucians extend their moral understanding to natural existences and phenomena, and construct an interactive human-nature relationship.
- Applying this understanding to human-nature relationship, Confucians tend to make use of empathy to speculate the interrelatedness of humans and natural existences.
- **Psychological:** Animals suffering can lead to sympathy in a gentleman: 'once having seen them alive, he cannot bear to see them die; once having heard their cry, he cannot bear to eat their fresh' (IA:7)
- **Religious:** Animalised plants deserve human respect, because they are believed to have a spirit or soul.
- **Mountains and rivers** are believed to be able to feel painful or happy, and this is taken as the reason for protecting them from being damaged.

Humans and all things

- Wang Yangming (1472-1529) further developed this into a Confucian perspective on the unity of humans and all things in the universe.
- He took the benevolent heart as the starting point and finally reached the one body of humankind and the world.
- When one saw a child about to fall into a well, one could not help feeling alarm and compassion. This fact shows that one's benevolence forms one body with the child.
- When one observed the pitiful cries and frightened appearance of birds and animals about to be slaughtered, one could not help feeling an 'inability to bear' their suffering. This fact shows that his benevolence leads him to unify with the birds and animals.
- When seeing plants broken and destroyed, one could not help feeling pitiful. This fact shows that his benevolence leads him to be in a unity with the plants too.
- When seeing tiles and stones shattered and crushed, one could not help feeling regret. This fact showed that his benevolence formed one body with tiles and stones (Wing-tsit Chan (ed.), 1963, pp.659-660).

Moralised Eco-Consciousness

- Confucian norms against eco-damaging behaviour are essentially personalised and moralised.
- The bad behaviour that has caused damage to environment is described as ‘not benevolent’ (*bu ren*);
- the action that has led to the overexploitation of natural resources not according to their seasons is called ‘*bu yi*’ (not righteous),
- the killing of animals and cutting off trees randomly is condemned as ‘*fei xiao*’ (not filial piety, *The Book of Rites*).

Holistic View of the World

- These moral terms produced a powerful effect on prohibiting the abuse of eco-system and on environment protection. They also added an extra weight to human responsibility towards environment.
- In this moralised consciousness, Confucianism finally developed a holistic vision of the world:
 - 'Heaven is my father, Earth is my mother, all humans are my brothers and all things are my companions.'
 - 'sincerity and enlightenment do not lie in differentiation between humans and Heaven, but in their harmony and unity'. (Fung Yu-lan: *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 2, Columbia University Press, 1953, p.493)