

Toward a Harmonic Relationship between Humans and Nature: A Humanist Reinterpretation of Early Confucian Philosophy

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Abstract

We are living in an era in which the world is being turned into an object to be exploited and nature into a storehouse. From environmental pollution and deforestation to toxic waste and the depletion of resources, the Earth is in trouble and we need to act. To address this environmental crisis, I propose to recover early Confucian philosophy because it can be used to develop a more desirable way of interacting with the environment. Confucian philosophy conceives a kind of humanism that promotes a harmonious relationship between people and nature. Thus, this article attempts to describe a distinctive attitude towards nature and the role of humans that we can find in early Confucianism as a way of rethinking our current ecological concerns.

Keywords: Cosmos, harmony, Confucius, *Dao*, *Tian*, *Tianxia*

Na poti k harmoničnemu odnosu med ljudmi in naravo: humanistična reinterpretacija zgodnje konfucijanske filozofije

Izvleček

Živimo v dobi, v kateri se svet spreminja v predmet, ki ga je treba izkoriščati, narava pa v skladišče. Od onesnaževanja okolja in krčenja gozdov do strupenih odpadkov in izčrpanja virov – Zemlja je v težavah in zato moramo ukrepati. Za reševanje te okolijske krize predlagam obnovitev temeljnih paradigem zgodnje konfucijanske filozofije, saj jih je mogoče uporabiti za razvoj boljšega in bolj konstruktivnega načina interakcije z okoljem. Konfucijeva filozofija predstavlja vrsto humanizma, ki spodbuja harmoničen odnos med ljudmi in naravo. Zato poskuša ta članek opisati poseben odnos do narave in vloge človeka, ki ga lahko najdemo v zgodnjem konfucijanstvu, in s tem bralstvu ponuditi možnosti ponovnega razmisleka o naših sodobnih ekoloških problemih.

Ključne besede: kozmos, harmonija, Konfucij, *Dao*, *Tian*, *Tianxia*

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Introduction

We live in a time of environmental crisis. Most people know that nature is facing great challenges and degradation, but few know how to solve such issues. One of the main problems is the ideology that is characterized by an instrumental rationality, which threatens the very existence of all life on the planet. This mentality is inherited from the Enlightenment, which made humans not only the measure of all things, but “also the only source of power for economic well-being, political stability, and social development” (Tu 1998, 4).

This kind of ideology has two important aspects which are worthy of consideration. First, it turns the world into an object of domination, with serious consequences for the environment. As early as the 1960s, the Club of Rome warned of the consequences of indiscriminate and intensive use of nature. Ten years later, the United Nations called on all countries to sit down and discuss what it considered to be a sufficiently dangerous situation. Fifty years later, we are in the midst of a “planetary emergency”. From deforestation and toxic waste to species extinction and pollution, the world is under constant attack. And this situation is aggravated by population growth, industrialization, urbanization, technological manipulation or military intervention.

The planet is in serious trouble because of our attitude to the environment. And although there is now a growing environmental awareness, we cannot afford to maintain an enlightened ideology that relies on technology to solve these problems. Today, it is believed that scientific and technological progress, as well as economic measures, will solve a problem that has a more complex basis. We therefore need to develop a broader philosophical understanding of ourselves as creatures of nature, not as owners.

Secondly, such a mentality presupposes inequality and discrimination. Many researchers and studies have shown that the Western model of development and progress cannot be exported to other countries. There is an unbalanced distribution of wealth and economic rents among people around the world. People in the West can own cars and houses, have ample leisure time and travel. But this is because there are economically poor and non-industrialized countries with high rates of poverty and economic instability. In other words, where people are born has a lasting impact on their lives.

From access to clean water and electricity to health care and education, there are people who do not have enough money to meet their basic needs. According to UNICEF reports and the World Health Organization (UN 2020), billions of people around the world suffer from poverty. The European model of modernization,

based on individualism, has divided the world's population into levels with different interests, functions and rights. Inequality is global and requires a new vision that offers equal opportunities and a new interpretation of distribution.

The challenges we face today therefore stem from a model of progress and development that reduces nature to an object of domination and exploitation. And not only nature, but also people born in less developed countries who do not have equal access to opportunities. These problems are easy to identify and have been well documented by academics and specialists. However, the solutions are more complex and cannot be reduced to technological, economic or political responses.

Today we need a new, non-discriminatory mentality that transcends the Enlightenment tradition. We need a new way of interacting that restores the balance between people and the planet. Confucianism has significant resources for rethinking our relationship with nature and discussing the role of human beings. We live in an interconnected world, and this school of thought can contribute to our current situation by offering a kind of humanism that promotes a new human attitude towards nature.

The aim of this paper is thus to explore the early Confucian tradition as a kind of humanism that presents a more desirable way of interacting with the Earth. This distinctive ecological attitude that we can find in Confucianism has already been researched by many scholars (see Cheng 1998; Ivanhoe 1998; Tucker 2001; 2020), but the current work attempts to show how this kind of humanism can contribute to the development of a different ideology for our present. I begin in the first section by arguing that Confucianism is not just an anthropocentric philosophy, but a kind of humanism that promotes a harmonious relationship between human beings and nature. In the second part, I offer an analysis of three concepts, (*dao*, *tian* and *tianxia*), which are crucial to this proposal in relation to our contemporary environmental problems. In the conclusion, I review the main lines of this paper and emphasize how this reinterpretation can contribute to our current world, a time of environmental crisis.

The Anthropocosmic Worldview of Confucian Humanism

Confucianism has generally been categorized as an anthropocentric philosophy, concerned only with human interests. As Peimin Ni has noted, there is a common assumption that the primary concern of Confucianism is morality (Ni 2021, 170). That is, the basic concern is the pursuit of human perfection (*ren* 仁). Nevertheless, this is a limited view of Confucianism, especially early Confucianism.

According to Confucius, human perfection can only be achieved by establishing a harmonious relationship with our surroundings. This is what we can read in the *Analects*: “Someone who does not understand the propensity of circumstances (*ming*) has no way of becoming an exemplary person (*junzi*). (不知命，無以為君子也。)” (Confucius 1999, 229).

Confucianism does not see a dichotomy between humans and the environment, but a correlative model that considers human beings as part of nature as a whole. As Tu Weiming has pointed out, what we find is not an anthropocentric view but an “anthropocosmic worldview”: “Confucian humanism is fundamentally different from anthropocentrism because it professes the unity of man and heaven rather than the imposition of human will on nature” (Tu 1985, 75). That is, man and his environment are a microcosm set within the macrocosm of the universe. In contrast to European modernity, which develops a view of human rooted in individualism and domination over nature, the Confucian tradition emphasizes that man himself is included in the cosmos as an active participant (Rošker 2023, 3).

As Corey Walker has explained, the emergence of Western humanism in the modern era is related to the project of the Enlightenment as well as the global expansion of European powers (Walker 2019, 206). In other words, it is a product of the creation of a particular form of rationalist and secularist consciousness which seeks to transform and dominate the world. And the domain of reason and the project of rationality and science are supported by the conception of the genius of transcendental man. Therefore, this kind of humanism places human in the centre, “the primacy of the human—as ontologically and epistemically constituted within this discourse—remains uninterrogated” (ibid., 213).

Unlike modern humanism, the early Confucian tradition understood human beings as becomings. We are constantly interacting and developing with our surroundings in an endless process. For this reason, as Roger T. Ames has observed, human beings cannot be thought of as “something that we are, but something that we do” (Ames 2021, 172). Human beings, occupying a place on the same continuum as other living things (Nylan 2019, 1), interact with the conditions in which they live and create meaningful interactions with their surroundings.

Confucian humanism is not just a set of doctrines, but above all an “art of living”. That is, it does not seek some essential reality, but attempts to cultivate harmonious relationships with one’s surroundings. As Roger Ames and David Hall have argued, Confucius does not provide the basis for a “general theory of being” or a “universal science of principles” (Hall and Ames 1987, 248). In contrast, Confucianism presents “an aesthetic understanding”, “an *ars contextualis*”, in which there is a mutual interdependence of all things.

Early Confucian philosophy thus has an aesthetic orientation that emphasizes open-ended interaction. It stresses, according to Dascha Düring, “the importance of judging the cosmos and humanity’s role therein as things whose meaning and interrelations cannot be determined or fixed but must remain open for interpretation and reinterpretation” (Düring 2021, 143). In other words, it develops a genealogical view of the world in which there is neither an initial beginning nor an anticipated end, but a continuous process. This process of becoming can be defined in terms of three characteristics.

The first feature is organic holism. As Chenyang Li has pointed out, the Confucian approach does not consider the world as a single element, but as an infinite number of elements in continuous interaction (Li 2006, 589):

Vast is the “great and originating (power)” indicated by Qian! All things owe to it their beginning: it contains all the meaning belonging to (the name) heaven. The clouds move and the rain is distributed; the various things appear in their developed forms. (The sages) grandly understand (the connection between) the end and the beginning, and how (the indications of) the six lines (in the hexagram) are accomplished, (each) in its season. (Accordingly) they mount (the carriage) drawn by those six dragons at the proper times, and drive through the sky. The method of *Qian* is to change and transform, so that everything obtains its correct nature as appointed (by the mind of Heaven); and (thereafter the conditions of) great harmony are preserved in union. The result is what is advantageous, and correct and firm. (The sage) appears aloft, high above all things, and the myriad states all enjoy repose.

大哉乾元，萬物資始，乃統天。雲行雨施，品物流形。大明始終，六位時成，時乘六龍以御天。乾道變化，各正性命，保合大和，乃利貞。首出庶物，萬國咸寧。(Yi Jing 1:1)

Thus the Chinese tradition presents a view of nature as a cosmos, a process by which the universe is continually self-generating. Frederick W. Mote has claimed that there is no creation myth in the Chinese tradition (Mote 1971, 17–18). Tu Weiming, on the other hand, states that ancient Chinese thinkers were intensely interested in the creation of the world, but they did not accept that there was an external intelligence that created the universe (Tu 1989, 37).

The important point is that the Confucian tradition describes the world as an interdependent process in which different things are interconnected. As Jana Rošker has pointed out, there are no transcendental forms or immaterial realms, “a separate world of any kind of Heavenly Kingdom”, (Rošker 2021, 36), but a

“One-world view”, in Li Zehou’s words, which is the same for humans, gods and emperors (Li 1999a, 180). For this reason, this holistic interpretation is not concerned with establishing immutable principles, but with the transformations of the myriad things (*wanwu* 萬物) (Zhao 2021, 53). Early Confucianism offers an interpretation of reality in which all elements, including human beings, are part of the same becoming process. Thus, Confucius says, “Zeng, my friend! My way (*dao*) is bound together with one continuous stand” (參乎! 吾道一以貫之。) (Confucius 1998, 4:15).

This brings us to the second characteristic, dynamism. To understand the Confucian concept of the cosmos, we need to focus on the rhythm and cadence of change. Nature proceeds through comings and goings, beginnings and endings, and is involved in pervasive change. In short, this worldview is defined by the “growth and diminution of eventful relations among things” (Ames 2021, 172). Nature manifests itself in propensities (*shi* 勢) to change. In this context, we need to understand propensity as the possibility of change. For this reason, this humanism is not concerned with defining the essences of things, but, as Tingyang Zhao says, “is geared toward grasping the transformations of the myriad things conveyed in comprehensive images (*xiang* 象)” (Zhao 2016, 53). As such, we can read in the *Analects*:

The Master said, “I think I will leave off speaking.”

“If you do not speak,” Zigong replied, “how will we your followers find the proper way?”

The Master responded, “Does tian speak? And yet the four seasons turn and the myriad things are born and grow within it. Does *tian* speak?”

子曰：予欲無言。

子貢曰：子如不言，則小子何述焉？

子曰：天何言哉？四時行焉，百物生焉，天何言哉？ (Confucius 1998, 17:19, 208)

Everything in nature is interdependent and interrelated in a dynamic and transformational process. This characteristic could be seen in the *Book of Changes*, as well as in the *Four Books*, and shows a contingent and open approach that focuses on becoming rather than on beings. Both humans and nature belong to each other in the continuum of the whole reality (Cheng 1998, 212), and this whole reality must be understood as a dynamic process of change and transformation:

The way of the Earth is “not to claim the merit of achievement”, but on behalf (of Heaven) to bring things to their proper issue. Through the changes and transformations produced by Heaven and Earth, plants and trees grow luxuriantly.

地道无成」而代「有终」也。天地變化，草木蕃。(Yi Jing 2:12)

The third characteristic is harmony and aesthetic order. Confucius proposed an aesthetic understanding of cosmology. Rather than investigating the essence of things, Confucius presupposes a contextualization in which each element contributes to the generation of events. As Roger Ames has pointed out, early Confucian philosophers “sought to understand order as a participatory process requiring the artful coordination and disposition of things (Ames 2021, 176).” Thus we can read in the Great Appendix to the *Yi Jing*:

It is Heaven and Earth that furnish models and patterns. It is time that changes and evolves. It is the sun and moon that are the most bright. It is wealth and nobility that are the most exalted. It is the sages that prepare things for practical use, and invent instruments for the benefit of the world. (*Yi Jing*, 373)

In contrast to rational order, which implies “pre-established patterns of relatedness” (Hall and Ames 1987, 134), Confucianism presents aesthetic order as a participatory process that requires the artful coordination and arrangement of things. That is, this kind of harmonization can be seen as “a relational and dynamic affair and can be defined as interactive and processive in nature.” (Li 2021, 44).

The aesthetic order thus alludes to a generative and creative process in which the different elements of the cosmos, including humans, are involved. And these interactions resonate with each other:

The Confucian notion of harmony is conceived of as a generative, creative, and (dare we say) “aesthetic” process in which the heterogeneous and diverse elements of the cosmos, including the human worlds—what are often referred to as “the myriad things” (*wanwu*)—are orchestrated into deep, harmonious relations that resonate with each other and entail productive tensions and resistance as well as agreement. (Li 2014, x)

Confucianism thus develops a kind of humanism in which humans belong to that creative process of self-fulfilment of reality. That is, the cosmology does not apply just to the arrangement and order of the physical universe, but to the social and historical worlds as well (Henderson 2010, 181). This kind of humanism does not

presume the dominance of man by intellectual authority, as modern humanism does, but the Confucian tradition provides a framework for harmonizing human life with the natural world (Tucker 2020, 109). In other words, it is not a human-centred humanism that focuses on human domination of the Earth, but a humanism that focuses on human beings as agents of self-transformation.

In contrast to modern humanism, which is based on a rational project that seeks to explain and control all changes in nature through rational discourse, early Confucian humanism assumes that reality is a creative change in which human beings participate. For this reason, Confucius says, “君子和而不同. An exemplary person seeks harmony not sameness” (Confucius 1998, 13:23). The art of contextualization, Hall and Ames assert, “involves the production of harmonious correlations of the myriad unique details (*wanwu* 萬物 or *wanyou* 萬有) that make up the world” (Hall and Ames 1998, 40). And this kind of interpretation can contribute to rethinking our current interaction with nature, as we will see in the next section.

The Harmonization with Nature: Rethinking Confucian Aesthetic Cosmology

As mentioned above, Confucianism develops a kind of humanism that calls for a harmonious relationship between man and nature. That is, this tradition is not limited to the human world, nor is it limited to human concerns. Every element in the world, animate and inanimate, is an integral part of the harmony that can be achieved. For this reason, human beings must live in balance with nature. And this interaction is not only ethical but also aesthetic, as it implies a creative creation in our everyday lives. As Li Zehou has explained, Confucian thinkers brought eternity and transcendence into the here and now and are concerned with anthropological becoming (Li 2010, 53).

Therefore, an aesthetic perspective does not necessarily imply a special significance for art and the artistic appreciation of nature. As Düring states, “there is something particular about the perspective that Confucianism advances in that its view in general exhibit a characteristic aesthetic tendency” (Düring 2021, 142). Confucian humanism marks a starting point in the transformation of nature through human participation. Due to the ongoing process of change, humanity must constantly find a way to achieve a dynamic harmonization with the environment. In this way, Li Zehou says, life’s significance is “a historical becoming that cannot be achieved apart from a relationship to the collective” (Li 2010, 54).

We thus find an aesthetic ontology that is not concerned with substances or

attributes, but with the way in which harmonious interactions are developed. In contrast to the tradition that explores the essence of things or universal principles, Confucianism presents a dynamic theory in which every element contributes to the creation of every event or situation. As Thomé H. Fang has pointed out, the universe is “is an all comprehensive urge of life, and all pervading vital energy, not for a single moment ceasing to create and procreate and not in a single spot ceasing to overflow and interpenetrate” (Fang 1931, 111).

The cosmos is constantly changing, transforming, and becoming new, and humans must readapt their interactions in order to achieve equilibrium with it. As Li Zehou has stated, the tension for the Chinese is not between the sacred and the secular, the empirical and the rational, but “on what and how human nature should be” (Li 1999b, 142). In this way, early Confucian thinkers developed an aesthetic thought that is concerned with application and the interaction between human beings and nature, which can contribute to develop other way of thinking our current relationships with nature.

To understand the significance of this kind of aesthetic cosmology, we need to look at Confucianism’s own vocabulary. The main aim of this section is to analyse the assumptions that characterize this kind of cosmology, and then to consider the contribution of Confucian humanism to our current environmental crisis. Obviously, this interpretation does not provide all the answers to current problems and several objections can be made. However, the main ideas of this kind of ontology can help us to rethink our relationship with the environment from a different perspective.

Dao (道): *The Pace of the Whole Reality*

The notion of *dao* is a central concept in Confucian cosmology and is found many times in two different ways in the *Four Books*. Firstly, it refers to nature, understood as the whole universe, including everything in its course. Fung Youlan has stressed that the Daoist and Confucian schools introduce a theory of the *dao* inspired by the succession of the seasons, the movements of the sun and moon, which determined the life of the peasants (Fung 1948, 222). Similarly, the classic study by Archie J. Bahn introduces this Confucian notion of *dao* as a process, as the way of nature that “proceeds through comings and goings, beginnings and endings” (Bahn 1969, 18). *Dao* can therefore be defined as “world-making”, a continuous process that never ends. In this sense, we can read in the *Analects*: “Ah, time’s passage is like this running water, never ceasing either day or night” (逝者如斯夫！不舍昼夜。) (Confucius 1998, 9:17).

Nature is a never-ending process of succession, a constant renovation. We live in a world that is in a continuous process of transformation. And this process is ordered, not chaotic. In his famous work *Chinese Thought*, Marcel Granet describes it as a set of closely related ideas based on concepts of order, totality, responsibility and efficiency (Granet 1968, 179). However, we do not find a logical or rational order, but an aesthetic one, a balanced system in constant transformation. For this reason, Confucius says: “Reviewing the old as a means of realizing the new—such a person can be considered a teacher” (温故而知新，可以为师矣。) (Confucius 1998, 2:11).

In this way, early Confucian thinkers believe that the world is organized according to a certain principle, which they call *dao*. However, the term is also used in another sense, as a path or road. This meaning denotes a human way of living in the world, a human roadmap for interaction, and can be found through an etymological analysis. If we make a philological examination of the term, we can see that this character is composed of two basic parts: *chuo* (辵) “to go over” radical and *shou* (首) “head” phonetic. This combination alludes to “lead the way”, as Roger Ames and David Hall have pointed out, denoting “the active project of road-making” (Hall and Ames 1987, 227). The basic meaning of this character therefore expresses the continuity between Heaven, humans and the Earth (天, 人, 地) as a trinity. It is the way of being that “achieves optimization in any modality” (Zhao 2021, 51).

This kind of approach has led us to reconnect people with the aesthetics of the world. The notion of *dao* is defined in an ontology of becoming, which deals with transformations, rather fixed essences. For this reason, this tradition reflects on “how it becomes” or “what is the way”. In this sense, we can read in the *Analects*: “Exemplary persons (*junzi*) in making their way in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate (*yi*)” (君子之于天下也，无适也，无莫也，义之与比。) (Confucius 1998, 4:10). In contrast to the modern European tradition, where the aim of philosophy is knowledge and the aim of knowledge is to master nature, Confucianism tries to observe the rhythms of nature and develops patterns of interaction to consolidate a harmonious equilibrium.

This approach could contribute to our present situation, where the modern European view of nature and the overproduction of the capitalist system have led to an environmental crisis. Today, governments develop their policies following a paradigm of continuous development, according to which the economy must grow. But the Earth is finite and has its own rhythms and patterns, its own *dao*. We cannot sustain a system that imposes a dizzying pace of growth on nature.

In this way, the Confucian concept of *dao* can help us to develop a view of the whole of reality as a dynamic and creative process of change in which man and nature are included. The world of nature and the world of culture form a continuum, and therefore we cannot develop a view of nature as a mere object of domination and expansion of economic growth. The Confucian sage must glorify his life of virtue and fulfil his human existence in creative engagement with the world. And this approach can help us to foster renewed creativity and future development.

Dao, understood as a process and the whole of reality, is constantly changing, and human beings are part of this process. In contrast to the current approach based on overproduction and theories that are alien to nature and its rhythms, human creations should continue the natural course of nature.

Tian 天: *The Way of the Myriad Transformations of Nature*

The character *tian* has received considerable attention due to its importance in Chinese mythology, religion and philosophy. In Confucian thought, *tian* refers to the universe in relation to the Earth (*di* 地). Therefore, the Chinese word *tian* can be rendered as nature in which things are always relational and situational and should be seen as such (Li 1999, 21). This meaning is also suggested by an analysis of the Chinese character, which is composed of two basic elements: “the one” (*yi* 一) and “the great” (*da* 大). This combination suggests an adult human being and the sky above his head.

Nevertheless, some characters found in oracle bone scripts depict a large head on a tall person, which seems to suggest an ideograph of an anthropomorphic deity. We can therefore find two meanings of *tian*: a spiritual or religious understanding of Heaven as the Supreme Being, and a naturalistic understanding of Heaven as nature (Wong 2012, 69). What is important for our analysis here, however, is that although there is this anthropomorphic deity interpretation, for Confucian thought *tian* is not a principle that creates a world independent of itself. Rather, *tian* is “a general designation for the phenomenal world as it emerges of its own accord” (Hall and Ames 1987, 207).

In this way, *tian* expresses the way (天道) of the myriad transformations of nature. As Confucius says: “Does *tian* speak? And yet the four seasons turn and the myriad things are born and grow within it. Does *tian* speak?” (天何言哉? 四時行焉, 百物生焉, 天何言哉?) (Confucius 1998, 17:19)

The myriad things are involved in an ongoing process of change that is unpredictable. For this reason, Confucian thought does not focus on existing things or

principles, but on “propensities (*sbi* 勢) latent in the transformations themselves” (Zhao 2021, 53). That is, Confucian thinkers believe that we live in a world that is contingent and open, and that human beings must make constant efforts to interpret natural transformations.

This interpretation can contribute to our current view of nature because it does not merely imply a general realm of living plants, inanimate objects and animals. This means that nature is not separate from man. Nowadays, we assume that our planet has undergone drastic changes due to rapid advances in technology and industry. In other words, we consider the human impact on the Earth and advocate for sustainable management of resources. However, we need to think not only about human activity on the environment, but also about our own view of nature. Nature is not just the phenomena of the physical world, it is a vast array of interconnected elements, so to meet the challenges of our world we need to seek a new humanism that does not place humans at the centre of the universe, but the harmonious interactions between man and nature.

The concept of *tian* could help us to provide a model of human interaction in which cultural and scientific activities must preserve the life of all nature. Our reflection on the environment must include the wisdom of the Earth in order to develop harmonious interactions. The present moment requires not only a critique of our patterns of behaviour and relationship with the environment, but also a new conception of nature that promotes the harmonization of things in a whole process.

With the advent of modern philosophy nature became a passive concept, an object of domination and exploitation. The development of the capitalist system has only aggravated this situation, breaking its own boundaries and producing beyond its own limits. This has led to crises ranging from pollution and deforestation to the collapse of ecosystems and the extinction of species. Nevertheless, the environment is not alien to the human species, defined as all the elements that surround us, whether living or inert, as well as their interrelationships.

As the United Nations has stressed, “our planet can only continue to sustain us if we protect its biodiversity” (UNDC 2021). Every form of life, every element of nature is interconnected and helps to hold our world together. For this reason, no matter what we consider, the alteration of any one element of nature can have disastrous consequences for ecosystems. The main problem is that modern and capitalist interpretations develop a kind of violation of nature, degrading each element to an object of domination.

What needs to be addressed is a recognition of nature in terms of interconnected

things in which each element has value. In this respect, Confucian humanism and its notion of *tian* can help us to develop a different way of interacting that is not focused on domination and technological development, but on harmonious interactions. As we can read in the *Book of Changes*:

The great man is he who is in harmony, in his attributes, with Heaven and Earth; in his brightness, with the sun and moon; in his orderly procedure, with the four seasons; and in his relation to what is fortunate and what is calamitous, in harmony with the spirit-like operations (of Providence). He may precede Heaven, and Heaven will not act in opposition to him; he may follow Heaven, but will act (only) as Heaven at the time would do. If Heaven will not act in opposition to him, how much less will men! How much less will the spirit-like operation (of Providence)!

夫「大人」者、與天地合其德，與日月合其明，與四時合其序，與鬼神合其吉凶，先天而天弗違，後天而奉天時。天且弗違，而況於人乎？況於鬼神乎？ (*Yi Jing* 1:23)

Therefore, in Confucian philosophy, the content of the universe is not limited to the physical world, but also includes the human world. As Ivanhoe has demonstrated, Confucius believes that Heaven (*tian*) has a plan for human beings: “a just, peaceful, harmonious, and flourishing society” (Ivanhoe 2007, 213). In this way, human beings must transform the Way of Heaven into the great undertaking of the human way, as we will see in the next section.

Tianxia (天下): *Through a Cosmos Order*

Tianxia is an important Chinese concept that involves a vital relationship between people and *tian*. The Chinese characters used to represent this concept are composed of two characters, *tian* (天) and *xia* (下), and it can be literally translated as everything that exists under Heaven, or all under Heaven. That is, the term encompasses every element in the world and emphasizes a harmonious interdependence among the parts, as it alludes to a “cosmopolitical order” (Zhao 2021, vii).

This Confucian concept explains that man is not a caged spirit in a hostile environment, there are no enemies or opposites, we are not confronted with an external world to conquer. Rather, we are organisms of this dynamic process in which harmonious integration must be constantly achieved. As Jan Erik Christensen has pointed out, the root of wisdom is to be found in the value of life as an inner

connection between Heaven and human beings (Christensen 2014, 282). As we can read in the *Analects*:

Exemplary people (*junzi*) in making their way in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate (*yi*).

君子之於天下也，無適也，無莫也，義之與比。 (Confucius 1999, 4:10)

We must realize that human civilization should be seen as part of the cosmos understood as a whole. In this sense, human life is part of the development of the cosmos, and we can only develop our full humanity in relationship with nature. However, nowadays we are disconnected from our environment and are imposing a dizzying pace on the world that is changing in even the most remote regions.

In this context, Confucian humanism, and in particular the notion of *tianxia*, contributes to thinking about our relationship with nature. Firstly, this notion can help us realize that we are just one species among others, but our actions can have catastrophic consequences for our environment. The United Nations department that supports China in integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into development decisions has highlighted that “our planet—the only home we have—is at breaking point” (UNDC 2021). They report that two-thirds of the Earth’s oceans and three-quarters of its land have been damaged by humans. What is worse, by 2050 a million species could be at risk of extinction.

The whole ecological system exists in an interdependent relationship, so it is necessary to rethink other interpretations of our human development and to understand the proper role that all human beings play in the world. This leads us to the second contribution of this concept to our current situation.

Tianxia sees the cosmos as a human subject, not just a physical entity. Thus, the interpretation of the environmental crisis as a problem is not only manifested in the natural realm, but also refers to a social conflict. As a result of the socio-cultural organization, the normative system and the economic structure that societies have adopted since modern times, the environmental impact of human actions has created an unbalanced cosmos that endangers the life of Earth.

The key concept for understanding the Confucian notion of *tianxia* is the principle of harmony with nature. According to early Confucianism, human self-realization can only be achieved in harmony with nature. As we read in the *Zhongyong*:

This notion of equilibrium and focus (*zhong*) is the great root of the world; harmony then is the advancing of the proper way (*dadao* 道) in the world. When equilibrium and focus are sustained and harmony is fully realized, the heavens and earth maintain their proper places and all things flourish in the world.”

中也者，天下之大本也；和也者，天下之达道也。致中和，天地位焉，万物育焉。(Hall and Ames 2000, 86)

Thus, as Evelyn Tucker has pointed out, “the great triad of Confucianism, namely, Heaven, Earth, and humans, signifies this understanding that humans can only attain their full humanity in relationship to both Heaven and Earth” (Tucker 2001, 131). Harmony is a key concept for understanding aesthetic cosmology. We live within the continuities of nature and yet are open to its spontaneity. For this reason, Confucius does not see *tianxia* as a transcendent principle to explain the natural world, but as a dynamic process in which human beings are constantly trying to restore a lost harmony. As Confucius says, “Achieving harmony is the most valuable function of observing ritual propriety” (礼之用，和为贵) (Confucius 1998, 1:12).

In this way, humans must be open to the spontaneous production of novelty, to this cosmic creativity. David Hall and Roger Ames have defined this notion through the connotations of the character *cheng* (诚) found in Mencius’ book and *Zhongyong*. In *Mengzi* we can read:

There is a way of being creative in one’s person. Persons who do not understand efficacy are not creative in their persons. For this reason, creativity is the way of *tian*, and reflecting on creativity is the proper way of becoming human.

诚身有道：不明乎善，不诚其身矣。是故诚者，天之道也；思诚者，人之道也。(Mencius 2009, 4A:12)

Similarly, a passage in *Zhongyong* says: “creativity (*cheng* 诚) is the way of *tian* (天); creating is the proper way of becoming human” (Ames and Hall 2000, 104). Thus, this aesthetic cosmology explains the world through the notion of creativity which permeates all the elements of the world. Creativity is the key concept to define the way of nature and the way of becoming human, is the capacity to produce new and unique meanings and relationships in a particular event which promotes new orders. This point has a special significance today, an era that needs to find a different way of restoring a dynamic harmony with the environment and human beings. And although early Confucianism is not the solution to this, this school of thought shows how other kinds of humanism are possible.

Conclusions

In these pages I have explored the contributions of Confucian humanism to the world today. In contrast to modern Western humanism, early Confucianism develops a dynamic and holistic view of the world that can make significant contributions to our present. This article does not attempt to offer a solution to our environmental crisis based on early Confucianism, because our moment requires new responses created from our time. There are, however, a number of ways in which Confucian humanism can be helpful in rethinking our interaction with the environment.

First, unlike the dominant ideology of the Enlightenment, Confucian humanism does not offer a view of nature as a static entity composed of objects to be mastered. Rather, all forms of life are interconnected and play an important role in the universe. It thus promotes a different approach to our concept of nature, focusing on the Earth's magnificent biodiversity and the importance of all species working together to survive and maintain their ecosystems.

Secondly, Confucian humanism can contribute to the transformation of current attitudes towards the over-exploitation and degradation of nature. Confucianism never sees human beings as separate from nature, but as active participants in the transformative aspects of the cosmos. In this way, human development must be in harmony with the rhythms of Earth.

Third, Confucian humanism stresses the importance of creativity in the ongoing process of nature, but also in the ongoing interaction between humans and the environment. This point is particularly important because Confucian humanism develops an aesthetic ontology that emphasizes the dynamic aspect of creative becoming. And this notion appeals to the relationship between man and nature, but also between personal realization and the flourishing community.

Therefore, it is not only easy to find ecological ideas in Confucianism, but also a deep reflection on our role in an interconnected cosmos. And although Confucian thought cannot be adopted as a new humanism, its proposal offers new approaches to develop a desirable way of human interaction with all living things, promoting ways of respecting and valuing nature and the rest of humanity. We need to remove the ideology whose belief in progress, technology and economic development has led to environmental degradation and an unequal world. In this way, early Confucianism can offer new ways of rethinking our role in the cosmos.

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