
**Response to Seth D. Clippard,
'Zhu Xi and the Instrumental Value of Nature'**

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Seth D. Clippard's basic argument is that the Cheng-Zhu school of Confucian thought and practice might be better-suited than the Lu-Wang school to provide a basis for a practical environmental worldview. The two major phases of the argument, as I read it, are (1) that the Lu-Wang approach presupposes the achievement of sagehood before environmentally supportive practice can be expected, and (2) that the Cheng-Zhu school's emphasis on the 'investigation of things' as a means of self-cultivation better supports sensitive engagement with the natural world as part of the process of achieving sagehood. I agree with the second part and therefore agree that the Cheng-Zhu method is potentially better than Lu-Wang idealism in this regard. But I think the argument for the weakness of the Lu-Wang approach is a bit overstated. Clippard uses Tu Weiming and Mary Evelyn Tucker as representatives of the position that in the Lu-Wang approach, 'The naturalist cosmology reaffirms the interconnectedness of all things and a transformative ethics arises out of recognition of this interconnectedness' (p. 18). He quotes Tucker's statement:

Numerous images from nature are used to describe self-cultivation such as planting and nourishing seeds... Human beings nourish the seeds of virtue within themselves and participate in both the natural and human orders (p. 18).

Clippard then states:

It is unclear, though, how 'seeds of virtue' are nourished, nor is it shown how self-cultivation leads to the kind of transformation harmonizing self

and cosmos. Allowing these ‘seeds’ to grow does not provide much direction on how one should proceed in situations of environmental decision-making (pp. 18-19).

The term ‘seeds of virtue’, as Clippard points out, is a clear reference to Mencius’s ‘Four Beginnings’ (*si duan* 四端), and both Lu Jiuyuan and Wang Yangming hewed closely to the Mencian line of interpretation.¹ I will therefore use Mencius to critique this part of Clippard’s argument. Recall *Mencius* 1A.7, the long dialogue with King Xuan of Qi that includes the story of the ox and the sheep. Mencius repeated to the king an anecdote he had heard recounting how the king had seen an ox being led to slaughter for a sacrifice. Feeling pity for the ox, the king had ordered a sheep to be sacrificed instead. Mencius (perhaps bravely) pointed out the hypocrisy in this, and the king candidly admitted that Mencius was correct and wondered why he did not feel equal compassion for the sheep. Mencius argued that it is natural for humans to have compassion for suffering that they witness and to ignore suffering they do not see (as we might say, ‘out of sight, out of mind’). But then he delivered his real lesson: that the King should recognize his natural compassion for the ox and consciously extend it not only to the sheep but to his people as well.

This dialogue is one of the most concrete illustrations of Confucian/Mencian self-cultivation in the classical tradition. It supports both Mencius’s basic claim that morality, in potential form, is a natural, innate characteristic of human beings, and his claim that active nourishment of these ‘seeds’—in this case the *feeling* (*qing* 情) of compassion—is necessary to develop them into full-fledged virtues, such as humanity (*ren* 仁). By recognizing his natural compassion for the ox, the king has taken a step towards realizing his unity with the natural world. By extending his compassion to the sheep and his people he will reinforce and deepen that realization. He may not yet be a sage, but with each step of this deepening realization of ontological unity he will increasingly experience himself in such a way that sensitive and morally responsive/responsible treatment of the natural world will surely result (Adler 1998). Therefore, the achievement of sagehood is not a necessary precondition, as Clippard argues, for environmentally responsible action.

The real weakness of the Lu-Wang position, in my view, is that it considers subjective knowledge, such as the king’s recognition of his own compassion, to be sufficient in itself to achieve sagehood. It *claims* that the *li* 理 (principle, order) of the mind is one with the *li* of external

1. See Chan 1963: 572-87 for a discussion of Lu, and Chan 1963: 654-91 for a discussion of Wang.

things, but it does not require investigation of those things to confirm and fully realize that unity. The Cheng-Zhu school, on the other hand, is less sanguine about the possibility of realizing the totality of *li* through subjective self-examination alone, although that is a theoretical possibility. Given the practical difficulty of achieving sagehood, both subjective *and* objective investigation are required.

A good example of this dual approach is Zhu Xi's *Ren shuo* 仁說 (Discussion of Humanity), in which he correlates Mencius's 'Four Virtues' (humanity, rightness, propriety, and wisdom) with what he calls the four 'moral qualities of the mind of Heaven and Earth' (origination, flourishing, advantage, and firmness):²

'The mind of Heaven and Earth is to produce things'.³ In the production of man and things, they receive the mind of Heaven and Earth as their mind. Therefore, with reference to the character of the mind, it embraces and penetrates all and leaves nothing to be desired. Nevertheless, one word will cover all of it, namely, *ren* (humanity). Let me try to explain fully.

The moral qualities of the mind of Heaven and Earth are origination, flourish, advantage, and firmness. And the principle of origination unites and controls them all. In their operation they constitute the course of the four seasons, and the vital force of spring permeates all. Therefore in the mind of man there are also four moral qualities—namely, *ren*, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom—and *ren* embraces them all. In their emanation and function, they constitute the feeling of love, respect, being right, and discrimination between right and wrong—and the feeling of commiseration pervades them all (Zhu Xi in Chan 1963: 593-55).

Zhu Xi goes on to elaborate more specific ways in which the two sets of four qualities are specific manifestations of universal principles—that is, how they exemplify Cheng Yi's doctrine, 'Principle is one, its manifestations are many' (*liyi fenshu* 理一分殊). Origination (*yuan* 元) in this context is the principle of inherent creativity, which in nature is the spirit of life or the inherent vitality of *qi* 氣, and in human beings is the capacity of compassion to fulfill the moral potential of humanity and the cosmos. Understanding one's subjective humanity through introspection alone, as Mencius and the Lu-Wang school teach, may theoretically suffice to understand fully the principle of humanity, but the Cheng-Zhu school is not that optimistic. It therefore teaches the practical necessity of investigating principle—the natural/moral order (*tianli* 天理/*daoli* 道理)—both within one's mind and in the external world.

2. These terms—*yuan*, *heng*, *li*, and *zhen* (元亨利貞)—are the hexagram text of *Qian*, the first hexagram of the *Yijing*. Their translation and meaning are highly speculative. See Adler 2014.

3. A statement by one of the Cheng brothers.

It is this injunction to study the natural world that renders the Cheng-Zhu school a more effective guide to environmentally sensitive behavior than the Lu-Wang school. As Clippard notes, this does not go so far as to constitute a biocentric or ecocentric worldview, in which only the natural world has inherent value, for its investigation has instrumental value for humans. In my view, the human and nonhuman worlds in this perspective have equal value, which I take to be the connotation of Tu Weiming's term, 'anthropocosmic'. And Clippard is correct in his claim that cultivation of one's seeds of virtue alone 'does not provide much direction' in environmental decision-making. The Cheng-Zhu method, by including the study of principles in nature and 'seeing things from the perspective of things' (*yiwu guanwu* 以物觀物), as Shao Yong had taught, allows one to know the particularities of natural processes as well as their general congruence with moral principles. This could, for example, prevent one from applying blanket principles to environmental problems when specific contexts call for different remedies. Conversely, applying the natural principle of biological flourishing—what Zhu Xi calls the 'qi of spring growth' (*chunsheng zhi qi* 春生之氣, translated above by Wing-tsit Chan as the 'vital force of spring')—can deepen one's understanding of humane interpersonal behavior and human flourishing.

I have one further demurrer on a point not central to Clippard's argument: his disagreement with Tu and Tucker on the usefulness of Thomas Berry's thought in developing a Neo-Confucian environmental worldview (see, e.g., *The Great Work* [1999]). It is true that Berry's Teilhardian teleology is not relevant to Confucianism. What is relevant, however, is Berry's more general point that scientific knowledge of cosmology and evolution can and should function much as myths did in a pre-scientific age. This 'universe story' can provide a descriptive framework in which normative values can be developed that are consistent with what we know about our relation with the natural world. From Berry's perspective and background as a Christian theologian (although he preferred to call himself a 'geologian'), this union of fact and value had a certain spiritual quality appropriate to his C/catholic worldview. For Neo-Confucians like Zhu Xi, there is an analogous spiritual value, understood in terms of the 'order of Heaven' (*tian* 天理). Therefore, I think it is useful to compare and contrast Berry's thought with that of the Confucians of both the Lu-Wang and Cheng-Zhu persuasions.

References

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