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Dialogue between Confucianism and Holmes Rolston, III—Its Significance for Theology in the Planetary Climate Crisis

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Abstract: Holmes Rolston, III examined the significance of Asian thought for Western evaluations of nature and questioned if Asian Romanticism can inform the realistic decision making required for practice. However, Rolston's general evaluation of Asian thought ignored Confucianism. This study launches a dialogue between Rolston and contemporary Confucianism on environmental philosophy and highlights the following points in response to Rolston: First, Confucianism is grounded on an "anthropocosmic" worldview and bases its environmental ethics on its affirmation of the "virtue of life and growth" and the related vision of "unity of heaven and human beings"; it is thus an objective environmental virtue ethics with the characteristics of sacred humanism that avoids anthropocentrism. Second, Confucian ethics is built on the premise of "one principle with various manifestations" and advocates for practicing benevolence through "love with gradations", which avoids an excessively idealistic ecocentrism. Furthermore, Confucianism may adopt Rolston's recommendation for Asian thought concerning the incorporation of evolutionary biology into Asian traditions to facilitate their own transformation and thus contribute to environmental philosophy. Upon an exploration of the compatibility and possible reciprocal illumination between Confucianism and Rolston, this paper points out the implications of the above dialogue for theology in the planetary climate crisis.

Keywords: Confucianism; Holmes Rolston, III; environmental philosophy; theology; planetary climate crisis



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1. Introduction

The planetary climate crisis is becoming increasingly severe, posing a threat to human civilization (Steffen et al. 2018; Hansen et al. 2013). In the face of these challenges, human societies not only confront adversity but also bear profound responsibility. One of these responsibilities is to transform the values within cultures that are detrimental to the natural world. As religion serves as a significant source of values, the assistance of religious studies is required for the reformation of these values (LeVasseur 2021). Additionally, every religion bears the responsibility to respond and adjust to the climate crisis. As one of the representatives of Asian civilization, what kind of response can Confucianism offer?¹

Holmes Rolston, III, widely recognized as the father of environmental ethics, has made remarkable contributions in the realm of environmental philosophy (Palmer and Cooper 2001, p. 291). He does not limit his exploration to the Western tradition and includes Asian philosophies like Daoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism to evaluate their role in shaping the Western evaluation of nature (Rolston 1987). It is interesting to note that, while Rolston investigated multiple Asian philosophies, he missed out Confucianism.² Often, Western academia categorizes Confucianism as "anthropocentric."³ However, recent developments in comparative environmental philosophy and the field of religion and ecology have seen scholars delve deeper into Confucianism's ecological aspects, gradually giving rise to Confucian environmental philosophy.⁴ Mary Evelyn Tucker and Tu Weim-

ing have shed light on the Confucian worldview, arguing that it is not anthropocentric but “anthropocosmic” (Tucker 2009, p. 163; Tu 2001, p. 245).

In the background of Rolston’s inquiries into Asian philosophy (which we discuss in detail later) and the reconstruction of Confucian environmental philosophy, the questions posed from the standpoint of Confucianism are as follows: Is it possible for the often-overlooked Confucian environmental philosophy to provide a response to Rolston, and, if so, in what manner? If we were to adopt Rolston’s approach to investigate Asian philosophy, how would we engage with Confucianism?

This research project aims to facilitate a reciprocal transformation between Confucianism and Rolston’s environmental philosophy. Given the significant influence of Protestant Christianity, particularly Evangelicalism, in China and the United States, two prominent global powers, it becomes imperative to address the planet’s climate crisis by reforming the eco-theology associated with Evangelicalism. Evangelicalism places emphasis on individual salvation while neglecting the salvation of the natural world (Santmire 1985, pp. 1–2). Considering this, how would the transformed Confucianism and Rolston’s environmental philosophy illuminate Christian ecological theology? What implications does this dialogue hold for ecological theology in the face of a planetary climate crisis?

To tackle these questions, this paper begins by outlining Rolston’s comparative research approach concerning environmental philosophy. Following this, it facilitates a conversation between Confucianism and Rolston, leveraging the contemporary discourse on Confucian environmental philosophy. Lastly, this paper highlights the implications of this dialogue for ecological theology in the planetary climate crisis.

2. Rolston’s Approach

Rolston’s piece “Can the East Help the West to Value Nature?” serves as the concluding article on environmental ethics in a 1987 special issue of the journal, *Philosophy East and West*. Prior to his work, five separate articles penned by various academics had been presented, concentrating on the potential of Asian philosophies to encourage Western reflection on environmental ethics, notably Daoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism (Ames 1987). These perspectives sparked Rolston’s discussion on Asian thought. Unlike his colleagues, such as John Baird Callicott, who express strong optimism for the future of comparative environmental philosophy, Rolston’s approach is marked by scrutiny and shaped by his scientific philosophy (Rolston 1987, pp. 172–90).

From an affirmative standpoint, Rolston maintains that Asian philosophy can aid Western thought in reevaluating and rectifying its philosophical premises regarding nature, thereby leading to more responsible environmental choices (Rolston 1987, p. 173). He urges that focus should be placed on the dominant ideas within each philosophical system, presuming that they hold positive implications for environmental ethics (Rolston 1987, p. 174). To avoid superficiality, he recommends delving into specific concepts for meaningful discourse. Following this rationale, Rolston explores the potential influences of Daoism’s *yin/yang* complementarity, the concepts of *karma* and reincarnation in Hinduism and Buddhism, and Advaita Vedānta of Hinduism on the Western understanding of nature (Rolston 1987, pp. 175–89). He envisions that these Asian philosophies can assist the West in adopting a less anthropocentric framework and a heightened sensitivity toward nature (Rolston 1987, p. 174).

For instance, Rolston suggests that the *Advaita Vedānta* in Hinduism, the concept of emptiness in Buddhism, and Zen’s perspective of “every particle of dust contains the universe and engenders all its powers” (Rolston 1987, p. 181) could greatly benefit the West’s understanding of “individuals in ecosystems, diverse organisms integrated into a single biotic community, and plurality in unity” (Rolston 1987, p. 181). He views the *Avatamsaka Sutra*’s depiction of Indra’s net as a metaphor that can help the West relinquish arrogance, acknowledge human beings as one among many, reject the assertion of dominion over nature, and thereby return to harmony with nature.

Yet, Rolston also acknowledges the practical difficulties in applying these philosophies, such as Indra’s net model, to real-world scenarios. He illustrates this point with

a case study involving a decision about whether to develop the Colorado River to cater to urban water needs, which would potentially lead to the extinction of a local species, the humpback chub. He argues that the application of Asian philosophies like Indra's net model, which equates humans and chubs, does not offer practical solutions to such predicaments (Rolston 1987, p. 185).⁵ Rolston contends that such attempts may come from category errors, neglecting the poetic nature of Asian philosophies and the details of the real world. He insists that, without a suitable method to adapt Asian thought to Western reality, the former cannot assist the latter (Rolston 1987, p. 186).

In conclusion, Rolston points out that the West anticipates responses from the East that can elucidate the complexities of evolutionary ecology, enhance the appraisal of nature, and guide practical environmental ethics, without requiring a conversion to Asian thought (Rolston 1987, p. 189). He also expresses hope for a unified East–West environmental ethics (Rolston 1989, p. 30). This sets the stage for the following question: Can Confucianism provide an answer to Rolston's viewpoints and aid the West in refining its understanding of nature and decision making? The subsequent section initiates a dialogue between Confucianism and Rolston to explore this question.

3. Confucianism and Rolston

In accordance with Rolston's standards for selecting Asian philosophies for comparative research with Western thought, the concepts chosen should be central to their respective systems and have a positive influence on ecological ethics. When evaluating contemporary Confucian environmental philosophy against this measure, and bearing in mind Rolston's emphasis on ethical practice, this paper engages with the specific Confucian concepts of "the virtue of life and growth" (生生之德 *Shengsheng zhide*) and "the unity of Heaven and human beings" (天人合一 *Tianren heyi*), "one principle with divergent manifestations" (理一分殊 *Liyi fenshu*), and "love with gradations" (愛有差等 *Aiyou chadeng*) in the ensuing dialogue with Rolston. The rationale for selecting these concepts is separately elucidated in the subsequent discussion.

3.1. The Objectivity of Confucian Environmental Virtue Ethics

Confucianism, characterized by its synthesis of multiplicity and unity, contains a variety of schools of thought. Nevertheless, "The virtue of life and growth" can be deemed the foundational spirit of Confucianism. Some scholars even consider the concept of "life" to be a central theme from the pre-Qin era to the Song and Ming dynasties and onward to the major philosophers of the Ming and Qing dynasties.⁶ Unlike Western mainstream thought, which posits an alienation or even hostility between humanity and nature, or views nature as a meaningless backdrop or a mere resource provider, pre-industrial Confucianism was untouched by Western dualism. Confucians endeavored to understand nature through virtue, emotion, and intellect, based on human experiences and reflections within nature, thus formulating a cosmic view of the "virtue of life and growth".⁷

As noted in the Introduction, the Confucian worldview encapsulates the "anthropocosmic" worldview. Tu asserts that this worldview precisely embodies the Confucian advocacy of "The unity of Heaven and human beings" (Tu 2001, pp. 243–44). Confucianism perceives the universe, in its spontaneous organic process, as embodying three themes: "continuity, wholeness, and dynamism" (Tu 2001, p. 108). "The virtue of life and growth", as the driving principle and energy, promotes the universe's change, succession, and growth. As stated in the *I Ching* (易經 *Yijing*), "The transformation of *yin* and *yang*, and the continuous life and growth are called changes".⁸ Inspired by the *I Ching*, Zhou Dunyi (周敦頤) elaborated his cosmology, constructing a theory of how everything is created and operated. What he wanted to present in *Taiji Diagram* (太極圖說 *Taiji tushuo*) was to explain the operations of "Taiji", "yin and yang". In this way, he illustrated the theory of how all things were formed (Zhou 1992, pp. 4–13).

Confucianism not only theorizes about "The virtue of life and growth" but also actualizes it in practice. As recorded in the *Survey of Song and Yuan Confucianists* (宋元學案 *Song-*

Yuan xuean), Zhou Dunyi refrained from removing the grass growing before his window. When queried about this, he responded: “It’s in accordance with my own ideas”. Seeing the others’ lack of comprehension, he elaborated: “Observe the phenomena of life and growth in heaven and earth” (Z. Huang 1992, pp. 66–78). From the ontology of Heaven and Earth giving birth to all things, Zhou Dunyi led to the practice of not removing the grass in front of the window, thus linking the Confucian concept of “The virtue of life and growth” with practice. This embodies Zhou Dunyi’s interpretation of “The unity of Heaven and human beings”: human actions should comply with the way of Heaven.

As indicated by the Cheng brothers (二程 *Er Cheng*), Heaven has the “virtue of life and growth”, and humans, in inheriting this virtue, express “benevolence” (仁 *ren*), thus providing cosmological backing for Confucian “benevolence” (He 2000, p. 36). Those who achieve the finest qualities can integrate their life with the universe. Qian Mu 錢穆 posits that Chinese culture has consistently conformed to nature and can “integrate with nature’s way” (Qian 1991, p. 94). As inheritors of the “virtue of life and growth”, people need to demonstrate “benevolence” in their relations, thereby propagating the “virtue of Heaven”. Apart from interpersonal relations, as exemplified by Zhou Dunyi, the relationship between humans and nature is another domain where “benevolence” is manifested. Confucians express this approach as “being affectionate towards parents (family), cherishing people, and caring about things.” (親親仁民愛物 *Qinqin renmin aiwu*), gradually forming a sequential environmental virtue ethics.⁹

Rolston, in his response to environmental virtue ethics, acknowledges its validity as humans need to align with nature’s rhythm and acquire corresponding virtues (Rolston 2005, p. 61). However, he contends that the notion of nature shaping virtues is a half-truth, and, if taken as a whole, it will be absurd (Rolston 2005, p. 62). Rolston argues that, while the pursuit of human excellence is a key motivation for environmental virtue ethics, it only forms part of the broader environmental ethics framework. If this partial truth is seen as the whole, the focus on the self-improvement of virtues becomes primary (Rolston 2005, p. 77). Rolston believes that environmental virtue ethics is overly focused on humans, whereas we should also pay attention to “values without us.” (Rolston 2005, p. 69). His criticism of environmental virtue ethics primarily lies in its anthropocentric tendency—that is, shifting the focus of environmental ethics from the intrinsic value of external nature to human virtues. However, Confucian environmental virtue ethics, not affected by the dichotomy of subject–object thinking, avoids the trap of anthropocentrism that Rolston warns against.¹⁰

Firstly, the “virtue of life and growth”, the source of environmental virtue, objectively exists in Heaven and is not influenced by human culture or social constructs. As Confucius said, “Does Heaven speak? The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being created, but does Heaven say anything?” (Yang and Yang 2000, p. 171). Confucius made this statement in response to his disciples’ question about how to record his thoughts without his words. Confucius wanted to remain silent, not to make arguments with words, and to use the analogy of Heaven. Confucius believed that life and growth exhibit objectivity that is not influenced by human culture.

The birth of all things, as understood by Confucians, does not require human creation but is perceived through interaction with nature. Heaven does not need words to express its virtues, nor does it rely on human concepts to construct its value. Instead, it presents its inherent virtue of life and growth through objective facts. Xunzi 荀子 also said, “Heaven has its constant ways, it does not exist for Yao 堯, nor does it perish for Jie 桀.” (Xunzi 2001, p. 96). Confucianism extracts the objectivity of Heaven from empirical facts, grounding Confucian environmental virtues in the objective source of the “virtue of life and growth.” Such an emphasis on the external “life-giving” virtue aligns with Rolston’s view: “But we fully flourish not with the excellence of an ‘own self’ but in celebrating the display of excellences in the surrounding world, both there with us and there without us. Humans are the only species capable of enjoying the promise of culture; humans are also the only species capable of enjoying the splendid panorama of life that vitalizes this planet.

Humans can and ought to inherit the Earth; we become rich with this inheritance, as and only as we oversee a richness of planetary biodiversity that embraces and transcends us" (Rolston 2005, p. 77).

Secondly, "benevolence", a manifestation of "heaven-man unity", is inherent in human nature through Heaven, and its concern lies in human nature as defined by the Heavenly Mandate, not in virtues constructed by humans. The source of both "virtue" and "benevolence" is nature, which gives birth to all things. These two virtues share the same origin and resonate with each other. However, due to the existential state of different roles between Heaven and human beings, humans also need to "improve their virtues." (正德 *Zhengde*) Through the practice of "sincerity" (誠 *Cheng*) and "understanding" (明 *Ming*), humans fulfil their potential and "participate in the nurturing of nature" (參贊化育 *Canzan huayu*) (Lin 2013, p. 342). Therefore, the virtues of Confucian environmental ethics originate from the virtue of the Heavenly Mandate and require human efforts to cultivate them, resulting in a divine and human ethics.

Lastly, the framework of Confucian environmental virtue ethics is not "how nature benefits our virtues" (Rolston 2005, p. 76); instead, the environmental ethics is derived from a framework of human–universe unity. Even though Confucianism advocates aesthetic experiences in nature, this experience is based on the harmonious coexistence of humans and the universe, not solely on human subjective feelings. This point aligns with Rolston's argument that it is incorrect to start environmental ethics with aesthetics (Rolston 2002, pp. 127–40). Confucianism, from the cosmogony of the "virtue of life and growth" to the environmental virtue ethics of "heaven-man unity", precisely emphasizes the "objectivity of the divine Subject" (Torrance 1969, p. 5). Tu suggests that, for humans to achieve "heaven-man unity", they must harmonize with the heavenly way in terms of sensation and thought, thereby completing the inner transformation and "interflowing with the spirit of Heaven and Earth" (Tu 1998, p. 118).

This approach suggests that Confucianism is a "holistic humanism", not a "secular humanism." (Tu 2001, pp. 247–49). Consequently, Confucian environmental virtue ethics, based on the "anthropocosmic" worldview, from the "virtue of life and growth" to "heaven-man unity", presents an objectified moral view with elements of sacred humanism. This view can avoid an anthropocentric stance, focusing instead on the intrinsic virtues of nature and the universe, rather than purely on human virtues.

Rolston's discussion about the cosmogenic process suggests that he would not oppose the Confucian approach to environmental ethics. Rolston believes that the essence of "nature" unfolds as a kind of "generative creativity" (Rolston 1999, p. xiv). This understanding of nature's creativity is very similar to the Confucian "virtue of life and growth". From a natural science perspective, Rolston would point out that the creation and transmission of values in the natural world and human culture are not separate but closely connected. From the universe's fine-tuning suitable for the generation of life to the sharing, distribution, and regeneration of values by genes, and to reciprocal altruism, all originate from the source of good, not from the source of selfish genes (Rolston 1999, p. 85).

The Confucian view from the "virtue of life and growth" to the "heaven-man unity" environmental ethics also echoes Rolston's approach to deriving ethics based on cosmology. By recognizing the generative creativity in nature and its connection to human culture and values, Confucianism offers a unique perspective on environmental ethics that can be reconciled with Rolston's views. This perspective recognizes the inherent value in nature and the universe, and the importance of human interaction with and respect for these natural systems.

Overall, the Confucian approach to environmental ethics offers a nuanced and philosophically rich framework for understanding our relationship with the environment. It balances the importance of human virtue and excellence with a recognition of the inherent value and "life-giving" virtue of nature and the universe. By doing so, it avoids the pitfalls of anthropocentrism and presents a more holistic and integrative approach to environmental ethics.

3.2. The Practicality of Confucian Environmental Ethics

In the Confucian tradition, the “virtue of life and growth” practices under the guidance of “one principle with various manifestations”. This principle, a defining attribute of Neo-Confucian, is not a fringe idea but rather the mainstream in Confucian philosophy (Jing 2019, pp. 125–38). It was introduced by Cheng Yi 程頤 as a response to Yang Shi’s 楊時 skepticism about Zhang Zai’s 張載 *Western Inscription* (西銘 *Xi ming*), which seemed to align more with Mo-tse’s (墨子 *Mo Zi*) notions of universal love.

Cheng Yi replied:

“*Western Inscription* advances the truth of Confucian tradition and at the same time has righteousness. It expands on what the past sages had not developed and is on par with Mencius’ theory of the original goodness of human nature and the cultivation of *qi*. The Mohist theory does not reach the level of *Western Inscription*. Whereas *Western Inscription* states one principle with various manifestations, Mohist’s theory has two unities with no differences. The disadvantage of differentiation is that selfishness wins, and benevolence is lost. The disadvantage of no distinction is that there is no righteousness in love. The way to realize benevolence is to establish distinction and emphasize unity to prevent selfishness. If someone emphasizes the absence of distinction and indulges in universal love to the extreme of fatherlessness, righteousness will be destroyed”. (Cheng and Cheng 2008, p. 609)

Cheng Yi posited that *Western Inscription* found a balance between unity and duality, emphasizing benevolence within differentiation and righteousness within unity. Though this concept evolved into metaphysical discussions, it was fundamentally grounded in ethical practice. The concept of Unity in Duality enhances the comprehension of benevolent love in practice, and it is applied in specific, real-world circumstances.

As per Wang Yangming’s 王陽明 discourse:

“For example, one will use hands and feet to protect one’s body, even though all of them are of the same body. This does not mean to despise the hands and feet. Similarly, one loves both animals and plants, but one may also tolerate feeding animals with plants. One loves both animals and human beings, but one will tolerate butchering animals for feeding parents, banqueting guests or religious sacrifices. One loves both parents and strangers, but if one has a minimal amount of food sufficient for only one person’s survival, one will give it to one’s parent rather than to a stranger ”. (Wang 2008, pp. 346–47)

It is clear that Confucian love is executed in a particular order, guided by reason. This reason relates to innate knowledge, expressing love with varying degrees of intensity based on the relationship. Hence, the concept of “one principle with various manifestations” embodies an environmental ethical practice of “love with gradations”. Confucianism handles the practice of “the virtue of life and growth” in a hierarchical manner, rather than with an unrealistic approach. This perspective responds to Rolston’s concerns about the over-idealization of Asian thought. Contrary to certain Asian philosophies, Confucianism seeks to engage with the complexities of reality rather than with an unrealistic unity. Its attention to real-world conditions has a strong practical rationale.

Furthermore, “one principle with various manifestations” underscores the systemic value of unity. The “virtue of life and growth” does not revere a single life form, but rather views nature as a collective whole. This aligns with Rolston’s recognition of nature’s sanctity and his approach to holistic environmental ethics.¹¹

In summary, Confucianism, based on the anthropocosmic worldview, executes environmental ethics in a realistic and holistic manner, eschewing the impracticality of eco-centrism. However, for Confucian environmental ethics to be effectively applied in contemporary contexts, it must be modernized via natural sciences and undergo self-transformation.

3.3. Human Responsibility: The Catalyst of Biology

Confucianism holds that humans, originating from nature, should embody “the virtue of life and growth”, manifesting their inherent moral goodness to become benevolent persons in unity with Heaven and Earth. Additionally, humans should actively contribute to the nurturing of Heaven and Earth, which is the sanctity and dignity of humanity. Thus, the purposes of nature and humans are not separate; the human purpose unfolds as an extension of nature’s purpose and should not conflict with it. Confucianism links human existence to nature, fulfilling Alister E. McGrath’s advanced requirement for re-enchanting nature: “To re-enchant nature is not merely to gain a new respect for its integrity and well-being; it is to throw open the doors to a deeper level of existence” (McGrath 2002, p. 186).

To apply the environmental ethical implications of the Confucian concepts “the virtue of life and growth” and “the unity of Heaven and human beings” to contemporary situations, it is necessary to take Rolston’s advice: “The East needs considerable reformulation of its sources before it can preach much to the West” (Rolston 1987, p. 189). Specifically, “the virtue of life and growth” needs to be interpreted in conjunction with modern ecological science, thereby giving direction to Confucian environmental philosophy. While Confucian observations of nature point out that the process of the ongoing creation of life is an inherent expression of virtue, they do not specify the direction of “life and growth”. Rolston’s interpretation of the direction of natural history can supplement this: “If we look back at natural history, we find that there is one direction, and it is a progressive one, namely, progress toward the balance of biodiversity and the complexity of life” (Rolston 1999, pp. 9–14). If Confucianism adopts this concept of transformation, it will define the direction of “life and growth” as balanced with biodiversity and the complexity of life. Then, Confucianism will naturally support the protection of biodiversity and its three dimensions: genetic diversity, species diversity, and ecosystem diversity (Gaston and John 2004, pp. 15–17). Similarly, Confucianism will also affirm the basic demands of humans, who are at the pinnacle of life’s complexity, and the affirmation of a unique human position aligns with Confucian tradition.

Furthermore, Confucianism would support the preservation of nature’s ability to generate complexity and diversity. From a negative perspective, the current severe ecological damage weakens nature’s ability for “life and growth”, and, Confucianism, which emphasizes human responsibility, would have stronger motivation to promote rescue and healing work in nature.¹² Thus, the Confucian transformation of the “life and growth” view, combined with biology, can give philosophical support to environmental ethics in a Confucian way while also clarifying human responsibility to participate in “the nurturing of heaven and earth.”

Given China’s current economic development reaching a critical juncture where the feasibility of rapid growth is increasingly in question, the integration of the Confucian “life and growth” view presents a timely opportunity to transcend the narrow confines of a quasi-religious, material-centric approach to development (Miller et al. 2014, pp. 2–6). By embracing the holistic advancement of morality, self-cultivation, and spirituality in Confucianism, China can broaden its developmental objectives and embark on a more comprehensive sustainability paradigm. Considering the profound impact of China’s economic, political, and cultural dynamics since the onset of the reform and opening-up in the 1980s, the transformation of Chinese development holds the potential to foster the multidimensional flourishing of humanity and diverse forms of life within China and worldwide (Miller 2017, pp. 147–66).

Confucian environmental virtue ethics, from the worldview of “the virtue of life and growth” to the practice of “love with gradations”, emphasizes the objectivity of nature without undermining the position of human morality. In the process of dialogue with Rolston, Confucian environmental ethics understood from a scientific situation does not neglect genuine human emotions, rational cognition, or corresponding responsibilities. Therefore, Confucian environmental virtue ethics can be seen as humanistic holism under the “anthropocosmic” framework (Marietta 1995, pp. 208–10). This standpoint does

not neglect the value of the whole ecology under the background of natural science, nor does it overlook the role of human culture and different real situations. For Rolston's environmental philosophy, the Confucian environmental philosophy based on the view of self-cultivation can help Rolston value the significance of human virtue and spiritual transformation for environmental protection.

Merely undergoing conceptual shifts without accompanying effective and direct action may not suffice to effectively tackle the planetary climate crisis. Yi-Fu Tuan astutely observed that the alignment between conceptual understandings of nature and corresponding actions is not consistently harmonious. Throughout Chinese history, instances of both detrimental and beneficial large-scale interventions altering natural landscapes have occurred (Tuan 1968). I posit that the prevailing dominance of agricultural production in Chinese society during those periods played a pivotal role in shaping such actions. With a primary focus on practical agricultural interests and a dearth of ecological knowledge, sustainable approaches were not necessarily chosen. However, in the contemporary era characterized by the ascent of modern ecology and the urgent climate crisis that intertwines with human well-being, there lies an opportunity to amalgamate ecological principles with the revitalization of our traditional cultural values. This entails, for instance, the modernization of the Confucian concepts expounded herein. As envisioned by Tuan, seizing the challenges posed by the current climate crisis could serve as a propitious occasion to harmonize the dichotomy between ideas and actions.

To seize this opportunity to address the broader intersection of religion and the climate crisis, it is beneficial to approach the dialogue between Confucianism and Rolston from the perspective of Christian theology. Then, from the perspective of comparative theology, what inspiration does the above dialogue provide for eco-theology?

4. Significance for Theology in the Planetary Climate Crisis

The dominant ecological theology presented by evangelical Christian communities is one of stewardship, emphasizing the responsibility to care for nature. Although it indeed advocates for environmental initiatives, it predominantly emphasizes God's initial creation, often neglecting to consider God's ongoing, dynamic involvement in the world, such as God's continual creative actions and sustaining work. This viewpoint may inadvertently diminish the endeavor of nature conservation to an obligation toward God, instead of a practice deeply grounded in a genuine love for the natural world. Furthermore, it fails to underline the profound, inherent connection between humans and nature (Lai 2001, pp. 38–39). Consequently, evangelical Christianity finds it challenging to fully embrace and endorse the environmental movement to confront the urgent planetary climate crisis (Clements 2014; Ecklund 2017; Lowe et al. 2022). However, the amalgamation of Confucian philosophy and Rolston's theology can offer a more holistic understanding of the stewardship approach.

Primarily, Confucian environmental virtue ethics stresses the heavenly virtues rather than the completion of a commissioned task. Confucianism advocates that individuals are responsible for actualizing their inherent virtues given by Heaven, ultimately transforming into benevolent beings who foster a deep love for the natural world. This benevolence, stemming from the divine mandate (*tianming* 天命), should be visible in relationships, embodying a life harmonious with heavenly virtues. In Christian terms, the sites for the renewal of the redeemed group's life in relationships are not restricted to family, church, or society but extend to the natural world as well. They should emulate God's benevolent heart rather than merely perform their duties.

God's love for all things in nature aligns with the teachings of the Bible. When God called Jonah to deliver the message of judgment to the people of Nineveh, His underlying motive was to encourage repentance, thus preventing disaster. This is because God's love extended not only to the lives of the people of Nineveh but also to the "many cattle" (Jonah 4:11 [NIV]) that dwelt among them. God's affection is not exclusive to animals; His love for all things in the world is further demonstrated when the Word becomes flesh and descends

into the world (Miller 2022, pp. 238–39). Furthermore, the incarnate Christ will guide all things to unite in Him (Sittler 2000, pp. 38–50). Eventually, God will come to dwell with human beings (Revelation 21:3 [NIV]).

Both evangelical Christianity and Confucianism echo a similar ethos of divine love. By assimilating Confucian environmental virtue ethics into its theology and unifying this with biblical tradition in a holistic manner, evangelical Christianity can imbue its notion of stewardship with a profound sense of benevolence. This would subsequently enhance the emotional depth and resonance of ecological theology. Consequently, this would enable evangelical Christianity to engage in measures addressing the global climate crisis with a greater emotional investment and depth of commitment.

Secondly, the concept of the “unity of heaven and human beings” in environmental virtue ethics also serves as a method for understanding the profound meaning of human existence. From Rolston’s perspective, the environmental practice spurred by benevolence is a work propelled by walking with God. Rolston interprets how God creates and enriches values in natural and cultural history as follows: “The divine spirit is the giver of life, pervasively present over the millennia. God is the atmosphere of possibilities, the metaphysical environment in, with, and under first the natural and later also the cultural environment, luring the Earthen histories upslope. God orchestrates such self-organizing, steadily elevating the possibilities, making for storied achievements, enriching the values generated” (Rolston 1999, p. 367). Not only does God create from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*), but He is also in a constant state of genesis. As Confucius states, “The four seasons pursue their courses, and all things are continually being created.” Humans have a responsibility to align with God’s continuous creation through ecosystems, or in Confucian terms, to “participate in the cultivation of heaven and earth” and facilitate the flourishing of life. Consequently, environmental protection is not a cultural by-product, or meaningless work in the end of times, but an eternal task undertaken in partnership with God.¹³

In this divine journey, humans experience a continual transformation of themselves within God’s created “atmosphere of possibilities” (Rolston 1999, p. 367), discerning the multidimensional meaning of life’s richness within existential experiences. Such an approach can fundamentally resist the ecological destruction brought about by consumerism, a quasi-religion. This pursuit of existence’s meaning within the realm of unity between Heaven and human beings can deepen the theological meaning of the stewardship role.

In conclusion, the prevalent ecological theology of stewardship within evangelical Christian communities, while supportive of environmental practices, may overlook the intricate bond between humans and nature. Incorporating the Confucian principles of the “unity of heaven and human beings” and Rolston’s theological perspectives can enrich this approach, underscoring a love for nature and our deep connections with the world around us. This fusion can help us better comprehend and execute our role as stewards of the Earth, guided by profound benevolence and commitment to the divine mandate of caring for all creation. The ongoing planetary climate crisis represents more than just an environmental challenge—it signifies a profound crisis in human cognition, morality, and spirituality. This article endeavors to tackle the deteriorating state of our ecological environment by incorporating interdisciplinary insights and reimagining theology for a contemporary context.

Some scholars who have analyzed the resolutions and campaigns of evangelicals over the past forty years have found that the resistance to environmental initiatives within conservative Christianity comes from apprehensions about the concept of “stewardship” evolving into a form of nature worship reminiscent of neo-paganism. Moreover, the presence of apocalyptic beliefs regarding the “end times” reinforces the notion that there is little value in being concerned about global warming (Zaleha and Szasz 2015). My research delves into the development of environmental philosophy, employing a comparative theological lens that specifically targets the evangelical standpoint. The primary objective is to illustrate that the concept of stewardship, when properly understood, does not inevitably result in the adoption of paganistic nature worship. Instead, it highlights the importance

of acknowledging and appreciating the manifestations of God's grace within the natural world. Additionally, I assert that Christian involvement in environmental endeavors holds profound and enduring significance, as it constitutes a ministry that transcends temporal boundaries, underscoring the essence and eternity of collaboration with the divine.

5. Conclusions

To summarize, Confucian environmental ethics from the stance of “the virtue of life and growth” to “the unity of Heaven and human beings” embodies a sacred humanism, effectively avoiding an anthropocentric bias. Confucianism, following “one principle with divergent manifestations”, sidesteps the unrealistic stance of eco-centrism by practicing “love with gradations.” This approach of environmental virtue ethics resolves the conflict between anthropocentrism and eco-centrism and effectively addresses Rolston's critical questions surrounding environmental virtue ethics and Asian thought.

Moreover, Confucianism can utilize biological insights to interpret its tradition, thus contributing significantly to environmental philosophy. The blending of Confucian principles and the theological perspectives of certain scholars presents a promising approach to developing an ecological theology that is practical, biblical, and deeply rooted in love for nature. This approach, by fully acknowledging the complex relationship between humans and nature, offers a more profound and satisfying understanding of our role as stewards of the Earth.

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Notes

- ¹ Regarding the influence of the Confucian views of nature and ethical axiology outside of academics, according to Robert P. Weller's work “Chinese Cosmology and the Environment”, he presents empirical evidence supporting the notion that traditional Chinese thought holds a vibrant reservoir of ideas regarding the relationship between humans and nature. Weller emphasizes that these ideas, both in Buddhist and Confucian teachings, had important implications for human relations with the environment. They continue to thrive and exert influence across various aspects of Chinese society (Weller 2011, pp. 127–36).
- ² Rolston mentioned Confucianism, but it was in the context of discussing Daoism, where he brought up the tense relationship between Daoism and Confucianism (Rolston 1987, p. 181). Rolston did not delve into the environmental philosophy of Confucianism. Furthermore, in his subsequent intellectual endeavors, he never addressed his omission concerning Confucianism.
- ³ “Anthropocentric” and “Anthropocentrism” are not necessarily negative (Hargrove 1992). In the face of the ongoing climate crisis and the overwhelming influence of human activities, the task of environmental ethics does not solely lie in the dichotomy between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism (Sorgen 2020). Instead, it calls for a focus on ecological values that transcend human beings and are rooted in the interconnectedness of all living entities. Furthermore, by acknowledging the distinct position of human beings within this ecological framework, a responsible environmental ethics should be derived. Additionally, it is essential to develop contextual environmental ethics that align with ecological science, allowing for the construction of diverse, holistic, and inclusive environmental ethics in different cultures (Marietta 1995; Minter 1998; Hourdequin 2021).
- ⁴ The majority of scholars involved in the construction of comparative environmental philosophy and the discipline of religion and ecology include J. Baird Collicott, Tucker, John Grim, Celia Deane-Drummond, Willis Jenkins, John Hart, Tu Weiming, and Cheng Chung-Ying. For some related publications, see (Collicott and McRae 2014; Jenkins 2008; Jenkins et al. 2017; Deane-Drummond and Bedford-Strohm 2011; Hart 2017; Tu 2001; Cheng 1986).

- 5 Rolston's understanding of Indra's net appears to be flawed. The real significance of Indra's net lies in the concept of interdependence, rather than equality.
- 6 Liang Shuming said, "In my mind, the Confucian principle is creating." See (Liang 1999, p. 122). Thomé Fang even summed up the main idea of his essays collection with "virtue of creative creativity." (Virtue of life and growth). See (Fu 2007, p. 89).
- 7 Thomé Fang was amazed at the "wholeness of life in man and in the world" developed by Chinese culture without outside influences and the "pervading unity of Man and Nature", which was advocated together by Daoism, Confucianism, and Moism. See (Fang 1980, p. 2).
- 8 The English translation is by the author, and the Chinese text is from (Huang and Zhang 2012, p. 335).
- 9 Huang Yong used Wang Yangming's teachings as an example to illustrate that Confucianism can derive an environmental virtue ethics (Y. Huang 2017, pp. 52–59).
- 10 In my scholarly endeavor, I shall undertake the task of elucidating the environmental virtue ethics by drawing upon the "virtue of life and growth" and the "unity between heaven and human beings". Furthermore, I intend to delve into the realm of Confucian perspectives regarding the direction of "life and growth", employing Rolston's interpretations of the evolutionary historical framework. Notably, a parallel endeavor undertaken by Miller serves as a reference, wherein he meticulously examines the realm of sustainability through the prism of Daoism, subsequently constructing the Daoist environmental philosophy in light of the ecological exigencies of our modern era (Miller 2017).
- 11 Rolston describes the Earth's "enthraling creativity" as "sacred". He states that, if there is any place that can be considered "holy ground, it is the promising Earth" (Rolston 2006, p. 313). For further exploration of Rolston's holistic environmental ethics approach, see (Kawall 2015, p. 18).
- 12 If we approach the issue from a Confucian perspective that emphasizes compassion in fulfilling environmental ethics, then humans should intervene in the suffering of animals within the natural state. The debate regarding whether humans should intervene in animal suffering can be found in Oscar Horta's article (Horta 2017).
- 13 John Polkinghorne, in his discussion of the relationship between Christian eschatology and natural science, suggests that the new creation is not a second creation ex nihilo, but rather a renewal built upon the foundation of the original creation. The new creation allows for the development and freedom of individuals in a closer relationship with God. See (Polkinghorne 2006, p. 70).

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