CONFUCIAN COSMOLOGY and ECOLOGICAL ETHICS:
QI, LI, and the ROLE of the HUMAN

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In our search for more comprehensive and global ethics to meet the critical challenges of our contemporary situation, the world's religions are emerging as major reservoirs of depth and insight, particularly with regard to the pressing environmental crisis of our times. While the scale and scope of the crisis are being debated, few people would deny the seriousness of what we are facing as a planetary community immersed in unsustainable practices of production, consumption, and development. Clearly the world's religions have some important correctives to offer in this respect.

There is a growing realization that attitudinal changes toward nature will be essential for creating sustainable societies, in addition to new scientific and economic approaches to our environmental problems. Humans will not preserve what they do not respect. What is currently lacking is a moral basis for changing our exploitative attitudes toward nature. We have laws against homicide but not against geocide or biocide. Thus, we are without a sufficiently broad environmental ethics to alter our consciousness about the Earth and our life on it. Consequently, what should concern us is this: to what extent can the religious traditions of the world provide us with ethical resources and cosmological perspectives that can help us deal with these pressing environmental issues? What insights from the world religions might be brought to bear on the re-envisioning of the role of the human in relation to the natural world that could be the basis for needed attitudinal change?

The dynamic and holistic perspective of the Confucian worldview may have significant contributions to make in this regard, enlarging our sense of ethical terrain and moral concerns
and providing a rich source for rethinking our own relationship with nature and the meaning of virtue in light of the environmental crisis we are facing. Confucianism’s organic holisms can give us a special appreciation for the interconnectedness of all life forms and renew our sense of the sacredness of this intricate web of life. Moreover, the Confucian understanding of the dynamic vitalism underlying cosmic processes offers us a basis for reverencing nature. From a Confucian perspective, nature cannot be thought of as being composed of inert, dead matter. Rather, all life forms share the element of qi or material force. This shared psycho-physical entity becomes the basis for establishing a reciprocity between the human and non-human worlds.

In this same vein, in terms of self-cultivation and the nurturing of virtue the Confucian tradition provides a broad framework for harmonizing human life with the natural world in its doctrine of the human as a child of Cosmos and Earth, as well as in its understanding of virtues as having both a cosmological and a personal component. Thus, nature and virtue, cosmology and ethics, knowledge and action are intimately linked for the Confucians in China, Korea and Japan, along with Taiwan and Singapore.

**QI**

The Chinese have a term to describe the vibrancy and aliveness of the universe. This is qi which is translated in a variety of ways in the Classical Confucian tradition as spirit, air, or breath, and later in the Neo-Confucian tradition as material force, matter energy, vital force. It expresses the understanding that the universe is alive with vitality and resonates with life. What is especially remarkable about this ancient and enduring realization of the Chinese people is that qi is a unified field embracing both matter and energy. It is thus a matrix containing both material and spiritual life from the smallest particle to the largest visible reality. Qi courses through the universe from the constituent particles of matter to mountains and rocks, plants and trees,
animals and birds, fish and insects. All the elements--air, earth, fire, and water--are composed of *qi*. We humans, too, are alive with *qi*. It makes up our body and spirit as one integrated whole, and it activates our mind-and-heart which is a single unified reality in Chinese thought.

In other words, *qi* moves though nature, fills the elements of reality, and dynamizes our human body-mind. It is the single unifying force of all that is. It does not posit a dichotomy between nature and spirit, body and mind, matter and energy. *Qi* is one dynamic whole--the vital reality of the entire universe.

The implications of this unified view of reality become apparent to us rather quickly. One wants to know and experience this *qi* more fully. This is why most of the martial arts and exercises like *taiqi* aim to cultivate and deepen *qi*. Humans, for all their blindness, are intelligent enough to want to taste and savor this marvelous aliveness of the universe. They want to harmonize their most basic physical processes with *qi*—thus the dynamic coordination of breath and movement is at the heart of the Chinese physical arts. And arts they are—this is not just a physical toning of the body or building up of muscles. This is a spiritual exercise filled with potency for health of mind and body—a coordinated and aesthetically pleasing dance of the human system in and through the sea of *qi*.

One way to visualize *qi* is a vast ocean of energy, an infinite source of vibrant potency, a resonating field of dynamic power—*in* matter itself not separate from it. For *qi* once again is matter-energy, material force. This is the important contribution of Chinese thought to world philosophy. It is an insight and realization of particular significance for our contemporary world which has been broken apart by our Enlightenment separation of matter and spirit, of body and soul, of nature and life.
From the perspective of *qi* the world is alive with a depth of mystery, complexity, and vibrancy that we can only begin to taste and never fully exhaust. The sensual world *is* the spiritual world from the perspective of *qi*. The dynamism of each particular reality begins to present itself to us—the oak tree in our yard radiates an untold energy, the snow-covered mountains in the distance are redolent with silent *qi*, the rivers racing to the ocean are filled with the buoyancy of *qi*.

One of the earliest Confucian writers, Mencius, speaks of the great flood-like *qi*. Humans are surrounded and inundated by *qi*. We walk around completely unconscious most of the time that this ocean of energy is here—sustaining us, nourishing us, and enlivening us. *Qi* is the gift of the universe—the endlessly fecund life source unfolding before us and around us in a daily miracle of hidden joy. It is the restorative dance of the universe inviting us into its endless mystery. As we return to the Chinese sources to sift through the texts and commentaries to learn more about what becomes apparent is that the notion of *qi* is not constant but evolving. It is rather a multivalent reality that begins to reveal something of its shape and function only when seen from a variety of perspectives and texts.

In the classical Confucian tradition *qi* tends to refer more generally to the spirit which animates the universe, the breath which enlivens humans, and the air that connects all things. Even from its earliest articulation, however, it would be fair to say *qi* was never seen as an entity apart from matter. Rather, it is embedded in the natural and the human world. It animates and nourishes nature and humans. Indeed, the very Chinese character itself is said to represent the steam rising from rice, suggesting the nourishing and transforming power of *qi*. Like food, *qi* maintains life and human energy. Benjamin Schwartz observes, "The image of food even suggests the interchange of energy and substance between humans and their surrounding..."
The idea of qi as having the properties of condensation and rarefaction like steam suggests the same.

As the later Han and Neo-Confucians began to articulate their cosmological understandings, the unity of qi as matter-energy became more evident. Dong Zhongshu, the leading Han Confucian, described qi as a "limpid colorless substance" which fills the universe, "surrounds humans as water surrounds a fish" and unites all of nature. The Neo-Confucians developed the notion of qi to refer to the substance and essence of all life. It pervades and animates the universe as both matter and energy.

For the Neo-Confucian, Zhang Zai, the vibrancy of material force originates in the Great Vacuity which contains the primal, undifferentiated material force. As it integrates and disintegrates it participates in the Great Harmony of activity and tranquility. This perspective affirms the unified and real processes of change, not seeing them as illusory as the Buddhists might nor as a product of a dichotomy between non-being and being as the Daoists would. There is instead a dynamic unity of qi as seen in its operations as substance emerging in the Great Vacuity and as function operating in the Great Harmony.

**SELF CULTIVATION**

For the Confucians, self-cultivation does not lead toward transcendent bliss or otherworldly salvation or even personal enlightenment. Rather, the goal is to move toward participation in the social, political, and cosmological order of things. The continuity of self, society, and cosmos is paramount in the Confucian worldview. Thus, self-cultivation is always aimed at preparing the individual to contribute more fully to the needs of the contemporary world. And for the Confucians this implies a primacy of continual study and learning. Education is at the heart of self-cultivation. This is not simply book learning or scholarship for the sake of
careerism. It is rather education--leading oneself out of oneself into the world at large. More than anything, then, the role of the human is to discover one’s place in the larger community of life. And this community is one of ever expanding and intricately connected concentric circles of family, school, society, politics, nature, and the universe. We are embedded in a web of relationships and one fulfills one’s role by cultivating one’s inner spontaneities so that one can be more responsive to each of these layers of commitments.

For the Confucians this is all set within the context of an organic, dynamic, holistic universe that is alive with qi and imprinted with li. Finding one’s role is realizing how one completes the great triad of Heaven and Earth. As we rediscover our cosmological being in the macrocosm of things, our role in the microcosm of our daily lives will become more fulfilling, more joyful, more spontaneous. The pace and rhythm of our lives will be responsive to the rhythms of the day, the changes of the seasons, and the movements of the stars. The continuity of our being with the being of the universe will enliven and enrich our activities. By attuning ourselves to the patterns of change and continuity in the natural world, we find our niche.

We thus take our place in the enormous expanse of the universe. We complete the great triad of Heaven and Earth and participate in the transforming and nourishing powers of all things. In so doing we will cultivate the land appropriately, nurture life forms for sustainability, regulate social relations adeptly and fairly, honor political commitments for the common good, and thus participate in the great transformation of things. This will be manifest as our own inner authenticity resonates with the authenticity of the universe itself.

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i This was one of the main objectives of the Harvard conference series and edited volumes on Religions of the World and Ecology.
