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**CONFUCIAN HUMANISM AS A SPIRITUAL RESOURCE  
FOR GLOBAL ETHICS**

**Tu Weiming**

*The Tasan Lectures, Korea, November 2001*

Humanity and the Earth face seriously deteriorating conditions. While specialists in many areas have identified crises in their particular fields – ecological degradation, economic disequilibria, political instability, and social disintegration – an overall assessment of the human condition requires cross-cultural as well as interdisciplinary approaches. Viewed from multiple perspectives, the human condition presents vastly different challenges. Furthermore, no consensus exists regarding how serious and deteriorating the situation really is, let alone on the proper response or course of action.

As we begin to move beyond the most devastatingly violent century in recorded history, we have witnessed enough man-made disasters to acknowledge that the continued viability of the human species is problematical and the end of humankind is not merely an imagined possibility but could be an imminent danger. While the need for action on many fronts seems obvious, strongly-held traditional and modern beliefs have variously advocated that there is no need to worry about matters of such a magnitude, that no matter how hard we try little difference can be made, that our survivability is beyond our control, that the evolutionary process will proceed anyway, or that we are doomed to failure.

Yet, we are acutely aware that the whole world as it exists is interconnected, that our planet is a part of an immense whole and that a small change in the balance of cosmic forces could destroy all life on earth. The astronauts who traveled into outer space perceived the earth not merely as clouds, oceans and continents but as an integrated, organic whole – the stunningly beautiful blue planet, shining against the black background of the vast universe. For the first time in history, we truly saw the earth as a single globe. This image vividly symbolizes the emergence of global consciousness as a lived reality rather than merely an imagined possibility. Since the 1960s, the idea that we on earth occupy a common lifeboat, implying that we are all stakeholders of the planet earth, has been floating around various intellectual circles.

However, while the sense that we are in this together has been greatly intensified throughout the world, the principle of interconnectedness underlying the whole ecological system from macrocosm to microcosm has been, and is still being, seriously violated by the overall developmental process of the human community. The relationship between the human species and nature is disharmonious and the situation is unsustainable. The technological power in the hands of profit-driven entrepreneurs motivated solely by self-interest is rapidly disrupting the delicate balance between Man and his environment.

Since the Stockholm Conference on the environment in 1972, ecological concerns have become a defining characteristic of global consciousness. The major international effort to formulate the Earth Charter as the result of the United Nations' Rio conference in

1992 clearly indicates that global warming, pollution, deforestation, soil loss, and the depletion of natural resources at an alarming rate is threatening our life-support system in a way that may well be irreversible. Traditional and modern belief that it is neither necessary nor possible for us to change our human condition fail to recognize that the environmental catastrophe is man-made and that only through human effort can it be avoided.

The choice is clear and the stakes are high: the very survival of life on our planet depends on the outcome of this issue. Confronting this unprecedented challenge, all spiritual traditions are undergoing the most fundamental and far-reaching transformation. The acknowledgement that the earth is the proper home for our body, heart-mind, soul, and spirit prompts world religions to shape their life-orientations according to a new global vision. Engagement in, rather than departure from, the world has become a basic desideratum of ethico-religious thinking. The sanctity of the earth is taken for granted as a basic value even in otherworldly spiritual traditions. The upsurge of concerned Christianity and engaged Buddhism is a case in point. Theologically, the argument that we need not care for our home on earth because the Kingdom of God is yet to come is unpersuasive. Similarly, it is difficult to justify contempt for the “red dust,” even though release from samsara is the path to salvation.

In the Confucian perspective, whether or not we are committed to reaching the deepest possible understanding of the human condition as a point of departure for confronting the fundamental crisis of humanity, we should have faith in the malleability, transformability, improvability and perfectibility of the human condition through individual and communal self-effort. Even if we are not motivated by sympathy, empathy and compassion, the Confucian ethic of responsibility dictates that we challenge the assertion that what we think and do on this earth here and now is superfluous to the inevitable trajectory of the state of the world.

As we begin to explore the environmental catastrophe, we realize that the Enlightenment mentality that has seriously threatened the viability of the human species has also undermined the social fabric of venerable institutions in the global community – family, village, church, synagogue, mosque, temple, school, nation and world organizations. Increasing human injustice has brought a large segment of the world’s population to starvation and abject poverty. Not only have we failed to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapon technologies, we allow violent conflicts to be engineered over ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural differences.

In a deeper sense, we have lost our awareness of the organic link between past and future. We deliberately limit ourselves to the immediate and superficial present at the expense of a richly-textured sense of time and space. The homogenization of our experience dictated by the market-oriented mass media has substantially reduced the cross-generation channels of transmitting values. Peer group pressure and profit-making advertisements have rendered the traditional educational institutions – family, church and school – inoperative. Television broadcasters often present programs simply to attract the youth audience in order to sell some commercial product. As this situation continues unabated, the decline of moral and cultural values is inevitable.

Nowadays, a commonly-felt anxiety throughout the world is the loss of wholeness. The emerging global community, far from being an integrated, organic whole, is characterized by difference, differentiation and discrimination. The divided self and the

fragmented community are not congenial to human flourishing. A clear indication of this loss of a sense of wholeness is the separation of means from ends, a separation that encourages the rise of unprincipled politics driven primarily by wealth and power. Political leadership defined exclusively in terms of calculative gains breeds mistrust and outright cynicism. As a result, all patterns of authority that maintain social solidarity have lost their legitimacy. Across the world today many societies face a decline in moral and spiritual values.

Although the founding father of economics, Adam Smith, was profoundly concerned about moral sentiments, modern economics has ostracized and excluded ethics from its orbit of concerns. The market and money have so dominantly shaped contemporary societies that morality and moral concerns have been relegated to the background. The media's celebration of materialism with little reference to moral concerns dominates the global consciousness of the young, and has rendered as secondary or irrelevant values absolutely necessary for the quality of life such as sympathy, empathy and compassion.

The contemporary world tends to give special weight to the measurable and quantifiable. Cumulative wisdom built around moral and spiritual values is undermined by knowledge designed by instrumental rationality. Character-building that emphasizes truth, courage, integrity, dignity, loyalty and selflessness no longer forms the core curriculum of education. Similarly, the development of imagination in the creation and appreciation of beauty is also undermined. A widespread marginalization of the humanities by liberal arts colleges emphasizes the overwhelming influence of the market on institutes of higher learning. As science is divorced from ethics, the value-neutral stance of the scientific community allows technology to succumb to commercialism at the expense of the environment and human dignity.

The great paradox of the twenty-first century is the built-in destructive potential of so-called empowering global trends. Increasing democratization notwithstanding, most people feel powerless against the unleashed mega forces of market, money, machines, and media. And virtually everyone is vulnerable. While economic maximization and market efficiency are supposed to benefit the human community as a whole, the gap between the rich and the poor is widening and more wealth is concentrated among the few. Medical research will cure disease and prolong life but methods of genetic engineering detrimental to the integrity of human beings and other life forms are being developed by technicians without adequate attention given to ethical considerations. Faster and easier mechanisms of communication actually undermine the art of listening and face-to-face communication as individuals and families become more isolated. Surely, the current information explosion does not necessarily enhance knowledge. An increasing number of students may suffer from educated incapacity precisely because their constant exposure to raw data has made them insensitive to learning. Moreover, unless we equate literacy with cultural sophistication, we may discover that an increase in literacy is proportionate only to a decrease in the oral transmission of cultural values. It is more than that, because literacy must bring with it the desire to live at a richer cultural and intellectual level.

Global consciousness can be characterized as a paradox: a process of convergence that intensifies divergence. Globalization so conceived is not simply homogenization, for it actually enhances local identities. We must transcend a simple dichotomous mode of thinking in order to fully appreciate the complexity of the "glocal" (global and local)

process. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's technical expressions such as "complexity-consciousness" and "union differentiates" are highly suggestive: "In any domain, whether it be the cells of a body, the members of a society or the elements of a spiritual synthesis – union differentiates." Furthermore, his claim, as interpreted by Ewert Cousins, that "the forces of divergence have been superseded by those of convergence" and that "[t]his shift to convergence is drawing the various cultures into a single planetized community" is prophetic.

"The forces of planetization," or global trends, "are bringing about an unprecedented complexification of consciousness through the convergence of cultures and religions." Against the backdrop of Karl Jaspers' thesis of the "Axial Period" (during the first millennium B. C. E., between 800-200 B. C. E.) in which major spiritual traditions emerged in South Asia, China, the Middle East, and Greece, the advent of global consciousness toward the end of the twentieth century can well be designated as the "Second Axial Period."

The First Axial Period, Cousins observes, "ushered in a radically new form of consciousness":

Whereas primal consciousness was tribal, Axial consciousness was individual. "Know thyself" became the watchword of Greece; the Upanishads identified the atman, the transcendent center of the self. The Buddha charted the way of individual enlightenment; the Jewish prophets awakened individual moral responsibility. This sense of individual identity, as distinct from the tribe and from nature, is the most characteristic mark of Axial consciousness. From this flow other characteristics: consciousness that is self-reflective, analytic, and that can be applied to nature in the form of scientific theories, to society in the form of social critique, to knowledge in the form of philosophy, to religion in the form of mapping an individual spiritual journey. This self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness stood in sharp contrast to primal mythic and ritualistic consciousness. When self-reflective logos emerged in the Axial Period, it tended to oppose the traditional mythos. Of course, mythic and ritualistic forms of consciousness survive in the post-Axial Period even to this day, but they are often submerged, surfacing chiefly in dreams, literature and art.

By contrast, in the Second Axial Period, "the forces of divergence have shifted to convergence, the religions must meet each other in the center to center unions, discovering what is most authentic in each other, releasing creative energy toward a more complexified form of religious consciousness." In the First Axial Age, even though there was a common transformation of consciousness, "it occurred in diverse geographical regions within already differentiated cultures." Since in each case – Confucian, Judaic, Greek philosophy, or Hindu – the tradition was shaped by a unique constellation of forces in its origin and developed along divergent lines, "a remarkable richness of spiritual wisdom, of spiritual energies and of religious-cultural forms to express, preserve, and transmit this heritage" was produced. The creative encounter of cultures and religions in the Second Axial Period, exemplified by an increasing dialogue among civilizations, is a great promise, if not the only hope, for the cultivation of a culture of peace for the human community.

Guided by the ecumenical spirit of pluralism, the dialogic rather than dialectic, dialogue is predicated on mutual understanding, mutual learning and genuine interchange. This celebration of diversity is neither exclusive nor inclusive but is a creative synthesis,

“the new complexified global consciousness.” Unfortunately, at the very moment when authentic dialogue among civilizations has become a realizable aspiration, our life on earth is being seriously threatened. The very tools that have enabled a true meeting of religions and cultures – industrialization and technology – are undercutting the life-support system upon which our existence depends. The project of the “dialogical dialogue” of the Second Axial Period necessitates the rediscovery of the spirituality of the primal peoples of the pre-Axial Period: a collective and cosmic consciousness rooted in earth and life cycles.

The challenge, as Cousins envisions it, is twofold:

Having developed self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness in the First Axial Period, we must now, while retaining these values, reappropriate and integrate into that consciousness the collective and cosmic dimensions of the pre-Axial consciousness. We must recapture the unity of tribal consciousness by seeing humanity as a single tribe. And we must see this single tribe related organically to the total cosmos. This means that the consciousness of the twenty-first century will be global from two perspectives: (1) from a horizontal perspective, cultures and religious must meet to enter into creative encounters that will produce a complexified collective consciousness, [and] (2) from a vertical perspective, they must plunge their roots deep into the earth to provide a stable and secure base for future development. This new global consciousness must be organically ecological, supported by structures that will insure justice and peace. The voices of the oppressed must be heard and heeded: the poor, women, and racial and ethnic minorities. These groups, along with the earth itself, can be looked upon as the prophets and teachers of the Second Axial Period. This emerging twofold consciousness is not only a creative possibility to enhance the twenty-first century; it is an absolute necessity if we are to survive.

This master narrative of the human condition, far from being a romantic assertion about the unity and harmony, is a realist appraisal of the gravest danger and the greatest promise to which the global community is challenged to respond. The implications are far-reaching. All religions are confronted with a dual task: to actively enter into a dialogue among peoples of different civilizations and to channel their energies into solving the human problems endangering our life on earth. They need to move beyond aggressive fundamentalism and abstract universalism. They need to reverse their “turning toward the spiritual ascent away from the material.” To “rediscover the material dimension of existence and its spiritual significance.” They must cherish and programmatically cultivate human values such as peace and justice without losing sight of their spiritual quests. “[T]heir unique contribution is to tap their reservoirs of spiritual energy and channel this into developing secular enterprises that are genuinely human.”

In light of Ewert Cousins’ formulation of a global ethic from the perspective of the Second Axial Period for the world religions, Confucian humanism assumes a new significance as a spiritual resource for global ethics. Among the First Axial Period civilizations, Confucianism has often been characterized as lacking several salient features shared by other religions. For instance, Cousins has singled out monasticism as “[o]ne of the most distinctive forms of spirituality that became available in the Axial Period.” Yet, the Confucian commitment to earth, body, family, and community is diametrically opposed to the monastic life. Similarly, the other spiritual traditions thrust in the direction of the

transcendent away from the earth, life cycles and harmony with nature seemed not present in the Confucian tradition. The Confucians have viewed the secular world as the moral, sacred domain for self-realization. The “radical split between the phenomenal world and true reality, between matter and spirit, between earth and heaven” is also alien to the Confucian emphasis on interaction, mutuality and harmony.

On the surface, among the Axial Period traditions, Confucianism seems to have maintained the strongest ties to pre-Axial consciousness: an intimate sense of the cosmos, harmony with nature and the web of interrelationships within the human community. While a “sense of individual identity, as distinct from the tribe and from nature, is the most characteristic mark of Axial consciousness,” the Confucian idea of self, the person as a center of relationships, is not a self that is alienated from either the human or the natural environment. Furthermore, the Confucian life-orientation cannot subscribe to the view that “(the) self-reflective, analytic, critical consciousness stood in sharp contrast to primal mythic and ritualistic consciousness.” In short, logos and mythos are not necessarily in conflict in Confucian humanism.

Does this mean, from a comparative civilizational perspective that Confucianism’s failure to break with primal consciousness means it was only a weak form of Axial consciousness? If the rise of Western science in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment can be characterized as the paradigmatic exemplification of Axial consciousness, Confucian humanism does seem woefully inadequate in developing the self-reflective, analytic and critical consciousness characteristic of the Age of Reason.

However, Confucian humanism, as an Axial Period consciousness, was instrumental in shaping East Asian life for centuries prior to the coming of the Western imperialist powers. Even after Confucianism was thoroughly critiqued by some of the most articulate East Asian minds (under the spell of the Enlightenment mentality), it continued to exert a profound influence in both industrial and socialist East Asia, as the habits of the heart, on the economic culture, on political ideology and the social ethos, and as a civil religion. The revitalization of Confucian humanism as a creative philosophy has been underway for at least three generations since the 1919 May Fourth Movement. The modern transformation of the Confucian tradition is too complex and too controversial a subject for our purposes here. Suffice it to note that whether or not we believe that the Confucian heritage is compatible with a market economy, a democratic polity, a civil society, or the dignity of the individual, the Confucian presence in and relevance to East Asian forms of modernity is undeniable. Therefore, it is vitally important to understand and appreciate the role and function of the Confucian traditions in the modernizing processes of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Chinese Diaspora, the two Koreas, Vietnam, Japan, and Singapore.

As I have explored in my article “Implications of ‘Confucian’ East Asian Modernity,” the time is also ripe for us to formulate a reflection on and critique of the Enlightenment mentality as a way of recognizing a possible Confucian contribution to the on-going conversation on global ethics. From the outset, I wish to mention that although the current discussion is closely intertwined with the “Asian values” debate, the purpose is not to underscore the uniqueness of Asian (Confucian) values. Rather, my goal is to identify those features in Confucian local knowledge that are potentially globally significant. In so doing, I wish to disassociate myself from the claim by some authoritarian regimes that an Asian

model of development, supposedly based on Confucianism, is fundamentally different from a Western model identified with liberal democracy, human rights and individualism. I also wish to acknowledge that Wm. Theodore de Bary's "Confucian communitarian perspective" in the book *Asian Values and Human Rights* is a source of inspiration for my thinking on such matters. However, my primary concern here is not to specify the Confucian ideas and programs that have the potential of nurturing liberal democracy in China, but to suggest why, in the perspective of globalization and the human condition, Confucian humanism still has an important message to deliver.

First, the Second Axial Period requires a holistic humanist vision that integrates all four dimensions of human existence: self, community, nature, and Heaven. The Enlightenment mentality focusing on the axis of self and community at the expense of nature and Heaven is too restrictive and too limiting to provide a proper compass for human flourishing. Modernity, rising out of the Enlightenment legacy, is de-natured and de-spirited. For example, even the most sophisticated conception of the Enlightenment project, as envisioned by Jürgen Habermas, still fails to take religion and ecology seriously. As a result, it suffers from an anthropocentrism that substantially undermines its effectiveness in dealing with ecological and religious issues.

Confucian humanism, on the other hand, seeks harmony with nature and mutuality with Heaven. It is neither secular nor anthropocentric. It regards the secular as sacred by infusing spiritual values to earth, body, family, and community; it urges humans to realize and rediscover the ultimate meaning and the deepest source of life in the Heaven-endowed nature. The highest human aspiration is the unity of Heaven and Humanity. Human beings are not merely creatures but partners of the cosmic process. Through active participation in the "great transformation," we are co-creators and thus responsible for the well-being of not only the human community but of "Heaven, Earth and the myriad things" (tianti wanwu). This anthropocosmic insight can serve as a corrective to the secular humanism informed by the Enlightenment mentality.

Second, the convergence of cultures and religions requires a dialogical wisdom that recognizes the interplay between a sense of rootedness and a need for self-transcendence. The Enlightenment demands for certainty are often in conflict with the patience required to deal with the complexities and ambiguities found in inter-civilizational dialogue. The dichotomous method of thinking by assigning complex phenomena to neatly conceived categories is incompatible with an openness to radically different ways of perceiving the same reality. What Teilhard calls "center to center unions" suggests that individual elements unite "[b]y touching each other at the creative core of their being, they release new energy which leads to more complex units." Indeed, "[g]reater complexity leads to greater interiority which, in turn, leads to more creative unions. Throughout the process, the individual elements do not lose their identity, but rather deepen and fulfill it through union." This approach is quite different from that of the Enlightenment thinkers.

The Confucian belief that takes self-cultivation as the root for regulating the family, governance of the state, and peace under Heaven is not based on deductive logic. It is based on the assumption that, through dialogue, individuals participate in an ever-expanding network of relationships, not by losing their personal identities but by developing an increasingly complex consciousness that actually enhances the interiority of each individual. Like digging a well, as we sink into our own concrete existence, we reach the



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common spring of humanity, allowing genuine communication with others. The Confucian idea of “harmony without uniformity” aptly captures the fruitful interplay between communion and diversity. Confucian humanism, taking the concrete living person as the focus of its attention, incorporates other units by realizing the self through communion. Self-transcendence, paradoxically, enhances our sense of rootedness in earth, body, family and community.

Third, the Enlightenment emphasis on rationality, especially instrumental rationality, is detrimental to communal solidarity. Surely, communicative rationality is a significant improvement in promoting reasonable dialogue, but the convergence of cultures and religions compels us to deal with radical otherness in a comparative civilizational perspective. The certainty in sharing the same linguistic universe, in which the rules of the game are given, is no longer there. Yet, the courage and wisdom to enter into others’ consciousness, allowing ourselves to experience the other’s values from his/her own perspective is enormously enriching. The discovery of values of another tradition that are rejected, submerged, marginalized or only inchoate in our own can be truly liberating. It is unlikely that those with a rationalist mindset can really take advantage of such a cross-cultural enterprise; the Enlightenment mentality is too Euro-centric to appreciate the heuristic value of alternatives to Western modernism.

By underscoring the importance of sympathy, empathy and compassion, Confucian humanism can help to alleviate the difficulties the “dialectic dialogue” has engendered in cross-cultural communication. Attempts to refute the claims of the other by appealing foremost to reason easily degenerate into hostile argumentation. “Dialogical dialogue” requires great concentration and careful listening. The purpose of such dialogue is neither to persuade nor to convert, but to gain experiential understanding. If our hearts and minds are receptive, united and tranquil, the meaning of others’ communication can enter unimpeded. In the Confucian tradition, the auditory perception of the ear, rather than the visual perception of the eye, is most attuned to the virtues of sympathy, empathy and compassion. A good listener attends fully to the message and allows it to be completely delivered before any judgment is made.

Understandably, the Confucian sage is an accomplished oral transmitter who, through his ears and mouth, makes the subtle meaning of the human world and the cosmic order audible. The classical Chinese word for sage (sheng) consists of both ear and mouth radicals, indicating that wisdom is nurtured by the art of listening and expressed through verbal communication. This emphasis on temporality rather than spatiality implies the need for patient watchfulness in interfaith or cross-cultural understanding. If a clash among civilizations is perceived as a real danger, the need for a dialogue among civilizations becomes particularly urgent.

Confucian humanism, by focusing on harmonious relationships at the personal, communal, national, regional, and global levels, offers a philosophy of life and a worldview that celebrates diversity without falling into the pitfall of pernicious relativism. It emphasizes group solidarity but doesn’t falsely regard egalitarianism as monolithic conformity. Furthermore, by integrating ecological and religious dimensions into human self-understanding, Confucian humanism, unlike secular anthropocentrism, provides a broad ethical basis in the quest for human flourishing.