



Living Earth Community

Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing

EDITED BY

SAM MICKEY, MARY EVELYN TUCKER, AND JOHN GRIM



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2020 Sam Mickey, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim. Copyright of individual chapters is maintained by the chapters' authors.



This work as a whole is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs license (CC BY-NC-ND), which allows readers to download parts or all of a chapter and share it with others as long as they credit the author, but they can't change them in any way or use them commercially. Selected chapters are available under a CC BY 4.0 license (the type of license is indicated in the footer of the first page of each chapter). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text and to make commercial use of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Some of the material in this book has been reproduced according to the fair use principle which allows use of copyrighted material for scholarly purposes. Attribution should include the following information:

Sam Mickey, Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds, *Living Earth Community: Multiple Ways of Being and Knowing* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0186>

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0186#copyright>

Further details about CC BY licenses are available at, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Updated digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0186#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-78374-803-7

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-78374-804-4

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-78374-805-1

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-78374-806-8

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 978-1-78374-807-5

ISBN XML: 978-1-78374-808-2

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0186

Cover image: *Feathers and Fins* (2014) by Nancy Earle, all rights reserved.

Cover design: Anna Gatti.

9. Confucian Cosmology and Ecological Ethics

Qi, Li, and the Role of the Human

Mary Evelyn Tucker

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 crises of our times.¹ While the scale and scope of the crises 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, technological, 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 ecocide or biocide. Thus, we are without a sufficiently broad environmental ethics to alter our consciousness about the Earth and our life on it.

1 This was one of the main objectives of the Harvard conference series and edited volumes on Religions of the World and Ecology (<http://fore.yale.edu/religions-of-the-world-and-ecology-archive-of-conference-materials/>). From that series, see Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Berthrong, eds, *Confucianism and Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014).

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 redefine mutually-enhancing human-Earth relations?

The dynamic and holistic perspective of the Confucian worldview may offer significant contributions in this regard, enlarging our sense of the ethical terrain and moral concerns, and providing a rich source for rethinking our own relationship with nature. 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 simply 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 nonhuman 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. An example of this is the Confucian view of the human as a child born out of the Universe and the Earth, and thus owing filial respect and reciprocity to the Earth community. Another example is the Confucian understanding of virtues as having both a cosmological and a personal component, so that love is a generative force expressed by humans, but is also seen as comparable to the original generative forces in the universe. Thus, nature and virtue, cosmology and ethics, knowledge and action are intimately linked for the Confucians in China, Korea, and Japan. This chapter will concentrate on three major themes and their implications for ecological ethics: *qi*, *li*, and the role of the human.

We are aware that, like all spiritual traditions, there is always a gap between aspiration and realization of these practices. Despite the narrow, ideological views of Confucianism, China is not a model of an ecologically realized society, historically or at present. However, aspects of this worldview are worth retrieving in order that we may break out of the constraining perspective of a modern reductionistic worldview.

Qi

The Chinese have a term to describe the vibrancy and aliveness of the universe. This is *qi* or *ch'i*, 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 describes the realization 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* moves 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* courses through 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 united, 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 obliviousness, 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 indeed — 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 as a vast ocean of energy, an infinite source of vibrant potency, a resonating field of dynamic power that is *in* matter itself, not separate from it. For *qi* 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.²

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 the forest radiates an untold energy, the snow-covered mountains in the distance are redolent with silent *qi*, the rivers coursing to the ocean are filled with the buoyancy of *qi*.

One of the earliest Confucian writers, Mencius, speaks of the great flood-like *qi*. This is what I am evoking here. We are flooded, surrounded, 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 laughter of the universe inviting us into its endless mystery.

As we return to the Chinese sources to sift through the texts and commentaries, what becomes apparent is that the notion of *qi* is not constant, but evolving. Nor is it unified and consistent. It is rather a multivalent idea 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, *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

2 On the Enlightenment legacy, see also 'Introduction: Ways of Knowing, Ways of Valuing Nature' in this volume.

their surrounding environment'.³ 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 (170–104 BCE), the leading Han Confucian, described *qi* as a 'limpid colorless substance' which fills the universe, 'surrounds man as water surrounds a fish', and unites all creation.⁴ The Neo-Confucians, however, 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 (1020–77 CE), the vibrancy of material force originates in the Great Vacuity (*taixu*) which contains the primal, undifferentiated material force. As it integrates and disintegrates it participates in the Great Harmony (*taihe*) of activity and tranquillity. 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 both substance (emerging in the Great Vacuity), and function (operating in the Great Harmony).

Li

Li is the inner ordering principle of reality that is embedded in the heart of *qi*. The Chinese character for *li* suggests working on the geological veins found in the mineral jade, which must first be discovered, and then carved adeptly. *Li* is comparable to the principle of *logos*, whereby all of reality is imprinted with structure and intelligibility. It is both pattern and potential pattern, and thus gives reality its intricacy of design as well as its thrust toward directionality and purpose. It is a revealing and concealing sensibility for human consciousness. We seek to find its imprint in the flow of the natural world around us, as well as in the unfolding of our lives. As Thomas Berry often said, we have lost the ability to perceive this

3 Benjamin Schwartz, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 180.

4 Wm. Theodore de Bary, ed., *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1960), p. 466.

vast intelligibility of the universe and thus have become ungrounded and rudderless, locked in our own self-referential mindsets.

It is, however, the universe which is calling to be read and to be heard in the deep patterning of its particularities. The beauty of *li* is that it brings us into contact with the myriad forms of life, the 'ten thousand things' (*wanwu*) as the Chinese say, with a penetrating clarity. This is because *li* is both normative principle and intelligible pattern. As pattern, it gives us entry into understanding nature and its complex workings. As principle, it gives us a grounding for a morality that arises from the very structure of life itself. The moral dimensions of the universe are found in the depths of matter revealing itself to us as *li*.

Li is principle and pattern — both a moral and a natural entity bringing together our profound embeddedness in a universe of meaning and mystery. The allure of the universe lies in seeing and experiencing that meaning and mystery before us, behind us, and all around us. We are drawn forth into a sense of the breadth and depth of *li* as manifest in the phenomenal world in great diversity and particularity. All of this breadth and depth of inner ordering is gathered up in the Great Ultimate (*taiji*) — that which contains and shapes and generates all principles and patterns in the universe.

As one of the principal Neo-Confucian thinkers, Zhu Xi (1130–1200) says, 'The Supreme Ultimate is merely the principle of Heaven-and-Earth, and the myriad things'.⁵ According to another leading Neo-Confucian, Cheng Yi (1033–1107), 'Principle is one (in the Great Ultimate); its manifestations are many (in the world)'.⁶ To illustrate this, both use an analogy involving the moon shining in the water in the irrigated rice fields on a terraced mountain side. There are many moons which are reflected, but only one full moon in the sky. *Taiji* is like this full moon. It is translated as the Great Ultimate or the Supreme Ultimate, while the term itself refers to a pole star — guiding, illuminating, and alluring. For Cheng Yi, and his brother Cheng Hao (1032–85), *li* was like a genetic coding, and was thus identified with the creative life principle (*shengsheng*).⁷

5 Ibid., pp. 701–02.

6 Wm. Theodore de Bary and Irene Bloom, eds, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 700.

7 Ibid., p. 689.

The creative dynamics of this great container of principles are cosmological, namely there is an interaction of non-being and being or the unmanifest and the manifest. This is seen in the interaction of the *wuji* (Non-ultimate) and the *taiji* (Great Ultimate). Some of the most interesting arguments and discussions in Chinese thought have arisen among thinkers who are commenting on this complex interaction.

Some would say that the Daoists want to maintain a dichotomy between non-being and being, emphasizing the dynamic creativity of non-being as the source of all life. Others would say the Buddhists want to maintain the ultimate emptiness of non-being and the illusory quality of being. The Neo-Confucians struggled to assert the importance of the dynamic continuity between these two forces (non-being and being). Indeed, they would maintain that the very creativity of the universe is revealed in this dialectical interaction. The complementarity of these creative forces is at the heart of all cosmological processes for the Confucians. The vast changes and transformations of nature in the endless flow of *qi* become clear in this interaction. That is because all reality, namely all *qi*, is imprinted with *li*. Discovering this patterning in the fluid material force of the universe is the challenge for humans.

As *li* is unveiled, humans can discern the appropriate patterning for both their individual and their collective lives. The universe unfolds according to these patterns of deep structure embedded in reality. Social systems are established according to these patterns, agriculture is conducted in harmony with these patterns, politics functions in relation to these patterns, and individuals cultivate themselves in response to these patterns.

The Role of the Human

In the Neo-Confucian understanding, humans receive *li* from heaven. Their heavenly endowed nature is thus linked to the patterning throughout the universe. By the same token, humans are composed of *qi*, the same dynamic substance that makes up the universe.

Humans are thus imprinted with unique and differentiated *li* embedded in *qi*, the material force of their own body-mind. *Li* guarantees the special and different qualities of each human being, while *qi* establishes the material and spiritual grounds for subjectivity, thus

uniting humans with one another and with the vast world of nature. In other words, *qi* as vital force is the interiority of matter, providing the matrix for communion and exchange of energy between all life forms.

Humans, then, are given a heavenly endowed nature which joins them to the great triad of Cosmos, Earth, and other humans. While this heavenly endowed nature is a gift of the universe from birth, it is understood as something to be realized over a lifetime. This realization of one's full nature occurs through the process of self-cultivation, which is at the heart of Confucian moral and spiritual practice. This process of actualization is not abstract or otherworldly, but rather concerned with the process of becoming more fully human. In doing so, one penetrates principle and perceives pattern amidst the flux of material force in ourselves and in the universe at large. The goal of our cultivation is to actualize and recognize the profound identity of ourselves with heaven, Earth, and the myriad forms of life.

Because the *qi* that we are each given may vary in its purity or turbidity, cultivation is needed. Evil, imperfection, loss, and suffering are thus part of the human condition. The Confucians, however, believe one's heavenly endowed human nature is essentially good and thus perfectible. To illustrate this, Mencius uses the example of a child about to fall into a well (*Mencius* II A 6). The instinct of any person is to save the child from harm, not for any exterior reasons but due to a naturally compassionate heart. The key to the goodness of human nature is a profound sympathy or empathy which all humans have. Indeed, affectivity is what distinguishes humans in the Confucian worldview. As Mencius says, 'No one is devoid of a heart sensitive to the suffering of others' (*Mencius* II A 6). Because of this basic sympathy, Confucians affirm that at the level of our primary instincts we will tend toward the good. Mencius uses wonderfully evocative images from nature to illustrate this, like water flowing naturally downhill (*Mencius* VI A 2). Like wind blowing over grasses, people are inclined toward the good and respond to the good because they are imprinted with the good.

From these examples, Mencius goes on to describe the basic seeds implanted in human nature which, when cultivated, become the key virtues for living a fully humane life. The seeds are compassion, shame, courtesy, and modesty, and a sense of right and wrong (*Mencius* II A 6, *Mencius* VI A 6). These seeds need to be watered and tended

so that they grow and flourish into the primary Confucian virtues of humaneness, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. The images used to describe the growth and cultivation of virtue are derived from the agricultural patterns and seasonal cycles of humans dependent on nature. Consequently, I am inclined to use the metaphor of 'botanical cultivation' when speaking of Confucian moral and spiritual practice.

The aim of such practice is to allow the seeds or tendencies of our deepest human spontaneities to be nourished and to flourish. Mencius suggests that this should be as clear as tending trees in one's garden: 'Even with a *tong* or a *zi* tree one or two spans thick, anyone wishing to keep it alive will know how it should be tended, yet when it comes to one's own person, one does not know how to tend it. Surely one does not love one's person any less than the *tong* or the *zi*' (*Mencius* VI A 13). In this same spirit, there should develop a naturalness to our actions based on the rhythms of the cosmos itself. From seeds in the soil to seasons and their cycles, to the flow of rivers and the thrust of mountains, we are part of the rhythms of the universe and need to nourish our original nature.

If one develops these seeds, it is like 'a fire starting up or a spring coming through'. The moral power that results from this cultivation of virtue is boundless: 'When these (seeds) are fully developed, one can take under one's protection the whole realm within the Four Seas, but if one fails to develop them, they will not be able even to serve one's parents' (*Mencius* II A 6).

The key is to tend, to activate, and to align our deepest spontaneities with the dynamic patterns of change and continuity in nature. Thus, self-cultivation needs to be an organic process. As Mencius suggests, we need to nourish our flood-like *qi* with integrity (*Mencius* II A 2) and recover our original mind-and-heart (*Mencius* VI A 11). However, this cannot be a forced or artificial process. Mencius uses the example of the man from Sung who planted rice seedlings. In his desire to see them grow quickly, he pulled at them too soon, and they withered. As Mencius observes, 'There are few people in the world who can resist the urge to help their rice plants grow' (*Mencius* II A 2). Others leave them unattended or do not bother to weed. How to nurture and nourish is the art of cultivation in both nature and in humans.

Mencius also uses the example of Ox Mountain, where, due to deforestation and overgrazing, the mountain becomes denuded (*Mencius VI A 8*). Erosion sets in, and the ecosystem is destroyed. People are inclined to think this has always been the nature of the mountain. Improper cultivation of ourselves and of the land results in waste and loss. As Mencius says, if one is not restored by the natural rhythms of the day and night, but rather dissipates one's energies and becomes dissolute, people will think that dissolution is one's essential nature. However, he insists that nourishment is the key: 'Given the right nourishment there is nothing that will not grow, and deprived of it there is nothing that will not wither away' (*Mencius VI A 8*).

These examples are so simple, clear, and timeless. They are as appropriate for our day as for Mencius', as their natural imagery restores us to the deeper rhythms of our being in the universe. For, in this context, 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. For the Confucians, this implies a primacy of continual study and learning. From this perspective, 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*. Thus, 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 great 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.

This holistic and dynamic understanding of the world and the role of humans, found in Confucianism, could bring us far in the revisioning that is needed for us to deal effectively with our current ecological crisis. In turn, it is but one example of the potential benefit of tapping the resources of the world religions in our endeavor to formulate a more comprehensive and global ethics.

Bibliography

- de Bary, Wm. Theodore, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1960).
- de Bary, Wm. Theodore, and Irene Bloom, eds, *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999).
- Grim, John, and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Ecology and Religion* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014).
- Lau, D. C., trans., *Mencius* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1970).
- Schwartz, Benjamin, *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985).
- Tucker, Mary Evelyn, and John Berthrong, eds, *Confucianism and Ecology: The Interrelation of Heaven, Earth, and Humans* (Cambridge, MA: 1998).

