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COMMENT ON “CONFUCIAN THOUGHT OF “HARMONY BETWEEN MAN AND NATURE” AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY CONSTRUCTION”

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As mentioned by Liu and Wu (2024), the Confucian concept of “unity of heaven and humanity” affirms that humans are nature’s products, advocating for the respect of the life’s value, promoting an ecological consciousness of benevolence towards all things and pursuing the ideal of “harmonizing with heaven through virtue.” It has multiple points of convergence and origins with the construction of contemporary ecological civilization. The concept of harmony, between man and nature, provides important insights and significance for ecological value selection, ecological resource development and the establishment of ecological morality.

As a whole, an ecosystem possesses the inherent ability to recover and regulate itself. However, its self-regulation ability is limited. When the impacts caused by external factors, such as human activities, exceed these limits, various ecological problems occur. The damage caused to ecosystems, by such excessive impacts, is long-lasting. Restoring an ecosystem to its original state often requires a significant amount of time and may even result in irreversible changes. Rooted in the experiences of agricultural civilization and meticulous observation and contemplation, Confucian scholars have profound insights and expressions regarding the interconnection and mutual restraint among various elements and processes in ecosystems. For instance, Confucius’ teachings on “benevolence” and his famous statement “to fish, not

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with a net; to hunt, not shooting at a nesting bird” (Xie, 2020, p. 142) exemplify how his concept of “benevolence” transcends human interactions to encompass a compassionate approach towards the natural world’s all elements. This underscores the interconnectedness between humanity and nature, highlighting the practical philosophy of utilizing resources in moderation.

The regularity of the heavenly movements is the great Confucian philosopher Xunzi’s famous viewpoint, emphasizing the inherent and objective nature of natural laws. Xunzi believed that the heaven’s operation follows its set patterns and laws, unaffected by whether the rulers on earth are virtuous or tyrannical, and regardless of people’s preferences. This is what he meant by saying, “Order and disorder are not caused by heaven, nor by time, nor by the land”. (Liang, 2021, p. 20-30-38). Here, the concept of “heaven,” previously imbued with anthropomorphic connotations since the Shang and Zhou dynasties, is thoroughly dissolved and negated by Xunzi. In the past, when unusual and rare phenomena occurred in nature, people would often attribute these events to mysterious connections with earthly disasters or the rulers’ successes and failures, believing them to be warnings or signs from the divine. However, Xunzi proposed the theory of “controlling destiny and making use of it,” suggesting that nature operates independently of human morality. Instead of admiring the heaven’s greatness, Xunzi advocated understanding and grasping its laws. Instead of marveling at rare and extraordinary natural phenomena, like falling stars and singing trees, Xunzi argued for utilizing natural laws to one’s advantage and preventing harm. Instead of waiting passively for opportunities, like the story of “waiting by the stump for rabbits,” Xunzi advocated for acting in accordance with the timing of events, fulfilling one’s duties, exercising subjective initiative, and rationally developing, transforming and utilizing nature.

Following the pre-Qin period, the worldview of the harmony between man and nature underwent further development during the Han and Tang dynasties. This culminated in a systematic theoretical framework within Neo-Confucianism during the Song dynasty, from which emerged the ethical ecological thoughts of Confucianism.

The ecological ethical principles rooted in benevolence ethics, within the “unity of heaven and humanity” of Song-Ming Confucianism, transcend mere universal love for humanity, extending to encompass a moral sentiment of benevolence towards all entities. This ecological ethical framework embodies a distinctive logic of ecological ethical construction and a form of moral care. By fostering a sense of benevolence towards both humans and all entities, it expands emotional and moral considerations from the human society’s realm to the broader universe, including non-human animals, plants and even inanimate objects. Through the progression from self-love to love for others, from caring for others to embracing all entities, and from self-awareness to awareness of all things, this framework integrates the human spirit into the universal spirit. Consequently, it broadens and enriches ethical

principles from familial and societal ethics to encompass ecological ethics. Additionally, this mode of extension through analogy serves as the moral induction principle of Song-Ming Confucianism, emphasizing different levels of love and benevolence depending on proximity. This concept contrasts with the ecological ethics of Daoism, which advocates for the equality of all entities, belief of Buddhism in the equality among all beings and notably differs from the concept of Mohism of “universal love.”

The Confucian notion of “benevolence” has historically been revered not only as a fundamental human moral sentiment rooted in familial affection, but also as an ideology that extends the sphere of moral concern from humanity to all beings’ expansive universe. It channels the human society’s tender affection characteristic towards all forms of life. The transition, from benevolence directed solely towards humans to benevolence encompassing all entities, reflects an intrinsic logical necessity and a significant ideological tradition within Confucian benevolence. This transition epitomizes the profound and inclusive moral ethos of Confucianism, which consistently advocates for compassionate treatment towards all life forms. Scholars of Song-Ming Confucianism have further expanded this compassionate sentiment from humans to encompass the natural world’s all facets, including non-living entities, such as tiles and stones. At this juncture, all entities cease to be external objects, but become integral components intricately intertwined with human destiny. The concept articulated by the Cheng brothers, asserting that “the benevolent regard everything as one,” implies that humans are indeed integral parts of the natural order, interconnected and in harmony with nature. It is through the sustained harmonious interaction between humans and nature that scenes of tranquility, such as favorable weather and bountiful harvests, are actualized. These scenes epitomize the enduring pursuit of harmony between heaven and humanity.

Although the ecological ethical thoughts of Song-Ming Confucianism exhibit characteristics of extending care from oneself to others, and from humans to all things through analogy, and differentiate closeness and degrees in their construction logic, they also possess a universal and unified connotation from another perspective. While Confucianism regards humans as superior to animals due to their moral reasoning, it does not imply that human value is higher than that of other forms of life, nor does it mean that individuals can disregard other beings’ interests for their benefit. The human life’s value is interconnected with all beings’ one in the universe, and human society is interdependent with the natural world. Heaven, earth, humans and things are interconnected; the relationship between humans and nature is one of symbiosis, coexistence and intrinsic unity. Scholars of Confucianism have drawn from the idea of the harmony between man and nature in the *Book of Changes* (Yi Jing). They have also absorbed the concepts of “the way of nature” from Taoism and the “equality of all sentient beings” from Buddhism, expanding the ideals of benevolence to encompass the entire universe. They have philosophically argued for the organic unity

of humans and nature in terms of cosmology, value theory and ethics, achieving thorough integration between human ethics and celestial ones, harmony between interpersonal ethics and ecological ones, and unity between human values and natural ones. This reflects the lofty moral concept of the unity of all things and the benevolent care for all things advocated by Confucianism, as well as the heaven and humanity's harmonious living realm.

When discussing the relationship between humans and nature, Marx proposed the concept of "humanizing nature" or "the humanization of nature," suggesting that while humans shape the environment, the environment also shapes humans. By adhering to natural laws and responsibly exploiting natural resources, humans enhance nature to be more conducive to sustainable human development, fostering a harmonious relationship between humans and nature (Fang, 2021, p. 149). Marx further pointed out that natural laws are fundamentally immutable, and what can change under different historical conditions are only the forms through which these laws are realized. Therefore, for humanity to achieve sustainable economic and social development, it must adhere to inherent natural laws, utilize "forms of realization", such as science and technology, to apply these natural laws reasonably, continuously enhance the level of human understanding, and achieve a unified development of natural resource utilization and environmental protection at a higher level.

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