

The Possibility of a Global Environmental Ethics: A Confucian Proposal¹

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Introduction

The fast development of communication technology, both the real and the virtual connections that we built around our lives, indicates that we are all living in a closely knitted global village. Anything happening in one corner of the world could reach anyone who wants to know and, no matter how insignificant it seems to world politics, its butterfly effect may loom large when it spreads through the internet. The development of genomic study reveals another aspect of our closeness between each other. In fact genetic studies tell us more than that as *Homo sapiens* we are genetically one whole species, but we are also very closely related with all other species on Earth. Our species identity and consequently our individual identity could not be understood without the background of our Earth and the biological circle on Earth. As a member of the human family, we are genetically, biologically and socially in one family all along. Diversity is only an outgrowth of our underlying identity.

Furthermore, the effect of our interactions and influences is no better exhibited by the experience we face today in our environmental crises. The recent climate warming is a threatening case. The outcome is a cumulating effect of more than two hundred years and over a very large stretch of land and countries. The disaster is felt by every nation and in fact upon everyone on Earth sooner or later. Such global disasters could not be solved by any individual country alone. We have no choice but to orchestrate our efforts and need to take up the point of view of a global citizen to deal and hope to save our common future. The old individualistic conception of human life and affairs, whether of the individual or individual nation, is not only incapable to deal with such problems, but is also a false conception of our reality

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since we are one whole ecological complex on Earth.

We have had a hot debate in the eighties of the twentieth century about the place and standing of human interest in environmental ethics. The West is dominated by liberal individualism as a whole, but we soon understand that environmental problems could not be solved by this model. For such a model would not post any responsibility for us to take care of the benefit of future people, nor the interest of members of other species.² However, since then, it has been successfully argued and I believe firmly established by environmental ethicists that anthropocentrism is wrong and we have to take a holistic view in our environmental issues. The fairly success of the Land ethic signifies at least that people concerning the environmental problems have more or less adopted a holistic world view. However, it seems that the most difficult task is to get people of different societies, different nations and cultures to work together. It seems that we still have to work out a global consensus across different regions and cultures to make good our common goal. In this paper, I try to propose a Confucian way of looking at our present day environmental problems and see how it could provide some new inkling to work on

1. Some Basic Facts of Reason: Global Citizenship and Global Conditions

We have to accept that the environmental problems that we face today are inimical to our survival and to many of the species on Earth. To name a few, the destruction of rainforest, the shortage of fossil fuels, the exceptionally large human population exceeding the carrying power of the Earth and so on are grave issues of survival that we have to face today. We have to recognize that without proper response to these problems the result would be disastrous and human being would be one of the species that suffers the most. Furthermore, such global disasters could not be solved by individual nation or groups of people as pollution finds no border and must be solved by global cooperation without taking advantage of each other. Human beings have to accept that we are all in a family, that is, we are global citizens and each has to play out his or her duty to make good the whole environment.

This global citizenship must be extended to all living things. We are not only genetically closely knitted with all other species, we are also sharing a holistic

² Cf. Tom Regan edited *Earthbound: New Introductory Essays in Environmental Ethics* (New York: Random House, 1984), pp.3-37.

ecological pyramid and very much inter-dependent. Our interest as well as our identity is bound up with all other species. There is mutual affinity between living things. We have certain kind of feeling of affinity with other species and often we are deeply touched by the sufferings of non-human animals. This feeling of empathy elicits human beings out of their self-centered way of thinking and urges them to judge with a trans-species point of view. Such trans-species commitment to the welfare of all does help to raise the moral status of human being without inappropriate species discriminations. As the most intelligible and morally sensitive species on Earth, we are the self-conscious part of mother Earth and have to take responsibility for our own actions as well as the wellbeing of other species or the whole ecological complex on Earth. We are naturally moral agents. Though we may value our species most, we have to accept that other species have values independent of our judgment. Now, any species discrimination is anthropocentrism without reason, and as a rational being, we could not accept such actions ourselves. Hence, we have to renounce the deep underlying unconscious belief that we may sacrifice non-human lives for our own good. We have to take other species as equally worth our considerations. It is no longer reasonable to take our own interest as paramount and could not treat other species as merely instruments for our own benefits.

As a moral agent we have a unique role to play in this family of life. We are in a sense ranked as one of the highest beings of the ecological pyramid; hence, we have to take up much more responsibility towards the whole. It is only through a species unselfishness way of treating others that we may justifiably win the respect of other species without being charged as anthropocentrism or specieism³. We could not relegate our duty lightly when we could act either by refraining from certain actions or by promoting certain effort to the prevention of the extinguishing of other species. We bear the responsibility if any harm to these species including their being extinguished is due to human improper actions. As a species with moral capability, we could not but have to judge morally not only in human affairs but in environmental issues. We are in a sense bounded by a natural moral community with other species. There are some minimal moral rules in our dealings with ourselves and with other species.

The basic element of this re-conception is the recognition that other non-human species share our identity and our common interest. We have to cross not only the national border but also the species border to let other species form with us a kingdom

³ Cf. Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Random House, 1975).

of common interest. They are forming part of our kingdom of ends. They are in fact forming a holistic unity with us though loosely and sometimes with conflicts. Not only that our interest is bound up with theirs, theirs is also a major factor in our estimation of what we should act to the remedy of our present environmental crises. We are so to say, not only a steward of their existence, we are also the nurturer of all living things. For example, we show our deep concern with the interest of other species by conservation and by restoration of the environment and increasing the number of those endangered species. We assume the duty to maintain the healthy growth and subsistence not only our own species but also other species and sometimes need to act further to promote their goods with certain sacrifice of our own interests.

Last but not the least is the recognition that we have limited living resources and each species in the ecological pyramid has certain natural limitation that no one could be exempted. We have learnt by the alarming results of environmental deteriorations throughout the twentieth century to respect the natural order and natural development of the biosphere and that we should not disrupt the natural process unless we have good reasons to do so. The evolutionary process is a summary of the natural limit of species development on Earth. For instance, we have to rely on each other in the food chain of the pyramid. We have to be alerted that some of our ways of living or standards of living are not sustainable and need be changed for good. We have to cooperate as global citizens. To make our actions effective, we need to refrain from both asking too much or too less for our own and for others in our daily lives. We could not ask everyone, say, to refrain from eating meats. Nor could we accept letting people exploit the environment as much as it is within their possession. We have to be holistic in general and let individualistic preference in particular cases be coexisting as far as possible without toppling the whole ecological pyramid.

2. A Confucian Conception of Holistic Perspective: The Relation of Man and Nature

The three most important philosophies of Chinese tradition, namely the Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism are without exception holistic and taking other non-human lives as having independent values by their own. Confucius once said,

Heaven does not speak. The four seasons go and myriad things flourish. Heaven

does not speak indeed. (*Analects* 17:19)⁴

Heaven or *tao* does not speak out but shows in the natural process the growing and flourishing of lives. This means that *tao* (Heaven) endorses everything with value, not just for human beings. Later in the *Doctrine of Means* it is said that the *tao* of man is to realize the *tao* of heaven and it means to sustain the growing and flourishing of all things (*Doctrine of Means*⁵, chapter 22). The famous and representative figure of Song-Ming NeoConfucians, Cheng Ming-tao said explicitly that a man of *ren*, or a moral person, is empathetically united with everything under heaven and earth⁶. Confucianism regards human being as one with all living things under heaven or throughout the whole universe. We are both ontologically united with all species and practically one by all means. In the evolutionary process, it is indeed thanks to the preceding species that *Homo sapiens* could emerge as a specific kind of being. However, for Confucianism, human being plays a unique role in this ladder of existence because man is the only moral agent on Earth. This means that according to Confucianism we have to take up our moral responsibility towards the wellbeing of other species. The *Doctrine of Means* gives a clear picture of the relation and duty of man towards nature as follows:

Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth. (*Doctrine of Means*, Chapter.22)

To act sincerely is to act authentically in accordance with our natural endowment of intelligence and moral capacity, that is, to act unselfishly as a moral agent. To fully

⁴ This and later translations of Chinese classics are basically mine with reference to Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

⁵ It is one of the so-called Confucian classic “Four books” and is sometimes translated as *Chung Yung*. There is a full translation in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Some of the exploration of the meaning of these and other sayings please referred to Wei-ming Tu, *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Chung Yung* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1976).

⁶ It appears in one of the famous letter “On Understanding the Nature of *Jen*” wrote by Cheng Ming-tao, which is translated in full in *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, pp.523-4.

develop our nature means to act according to *tao*, that is, to promote the wellbeing and flourishing of others and other species. For Confucianism, as a moral agent we have a moral mandate to live out our moral ideal and this is what makes human being morally respectful and have a life with dignity. This self imposed moral command is regarded by Confucianism as the most significant inborn human nature. The fulfillment of this moral or Heaven mandate transfers us above our natural species boundary and become united with *tao* or feeling oneness with the universe. Moral capacity endows us with dignity. It is the morally sincere person who is true to his or her inborn moral nature and who could fully fulfill this moral mandate. Since we are free, we could share and participate voluntarily the nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. It is because of this capability we have the responsibility to take care of everything on Earth and serve not only as a steward but also a nurturer like *tao* which nurtures and sustains everything. It implies that we have responsibility not only to our contemporaries but also to our posterity, to the flourishing of the future generations of *Homo sapiens* as well as other species. If we achieve such virtue we are the sage and united with Heaven and Earth in a holistic unity.

Philosophically, the basic moral concept of Confucianism is Confucius' conception of *ren* (humanity) or Mencius' conception of "the mind that could not bear the sufferings of others.(2A:6)⁷" Both of them signify our natural feeling of empathy with each other and with other species. It is our internal natural moral consciousness towards the sufferings of others. When we see or even just learn indirectly somebody or some animal badly hurt or cruelly treated, we could not but feel morally uneasy and disturbed in our mind. This moral consciousness is also the source of our moral command that prompts us to take action to relieve the pain or promote the wellbeing of others. For Confucianism, the way to carry out this self imposed moral mission is to act through *li* (moral principles and rituals) in a humanly and properly considered pattern. Hence, moral principles and rules are the channels that help to actualize our moral commands. The particular way to act according to principles, especially the specific form of ritual or action could be amended according to the need of the situation and the call of humanity (*Analects*, 2:23). It depends largely upon our moral experience and our grasp of the morally relevant elements in the context. It comes close to Aristotle's idea of practical wisdom though the guiding source is always our moral mind of *ren*. *Ren* is first expressed naturally in our early years as filial piety to our parents and respect to our elders (*Analects*, 1:2). It is reflected in our love of and passions with our family members. To them, we

⁷ *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p.65.

bear the most intimate relationship and the most primordial moral duties. However, it is only the starting place of our practice of morality. Our moral responsibility is not limited to intimate family members but also extended towards others. Mencius said,

We have the duty to respect our elders first and then extend it to other's elder; to nurture our youth first and extend it to other's youth (*Mencius*, 1A:4).

Hence, we have a gradation or diffusion of duties to others. It is a principle of differentiation of the performance of our moral duties. We have more stringent duties towards our parents and children. However, we have to extend it to our fellow citizens, different peoples and other species. It would ultimately extend all the way to cover everything on Earth, nay, to the whole universe. It implies that we have to treat our fellow living things fairly as they are endowed with *tao* like us. With such a mind of *ren* or humanity, we have to fulfill as much as a moral agent have to, that is, to nurture as far as possible. Mencius captures this holistic responsibility in his further emphasis of the order of our duties relative to our family members, to others and to other species in the following:

Be intimate with family members and going on to treat people with humanity; treating others with humanity and going on to be beneficial to all things (*Mencius*, 7A:46)

This is a broad guiding principle. Confucians are very much aware that the decision-making in practical affairs are not easy. To make the most prudent and moral judgment in the day to day affairs is the chief goal of moral cultivation. It is what we have to learn by doing. Thus, Confucianism is rather down to earth in personal and global decisions and would make truly workable solutions that reflect our authentic moral experience and our understanding of the objective reality.

In sum, Confucianism recognizes Heaven and Earth as the carrying mother, which creates and nurtures all things. We are one among the myriad things and have to respect the value of each living thing and each species. Though we could not overstep the natural circle of ecology, human being has to follow the step and spirit of mother Earth to nurture all things and thus serving the kingdom of nature as a nurturer. Confucius once remarks that it is human being that could enlarge *tao*, not that *tao* enlarges man (*Analects*, 15:28). It means that human being is the one who could put *tao* into action and realize it on Earth. Human being is sometimes heralded as the

heart of Heaven and Earth⁸ to signify its special moral status as well as its moral responsibility to all species. Confucianism may be said to give a moral justification of the notion of ecological conscience in Land ethic.

3. How to Make Good of Ecological Pluralism: Harmony with Difference and Some Working Principles

For Confucians, there are a number of middle principles that are essential and very helpful to make our practice in environmental ethics work individually and holistically. The first one is the principle of extending the nature of everything to the utmost which is embedded in one of the passages of the *Doctrine of Means* quoted before. I would like to explore further its rich implications in our practical actions:

Only those who are absolutely sincere can fully develop their nature. If they can fully develop their nature, they can fully develop the nature of others. If they can fully develop the nature of others, they can fully develop the nature of things. If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a trinity with Heaven and Earth. (*The Doctrine of Mean*, Chapter 22)

This basic principle expresses the fair treatment of everything on Earth. The so-called “nature” means the endowed potentials and capabilities of each living thing. For human being it also manifests as our moral striving. This principle requires first that we let everybody have the chance to develop to the utmost his or her talents as well as let our moral sensitivity express freely without hampering by social or natural conditions. It contains also an idea of equality and equity that we have to respect other’s freedom to develop their endowment as far as possible. In case of conflict, we have to make certain specification and balance between the contenders. Furthermore, as we have argued, embedded in this principle is our duty as the nurturer of other species as well.

Another important principle is the principle of harmony with difference. It

⁸ This phrase was coined by the famous Ming Confucian Wang Yang-Ming and is the common thread running through Confucianism from Confucius and Mencius up to contemporary NeoConfucians. Cf. *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p.690.

develops from Confucius saying that we do not require everybody to do the same or attain the same end. We shall let everyone develop their own interests and ideals as far as possible with the conditions that we could live harmoniously together. It means that we should not take authoritarian means to solve our conflicts and let everybody and indeed everything retain their individual difference as far as possible. Thus the different traditions and preferences of each people and the natural ways of living of other species should be maintained as far as possible. In case of conflict, whether it is within our species or between species, Confucianism will try to solve it peacefully according to what is available and affordable at hand.

A third principle is the Confucian way of expressing our individual relationship with others. It is the principle that we may express our love and responsibility according to our different relationship with others. Each one should act with an eye upon the duties coming with their natural and social inter-personal relations. For example, our duties to our parents and children has a higher bearing than our friends and fellows, and our duties to the latter would be higher than those to other species and further still to the ecological elements. This differential gradation of duties and responsibilities is accorded fairly for everybody. It is the duty of each moral agent to make good of her or his case in particular situations without damage to others and respecting the interests and rights of others as far as possible.

In response to the shortage of resources for the satisfaction of everybody, Mencius proposes a fourth principle that we should lead a life without too much demand of satisfaction of our desire. This is a way to let our moral commands be carried out more easily. Besides, we shall have more spiritual enjoyment and less material distractions to our moral virtues. Reducing unnecessary desires and satisfactions is also important to maintain a sustainable social and natural environment. For instance, in face of the too large a human population, we have to make certain self restraint to reduce our numbers in the future so as to let our dear mother Earth retain its carrying power in time and our future generations, including other species as well, to have an enjoyable environment.

In general, we have to make allowance for our individual capabilities and our responsibilities to our fellow persons as well as other species. We have to take seriously the urgency of the global problems that we face together today and have to limit our interest within the moral bondage of a global citizen. The commons are for us as well as for other species, for us as well as for our future generations. Any selfish exploitation of the commons is unsustainable and against our rational and

moral requirements. With this moral framework, Confucianism may provide the common ground for our collective effort and co-operation between nations and people to the preservation of our living environment and to the best of our common future.

4. Some Ramifications in the Global Warming Issue: Towards an Ethics for Global Environmental Problems

Environmental problems have been a major concern for scholars east and west for the last decades, and international efforts have been organized to solve these problems with at least limited success. For instance, the recognition of existence and harmful effect of the ozone hole and the forbidden of further production and use of CFC products is a case heralded as a success of international co-operation and provides a good example for future solution of similar global problems. The global efforts in restoration of endangered species and prevention of the destruction of rainforests are more or less recognized as our common responsibility. However, the underlying ground for such cooperation is mainly national interest and it is because of the obvious scientific certainty of the fault of CFC and the relative small scale of the backlash on economic development that developed countries were quick to come to a consensus banning its use. It may be fortunate that at that time we have some alternative products ready to make a substitute. However, when it comes to more serious national interest and diffusing cause and responsibility, such as the global warming problem, international co-operation is much more difficult. We have such an experience in the signing of Kyoto protocol and the carrying out of the Agenda 21. As many studies have shown that when the issue is not quite clear about its cause and effect, when the global community is quite fragmented in its evaluations, and when the threatening result is in the distant future, it would be very difficult to arrive at global and orchestrating actions. Since it is much less cared by individuals and individual countries and the wager seems heavy, the needed actions would not be easily agreed upon. When it is coupled with huge national economic interests, it is almost certainly doomed to fail. Global warming is just such a case in point. It is until the effect is too obvious and the damage to other peoples or nations, or most importantly to every nation, becomes a glaring reality, that more and more people throughout the world start to press for actions, that leaders of nations have the interest to face it and willing to make a deal.

It is now obvious that global warming has great destructive effects on the environment and upon our low sea level fellows and very many types of species. It

will make our future generation much harder to survive and in a harder living conditions, such as shortage of clean water, not enough food to feed and less useable land to live. We are not only unable to live up to our mandate as a nurturer, we are much less than a steward of our Earth. We are in fact living against the moderate demand of sustainability. Since it is also obvious that the present global warming effect is at least partly if not wholly anthropogenic, we have to take up our responsibility. What human has done could be undone and should be undone if it is wrong. It is no excuse even what we could do may not be able to avoid the tragedy happening. It is just like saying that all species may ultimately not be able to escape the fate of warm death or that the Earth would vanish in the expansion of the sun in the distant future, but this does not suspend our moral responsibility a moment less. As a member of a holistic whole we have to admit our responsibility even though we seem to live innocently as an ordinary person. It could not be ducked that our individual contribution is too insignificant and has little responsibility towards such gigantic deterioration of others and other species. As a species of over six billion members, our collective action is as effective as any mass motion on Earth. Our individual action of redemption will not be in vain.

In fact, with our powerful technology and know-how, we could make a great change. The only obstacle is how to make up our determination for a global orchestrating action to solve this problem. In the past, the United States of America was no doubt the one most irresponsible and greatest obstacle for the global cooperation in its solution. The unilateralism of USA is the most obvious kind of national selfishness against the wellbeing of other peoples and other nations. The delay of the global rectification of the Kyoto Protocol leads global warming problem almost to a point of no return. The increase of green house gas, especially carbon dioxide, over the last few years, helps to fuel global warming and very difficult and much less successful to make good now.

The 2009 Copenhagen Accord gives a new hope for the realization of cooperation though with many controversies and conflicts of interests of different nations and parties. Somehow it makes a step forward. Further actions of the governments of nations on Earth need be observed for the next few months, before we could work out some collective and efficient actions to solve this mounting issue. Though international justice between the developed and underdeveloped countries need be contained, certain compromise by all is a necessary precondition for a really effective solution. The basic value is that the future generation is for us all. There should not be and will not be nationally or ethnically divided *Homo sapiens*. Our

sacrifice is sacrifice for our future generation. We could do more if we take them as our family members. In fact, we are predicting there will be great fights in the coming age of shortage of materials for living. Wars are what we must avoid morally and rationally. There are a number of immediate actions that need be taken individually and globally. First of all, we need to reduce the carbon consumption by all means individually socially and internationally through low carbon way of living and new technologies. Second, it is our imperative to join hand in hand to reduce the world population in the near future. Third, we have to consider the release of national borders to admit those who are going to lose their homeland because of rising sea level and because of the destruction by violent climate changes. The abolition of national border is inevitable from a holistic point of view and the integration of all people is true to the spirit of the notion of a common future for all.

It would be a great lesson and success for all if this and other grave environmental problems lead us to reflect more deeply our intra-species and inter-species relationship, the so-called human-nature relationship⁹. Such grand issues have the power to wake us up from our ethnic centered, anthropocentric way of doing things. It would be a great achievement if we finally learn how to live peacefully and equitably together with our fellow people and fellow species. By this we may realize the long time dream of our fore-runners: the perpetual peace between nations and the harmonious utopia of equity and flourishing heaven for all.

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⁹ I have treated this subject in Confucian terms in an earlier paper, "The Fundamental Ideas of a Confucian Environmental Ethics: A Critical Response to Callicott's Project" in the Environmental Conference of "Heaven, Earth and Human: The Trios of Environmental Ethics" on August 4, 2000 at Chungli, Taiwan, organized by the Graduate Institute of Philosophy, National Central University, Taiwan, R.O.C. A Chinese version of it was published in *The Legion Journal*, vol.25 (Taipei: Legion Monthly Publisher, December, 2000), pp.189-205.

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